

With A Song In His Heart

by Curt Schleier

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You might not recognize Charles Strouse's name, but you almost certainly know his music: "Tomorrow," from the musical "Annie," "Put on a Happy Face" from "Bye-Bye Birdie" and "Those Were the Days," the song that opened more than 200 episodes of "All in the Family."

All told, Strouse has written the score for over 30 stage musicals, four Hollywood films and an opera. His songs have been recorded by everyone from Barbra Streisand to Jay Z. He's won numerous Tonys (three), Grammys (two) and Emmys (two) and been inducted into both the Songwriters and Theater Halls of Fame.

Having just turned 80, and with a new memoir, "Put on a Happy Face" (Union Square Press) just out, you'd think he might be kicking back and enjoying the fruits of his 60 years in the business. But he's not slowing down. He's putting the finishing touches on a stage version of "The Night They Raided Minsky's," scheduled to open next year



The song is you: Charles Strouse, then and now.

in Los Angeles. Musical adaptations of Paddy Chayefsky's "Marty" and Theodore Dreiser's "An American Tragedy" are also in the works.

Strouse admits that at least part of his drive stems from insecurity; not all his babies are equally adored and appreciated. "Dance A Little

Closer” (1983), for example, written with Alan Jay Lerner, closed after opening night. “People judge a show on whether it’s a hit or not,” he said in a telephone interview. “They don’t ever probe into the quality of the music — or lack of it. I’ve had my share of hurt.

“I don’t want to lie to you. I do think of myself as good — but most of the time, frankly, I have a lot of doubts. Honestly, it’s something I wrestle with. I still think I caught ‘em on a good day — which I think is very Jewish.”

Strouse was born into a middle-class Jewish family in Manhattan, and as with seemingly every Jewish home of the time, there was a piano in the house. He started taking lessons at a very young age, but didn’t quite take to it at first. In the end, his native talent won out. He attended the Eastman School of Music, studied with Aaron Copland and others at Tanglewood and spent three years in Europe, studying there as well.

When he returned, he and longtime writing partner Lee Adams wrote songs for a variety of revues as well as special material for performers such as Kaye

Ballard, Carol Burnett and Jane Morgan. Television viewers of a certain age may remember the way Strouse picked up a little extra cash. When Molly Goldberg’s daughter Rosalie “played” the piano, it was Strouse offstage tickling the ivories for her.

In 1958, Strouse and Adams auditioned to write the music for a new show about American teenagers. It took them three rounds before they were selected, but that musical — his first on Broadway — was “Bye Bye Birdie.” It earned them a Tony their first time out.

That was followed by several seminal Broadway shows, including “Annie” and “Follies,” which was a musical adaptation of “All About Eve.” And those are just the ones for which he won a Tony. He was nominated for “Golden Boy,” “Flowers for Algernon” and the immigrant-themed show, “Rags.”

There were movie scores as well, even a top-20 hit back in 1958. He and a friend wrote “Born Too Late” (recorded by the Poni-Tails) in about 15 minutes while waiting for a tardy player to show up at a poker game.

It is a remarkable record, one that places him in the same pantheon with Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin and other composers who created the American songbook. With few exceptions (Cole Porter most prominent among them) it is a book written primarily by Jews.

Strouse’s Jewishness, though he is not observant, regularly comes out in his music, most notably in his score for “Rags,” a show about the Jewish immigrant experience.

“I don’t know the exact reason [why Jewish composers figure so prominently in the American songbook],” Strouse says. “My sense of music history is that in Europe serious music composition — symphonies and operas — was almost exclusively non-Jewish composers. They were left out because of an unspoken anti-Semitism. They could connect only with light music, not serious music.

“And when they came here they were exposed to so many new influences: black jazz, Irish clog dancing, Italian tarantellas. Sometimes I listen to klezmer music and the wail of the clarinet and I can’t tell if it’s Jewish or black.”

