The Marx Brothers

How did four nice little boys called Julius, Adolph, Leonard and Herbert grow up into the Marx Brothers? Perhaps because they never really were nice little boys.

People who had known the Marx Brothers before they became famous (when they were still Julius, Adolph, Leonard, Milton and Herbert), even before they entered show business, all agreed that the five brothers never had to create the characters they played so convincingly on stage, screen, and television - they already were those characters. A neighbour of the Marx family in New York City during the early 1900s remarked:

'They were wild youngsters with a talent for having fun. The place would be a shambles, especially if Mrs Marx left them alone. They would tear down the draperies. There was a woman across the way, a doctor's wife, who used to send over notes saying that she was going to call the police, which probably made them do it even more.'

The poor Marx brothers

The Marx family was poor but, as Groucho said of his childhood: 'We didn't know it, so we were happy. At Christmas we didn't have a tree, just a branch, and we each hung up one of our black socks and got a half an orange each for Christmas. All our neighbours even had better garbage than we did. Harpo used to skate in Central Park with one ice skate he tied on. When my Aunt Hannah cooked the clam chowder, she used the same pot she used for the laundry, and there was plenty of starch in both.'

Although the Marx Brothers' theatrical characters were based on real people and actual experiences, their mannerisms and costumes were developed through trial and error during their years in vaudeville. For Groucho this all began in 1905 when he joined a travelling troupe as a boy soprano. He got the job out of economic necessity:

'I became an actor because I had an uncle in show business who was making $200 a week, and I wasn't making anything, not even an occasional girl.'

Although the job didn't last long, and three times he found himself stranded on the road without money, Groucho persisted. Eventually he landed work with the Gus Edwards school act - his first professional encounter with stage comedy.

Donkey business

Three years later Minnie Marx gathered her sons (Groucho, Gummo, and later Harpo) together into a singing act called first The Three Nightingales, then The Six Mascots. She was their agent, and sometimes joined the act with her sister, Hannah. Sam Marx (known as Frenchie), the father of the Marx Brothers, stayed at home with the cooking and housework, as well as a threadbare tailoring business. Apparently this pioneering role-sharing worked out perfectly: Sam was a superb cook while, in Groucho's words:
Minnie couldn't make anything except my father.'

But as an agent she was unsurpassed. Groucho often said:

'Without her, we wouldn't have been anything. She was the most important woman in my life.'

As a singing act the Marx Brothers were condemned to second-rate or even third-rate vaudeville, and it was only by accident that they discovered how funny they could be. Groucho described the moment:

'We were playing a small town in Texas, a farming town. The farmers came in and tied up their horses beside the Pantages Theatre. We were doing a singing act. a mule runs away, and the whole audience left to catch the mule. Then they came back. By this time we were so angry we started making sarcastic remarks. Like, "Nacogdoches is full of roaches" and "The jackass is the finest flower of Texas." Instead of getting mad, the audience laughs. This is the first time we ever did comedy like that.'

This incident happened in 1912 during a tour through Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma.

School Marx

After their unexpected triumph they attempted comedy whenever it seemed appropriate, and in Denison, Texas, The Six Mascots were received so enthusiastically that they were invited to stay over, this time with a guarantee. Wishing to please an audience of teachers who were there for a conference, Groucho wrote a comedy sketch based on the Gus Edwards school act. Groucho became Herr Teacher, Harpo played the stupid boy, and the other members of the troupe, who included Gummo, became the standard school act characters of that day. This act was called Fun in Hi Skule, and much of what the Marx Brothers did afterwards was influenced by it. Most notable of all, Harpo donned his famous red wig (later to become blond for the films) and became himself; Groucho assumed a stern countenance and an air of unqualified authority: and Gummo played the juvenile straight-man role that Zeppo later inherited. Then Chico joined the act as the confidently ignorant 'Eye-talian'.

All of the Marx Brothers shows that followed Fun in Hi Skule, including the films and even Groucho's TV programme, owed a great deal to it. You Bet Your Life was the same routine but in modern dress, with Groucho still playing Herr Teacher. Horse Feathers is Fun in Hi Skule graduated to college and Hollywood. As the great white hunter in Animal Crackers, the prime minister in Duck Soup, or the bogus doctor in A Day at the Races, Groucho is still in many respects Herr Teacher, and his brothers play almost exactly the same roles as in Fun in Hi Skule.

Harpo loses his voice

It was their uncle (Minnie's brother), Al Shean - himself a big star in American vaudeville - who had helped to crystallize further each brother's stage personality. Groucho was allowed to talk incessantly, while Harpo became mute, and Chico played comic straight-man to both. According to Groucho, Al Shean felt that Harpo's voice did not match his whimsical appearance. Harpo was disappointed, but accepted Uncle Al's dictum. Thereafter Harpo talked professionally only once again during his entire career. A quarter of a century later, he spoke at the end of the stage tryouts for Go West. The brothers decided that this speech, whilst comically effective, departed from the innocent Harpo character, and it was omitted from the movie. In later life, after his retirement from films, Harpo would...
not accept any speaking engagements, and requested that his family never allow a recording of his voice to be played. He felt that to allow his voice to be heard by the public would be unfaithful and destructive to the character he had created. Groucho said the question he was most often asked was, 'Can Harpo talk?' His answer was always, 'Of course not.'

