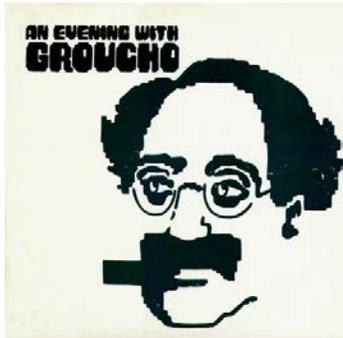


# “An Evening with Groucho”—Groucho Marx (1972)

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Essay by Robert S. Bader



*Original album cover*



*Original label*



*Groucho Marx*

“Billboard” magazine’s chart of top selling record albums on November 25, 1972 included an unlikely name listed alongside 70’s hit makers like the Partridge Family, Elton John, Seals & Crofts, Rod Stewart, Black Sabbath and Cat Stevens. Eighty-two year old Groucho Marx debuted on the chart that week with his double LP, “An Evening with Groucho.” The album stayed on the chart for fifteen weeks. Somehow this veteran of vaudeville had become a pop star 67 years after making his show business debut.

It was a time when comedy albums were popular. Comedians like George Carlin, Cheech & Chong, Robert Klein and Richard Pryor regularly had LPs on the “Billboard” chart. But Groucho’s album was equal parts music and comedy. A&M Records even issued two songs as a single: “Lydia the Tattooed Lady,” backed with “Show Me a Rose.” Groucho’s contemporaries, like George Burns and George Jessel, occasionally released record albums late in their careers, so the release of “An Evening with Groucho” was not itself out of the ordinary. It was the album’s popularity that was unexpected.

Groucho was enjoying a new generation’s discovery of the Marx Brothers. His 1950s quiz show, “You Bet Your Life,” was back on television, and Groucho was also making regular appearances on talk shows. He was frail, but could still show flashes of the brilliance that made him a vaudeville star and the toast of Broadway 50 years earlier. A 1970s Marx Brothers renaissance came just in time for Groucho. Harpo and Chico didn’t live to see the flood of Marx Brothers books and merchandise. Marx Brothers films were playing on television and at colleges and revival houses across the country. Groucho was suddenly in demand after a relatively quiet decade of semi-retirement. “An Evening with Groucho” was the result of a series of one-man shows in the spring and summer of 1972.

The one-man show actually featured Marvin Hamlisch accompanying Groucho on piano, and a couple of brief appearances by Groucho’s controversial manager and companion Erin Fleming. But the show was mostly Groucho telling stories and singing songs. His

appearance may have been startling to people expecting the Groucho they knew from Marx Brothers films, or from “You Bet Your Life,” but the mere sight of him onstage thrilled packed houses wherever he appeared. He didn’t have to be great. He simply had to be Groucho.

The show debuted in Ames, Iowa, at the C.Y Stephens Auditorium at Iowa State University on April 29<sup>th</sup>. The big event was the upcoming Carnegie Hall show in New York on May 6<sup>th</sup>. All of the shows would be recorded for a planned album. After Carnegie Hall, Groucho traveled to France to be honored at the Cannes Film Festival. He returned to the stage on August 11<sup>th</sup> at the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco. But it was all too much. On September 12<sup>th</sup> Groucho suffered a stroke and was hospitalized. October performances in Chicago and Detroit were canceled. The September 24<sup>th</sup> performance in Los Angeles was rescheduled at the insistence of Erin Fleming, but Groucho was not well enough to perform. Erin told the press that the postponement was the result of Groucho being depressed by the September 5<sup>th</sup> massacre of eleven members of the Israeli Olympic team in Munich, Germany. The stroke was not disclosed. The album would be made from the three shows already recorded.

In reviewing the recordings, producer Phil Ramone concluded that the Carnegie Hall performance was the weakest. The tapes were deftly edited to utilize portions of the Iowa and San Francisco shows along with the best material recorded at Carnegie Hall. “An Evening with Groucho” was enjoying its run on the “Billboard” charts when Groucho finally played the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles on December 11<sup>th</sup>.

The album remains a critical piece of Marxian history. Groucho’s vaudeville stories, tales of his odd relatives, and those wonderful forgotten songs from his early days on the stage would not have otherwise been preserved. Like most vaudevillians, Groucho was prone to hyperbole and is occasionally a bit loose with his facts on the album. But there are few documents of early 20<sup>th</sup> century show business as entertaining as Groucho reminiscing on stage in 1972.

Musically the album runs the gamut from Groucho’s greatest hits--like Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby’s “Hello, I Must Be Going” and “Show Me a Rose” and E.Y. Harburg and Harold Arlen’s “Lydia the Tattooed Lady,” to vaudeville era songs so obscure that there are no other known recordings of them. In the case of “Toronto Song,” Irving Berlin denied having written it. Marvin Hamlisch opens the album with a medley of tunes from Marx Brothers films, peppered with bursts of applause as familiar melodies from “Animal Crackers,” “A Night at the Opera” or “Horse Feathers” are heard. Audiences were filled with young Marx Brothers fans--many dressed as Groucho--who would have been well entertained by a mere glimpse of the man.

In his introduction to the Carnegie Hall show, talk show host Dick Cavett gushed, “I can’t believe I know Groucho Marx.” When the album came out, Cavett recalled a promise of compensation for the use of the recording of his appearance. It never came. In 1974 when a compilation of clips from Groucho’s appearances on “The Dick Cavett Show” aired, Cavett answered his phone and heard a weary sounding Groucho on the line

demanding payment--with Erin Fleming no doubt nearby. Nothing came of any of it and Cavett and Groucho remained close friends.

Groucho's appearances on "The Dick Cavett Show" and the album "An Evening with Groucho" are the highlights of what Cavett refers to as "the last of Groucho's greatness." He would return to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in 1974 to collect an honorary Academy Award as part of the ongoing celebration of the Marx Brothers that Groucho enjoyed in his last years. "An Evening with Groucho"--essentially a document of Groucho's final stage performances--remains a monumental piece of that celebration and resurgence.

The gatefold album sleeve featured quotes from many friends of Groucho's including Cavett, Woody Allen, Harry Ruby, Laurence Olivier, Charlie Chaplin and T.S. Eliot. But fellow vaudevillian George Burns summed it up best: "This album could make a big star out of Groucho Marx. There's nothing going to stop this kid."

*Robert S. Bader is the author of "Four of the Three Musketeers: The Marx Brothers on Stage," published by Northwestern University Press. He is also the editor of "Groucho Marx and Other Short Stories and Tall Tales," an anthology of the comedian's lost writings.*

\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.