



## Strouse at 80 Always Looking Toward Tomorrow

Friday, June 27, 2008 - by [TJ Fitzgerald](#)



No matter what we do or where we go, there are certain songs that stay with us and inspire us. But many times, we associate the songs with the shows and not with the people who created them. Well, it is with the deepest gratitude and respect that I share this interview with all of you for one of Broadway's greatest composers, Mr. [Charles Strouse](#). And I apologize to Mr. Strouse if I gush, as I know from speaking with him that he really doesn't feel comfortable about people gushing, but I do it out of respect for the work he has done and continues to do.

On June 7, 2008, [Charles Strouse](#), the award winning composer of Annie, Bye Bye Birdie and some of the most popular music from the last 50 years of Broadway, film and television, turned 80. To mark the occasion, a year-long celebration of events including concerts, international tributes, revivals of popular favorites and premieres of new works will take place across the United States and around the world.

Strouse has written the score to over 30 stage musicals, 14 scores for Broadway, four Hollywood films, two orchestral works and an opera. He has been inducted to the Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Theatre Hall of Fame. He is a three-time Tony Award winner, a two-time Emmy Award winner, and his cast recordings have earned him two Grammy Awards. His song "Those Were The Days" launched over 200 episodes of the "All in the Family" and continues to reach new generations of television audiences in syndication.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, I give you [Charles Strouse](#)...

TJ: Congratulations on fifty years of entertaining people all over the world!

STROUSE: Thank you.

TJ: So how does it feel?

STROUSE: I feel pretty much undeserving, if that's a way to put it. You know, it's something you want...admiration, adulation and all that. But deep down, between you and me, who deserves it.

TJ: Well, with the work that you've done, from the perspective of someone from the outside looking in, it's been such a wonderful body of work and so many people around the world appreciate the work you have done everyday.

STROUSE: Thank you. I just got back from a doctors appointment and I said, "Gee. What you do is so fantastic. I always wanted to be a doctor and give people comfort and cure them and all that." He's a fine doctor and he said, "Well, look at what you do?" Well, I do what I do because I don't know what else to do. The short answer is it feels great.

TJ: I think everybody contributes to life in a certain way and we're all appreciative to some respect of each others contributions. Now, there are all sorts of celebrations going on over the year, which will be keeping you really busy.

STROUSE: Yes because I turned 80, which is unusual for my family as both my parents died before or in their early 60's. But I feel great. I'm doing a lot of work. I guess there's something mystic about 80. Maybe next year it will be 90....who knows?

TJ: When you look back on all the work you've done over the past 50 years, it has got to be fulfilling for you.

STROUSE: As I said before, I don't know what I else I would do. I was trained. You're a writer. You get trained in it...someone explains a metaphor or something and suddenly, it's the only thing you want to do. It's your teachers. I had very good teachers. I wake up every morning wanting to write something.

TJ: When did you discover that this was what you wanted to do?

STROUSE: Well, I went to music school fairly early in my life. I was 15 and wasn't sure at all that was what I wanted to do, but I showed an aptitude for it. I think when I was at school, the Eastman School of Music...which is a very serious music school...I started to have goals. They were basically in writing quartets in **Bartók** and Stravinsky...all the music I heard. All my fellow students and teachers appreciated the values and that and the counterpoint in Bach and all of that. And it seemed as though that was what I wanted to do.

The only difference was that my parents were sickly and my father particularly. But my mother was a kind of depressive and I found myself more and more writing music that would please them. I pleased them when I was a kid. I still write seriously once in a while and I've done film scores and things like that. I moved away from the cantatas and sonatas and all that kind of thing and when I made my living in New York, I got into jazz. I started playing for a lot of singers and dancers and before you know it, I was a jazz guy.

TJ: Did you find it hard to break into the business?

STROUSE: It's beyond hard. There's something about the New York theatre world, which indolence is built into it. I read that it wasn't that way in Ziegfeld's day. But yeah, it's more than hard...it's like air that's always yielding to any pressure without ever seeming to give anything back. It's been good luck that sometimes you do run across somebody whose interests coincide with yours or who sometimes have an admiration for what you do.

I had a couple of people like that in my life. I had Goddard Lieberson, who was the head of Columbia Records, who through a friend heard Bye Bye Birdie and liked it. And there was a man, who I thought was a fool, who came up from the South...a very rich man...who I thought was at least a total innocent. And he

didn't know what was in or out or fashionable...he just liked some of the music and he invested \$75,000 in it, which was more than anybody had ever heard of, and that enabled us to get started. The theatre owner, kind of against his will, gave us the Martin Beck. I say against his will...he was looking around for any other show and looking back on it; I can't help but feel there's an element of luck.

I don't know if you've read my book but my wife was always finding coins on the street and I never found anything. And she said, "The trouble is you're looking at the wrong time. You should always look down when the coin is there", which made no sense at all to me. There's a kind of optimism.

TJ: I can't believe that it's been 30 years since Annie came out.

STROUSE: Yeah. I know. It was another tough grind along the path. Of course, I had the greatest collaborators. We had the most fun...[Martin Charnin](#) and [Charles Meehan](#) and I. We worked on it and worked on it and I can't believe it was 30 years ago either. Many people had said that we wrote so we could get a young audience. We didn't know what we were doing, in that respect. We were writing the Depression and Dickens. So those elements played in our favor.