By 1914, Mr Green's Reception, as Fun in Hi Skule was now called, had established the Marx Brothers as rising vaudeville stars. They were not yet, however, known by their famous 'O' names. This happened while they were touring Illinois in 1914. Another performer on the bill with them had a penchant for giving nicknames to his friends. Julius became Groucho because of his serious demeanour. Adolph became Harpo for the obvious reason. Leonard became Chico because of his passion for the chicks, as girls were then called. (Thus the correct pronunciation of his name is 'Chicko') Milton became Gummo because, as he later explained:

'I always had holes in my shoes, so I'd wear rubbers, or gumshoes, over them even when it wasn't raining, and I got called Gummo.'

Herbert was only 13 and at home in Chicago when his brothers were being renamed, but he became Zeppo later. No one, especially Zeppo, is certain why. They continued to use their real names until 1924, but the 'new' names eventually took over.

He stoops to conquer

Harpo's devotion to the harp was not accidental. His grandmother had played, in the family's travelling magic show in Germany, on a wondrous instrument without strings. As a child Harpo would also 'play' on this harp which was stored in a closet in their New York apartment, and when he finally got a harp with real strings he taught himself to play, but in an unorthodox style that in later years amazed professional harpists.

Before they were established as stars, however, the Marx Brothers ran through a number of what were then called musical tabloids: several thinly plotted scenes, as sumptuously mounted as a tight budget and difficult physical conditions would allow, were held together by song, dance and comedy. In each of these shows the brothers enriched their comic characters and developed routines that would serve them - with variations - for decades. The sloping, stooping Groucho walk, for instance, happened by accident:

'I was just kidding around one day, and I started to walk funny. The audience liked it so I kept it in.'

After one failure, the Marx Brothers appeared in the successful On the Mezzanine Floor, which, along with Home Again, toured Great Britain in 1922. They opened at the Coliseum in London. At first, the audience did not understand the Marx Brothers' humour and responded by throwing pennies onto the stage. In those days, Groucho recalled:

'it was the custom when the audiences didn't like an act - a pretty dangerous custom, too, since the English penny was as large as a silver dollar.'

Groucho waded into the shower of coins and addressed the audience: hose days, Groucho recalled:

'We came all the way from America to entertain you, so you might at least throw some shillings.'

His ad lib won over the audience, and their entire British tour was enormously successful.
A night in New York

Back in the United States in 1923 they had serious difficulties with the United Booking Office, which controlled virtually all of vaudeville. Unable to get work they were forced to put on their own show. They were helped by a Pennsylvanian industrialist who owned a theatre in Philadelphia and the sets and props from several theatrical flops, and were thus able to put together I'll Say She Is, their most ambitious musical tabloid to date. Although Groucho always referred to this show as 'a real turkey,' it was a huge success in Philadelphia. After a tepid road trip, they came to Broadway. Fortunately, on the night they opened in 1924 a more important show postponed its premiere, and the most influential New York drama critics went to I'll Say She Is instead. Their rave reviews established the Marx Brothers as permanent superstars.

Two even bigger Broadway hits followed: The Cocoanuts in 1925 and Animal Crackers in 1928: both were later filmed in New York - in 1929 and 1930 respectively - almost exactly as they were presented on the stage.

After filming Animal Crackers, the Marx Brothers left for California, where they remained. Their first three Hollywood pictures were produced for Paramount by Herman J. Mankiewicz, writer of Citizen Kane (1940) and one of Hollywood's great non-conformists. (Assigned to write a Rin-Tin-Tin picture, he had the courageous police dog carry the baby into a burning building instead of out of it. He was never assigned to a Rin-Tin-Tin film again.) The Marx Brothers' pictures of this period - Monkey Business (1931), Horse Feathers (1932), and Duck Soup (1933) - all bear the imprint of their iconoclastic producer.

Under Thalberg's wing

The next two films, A Night at the Opera (1935) and A Day at the Races (1937), were produced by Irving Thalberg at MGM. Groucho credited Thalberg with saving their careers after Duck Soup had done poorly at the box office. Thalberg felt that the Marx Brothers were appealing only to a minority, and that they were missing especially the female audience that so often decided which film the family attended. He found the Marx Brothers characters of the Paramount films 'unsympathetic' because they were not helping anyone. To remedy this, he reinforced the plots so that they could stand alone as romantic comedies, recast the Marx Brothers as helpful avuncular types rather than totally uninhibited anarchists, and added the kind of lavish production numbers that a major studio like MGM could afford. He also allowed the Marx Brothers to try out material for their next picture in front of audiences on a road tour; this was especially helpful, as the Marx Brothers had always depended heavily on the reaction of live audiences to their ad libs. Thalberg returned to the original successful formula of George S. Kaufman who, with Morrie Ryskind, had conceived and written The Cocoanuts and Animal Crackers, and at Groucho's behest, Kaufman and Ryskind were imported from the East Coast to write A Night at the Opera.

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