TJ: And years later, Annie is known by everyone.

STROUSE: I know! I have had parents say to me that if my daughter sings Tomorrow one more time, I'm going to come over to your house and kill ya [*laughter*]. I'm kidding. I mean they said it jokingly.

TJ: I understand that. But the bottom line is that people love the show. It's timeless.

STROUSE: I've got to say, it seems to be.

TJ: On that subject, I spoke to [Sally Struthers](#) a couple of weeks ago and she is playing Miss Hannigan in a production of Annie coming up in July. She loves the show and said she has so much fun playing that role.

STROUSE: She's very good in it.

TJ: Speaking of her, I didn't realize that you wrote the theme song to All In The Family, Those Were The Days.

STROUSE: Yeah. Lee Adams and I. We had written the score for a movie called The Night They Raided Minskys. It's full of coincidences, this corner of my life. The reason that he asked me to do the score for that, Lee and me to do some songs, was because he had seen Bonnie and Clyde. Actually he hadn't seen it but heard it was very good and that I did the music for it. He asked me if I wanted to do the music for this picture and I said, "Sure!"

And then after that, he showed me this British script which I thought to myself that this was a real loser...nobody's going to use language like that. But he softened it up a bit and it became what it became. I feel blessed rather than deserving.

TJ: Now, you had mentioned Minsky's and I understand that you're doing the music for the new musical stage version?

STROUSE: Yes. It opens in California in December and then is coming to New York.

TJ: At 80, you're still doing it.

STROUSE: Yes, that's what I like doing. I don't know what else I'd do. I can't eat more than one dinner a night. I have a great family, which is terribly important to me. Three out of four of them are married. One is on the way. And I'm crazy about them. They're all writers, by the way, except my second son, who was an actor and a rock 'n roller and he's now a psychotherapist. Yeah...it's a great life.

TJ: It sounds like your family has been very supportive of you.

STROUSE: They really are. They're wonderful and bright and achievers and I've learned a lot.

TJ: Now, the new book, what was it that inspired you to write it?

STROUSE: I do concertizing every once in a while. It's basically with a singer or two or just by myself. I play a whole bunch of songs and tell anecdotes. Well, one night, a literary agent, whom I didn't know that well, as a matter of fact, said, "I think there's a book in that. Why don't you try writing it?" She told me to write 30 or 40 pages and I did. Oddly enough, I heard from her and her editor, who were both very positive. Then she lost me in the shuffle of her being busy and so I looked up on the internet for literary agents. The first one I buzzed was somebody I liked on the phone. She read it, she liked it and she got two offers right away from publishers and that was it!

TJ: How far back do you go in the book?

STROUSE: Back to, I would say, 3 or 4. My mother was a seriously depressed woman who became addicted to drugs and my wanting to cheer her up. And my father who was very sickly...it's a very early part of my life that I do remember.

TJ: Who are some of your inspirations in musical theatre?

STROUSE: Well, certainly Kern and Steve Sondheim, who is probably my oldest friend. I would say [Cole Porter](#) was my biggest inspiration. I found his work so thrilling and sophisticated. I would put him as the number one influence. You know, I studied with a lot of people who influenced me outside of musical theatre...influenced me rhythmically and harmonically and all that kind of thing where it started to draw together.

TJ: On Minsky's, you have a great collaborative team in [Casey Nicholaw](#) and Bob Martin, who both worked on The Drowsy Chaperone.

STROUSE: And [Susan Birkenhead](#) is doing the lyrics. It's a lot of fun working on the show and I think more than that. We'll see.

**With great thanks to the legendary [Charles Strouse](#), you might want to head out to the bookstore or check out Amazon.com or [www.bn.com](#) as his new memoir, "Put On a Happy Face" releases on July 1<sup>st</sup>. It should be a great read. And the year long celebration continues with events all over the place. You can get more information on where to see him at his newly launched website [www.CharlesStrouse.com](#).**

**And don't forget his new show, Minsky's, with lyrics by [Susan Birkenhead](#) (Jelly's Last Jam), a book by Bob Martin and direction and choreography by [Casey Nicholaw](#) (both of The Drowsy Chaperone), which will play at The Ahmanson in Los Angeles January 21 to March 1, 2009, with a New York premiere to follow. Minsky's is a big, racy, new musical comedy set in the Prohibition Era New York City, recalling the free-spirited time of early showbiz comedians, con men, sexy chorus girls, hot music and dancing.**

**Its one big celebration for a great guy and hope you join in. So for now folks, I am back to the grind and bid you, "Ciao!"...and remember, theatre is my life!**



TJ Fitzgerald has been around the New England Theatre scene both as a participant (acting and directing) as well being a theatre fanatic since birth. He had been a featured columnist on interviews and theatre features for New England Entertainment Digest since 1992 and is currently a board member of the New England Theatre Conference. His past interviews have included Tony Award winner Faith Prince, Tony Nominee Brad Oscar (The Producers), Maureen McGovern, (Little Women), Joanna Gleason (Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, Into The Woods), Gregory Jbara (Chicago, Into The Woods) and Stephen Schwartz (Wicked, Godspell). It's been quite a life thus far, folks and the best is yet to come

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