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The Ultimate American Composer

A STANDING OVATION FOR STROUSE

BY WILL FRIEDWALD

In 1999, when Jay-Z recorded and shot a video for "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)," a rap interpretation of a Broadway show tune, "It's a Hard Knock Life," from "Annie," he wasn't just being ironic by parading his "ghetto anthem" in front of a choir of Caucasian moppets and using their whiteness to emphasize his blackness. Really, the rapper was only amplifying and anthematizing the antisocial feeling that songwriter Charles Strouse had instilled in the song in 1977, when he captured the aggression of a gang of future delinquents who were kicked rather than kissed. The hapless orphans suffering under the iron fist of the despotic Miss Hannigan already know well "from nightmares of a lonely cell, my only hell."

For his part, Mr. Strouse lent hip-hop a harmonic and melodic depth it seldom boasts of elsewhere. Still, this ghetto anthem seems an entirely logical destination for the career of the composer, whose 80th birthday will be celebrated Wednesday at



Charles Strouse

the Allen Room (as part of Lincoln Center's American Songbook series) by the singer-pianist Eric Comstock in a program called "This is the Life: Eric Comstock Salutes Charles Strouse @ 80," and whose classic 1970 musical "Applause" is being staged this weekend by City Center Encores!

Mr. Strouse's first full-length show, 1960's "Bye Bye Birdie" (with lyrics by Lee Adams, who would become his longtime collaborator) is widely credited (or blamed) as the first to bring

rock 'n' roll to Broadway. Forty years later, the merging of show tunes and rap seemed a logical step. Of course, the big love song in "Birdie," "One Boy," showed a subtler, if no less skillful, side of the composer's abilities. It's a grand, soaring, romantic number in the tradition of Jerome Kern, or even Puccini, even more so in the lush orchestration supplied by Johnny Green for the movie version (there were many more strings in Hollywood than could fit into the orchestra pit at the Martin Beck Theatre). Like Kern before him, Mr. Strouse's primary musical influences were the great European symphonists; he studied with Aaron Copland and Nadia Boulanger.

Still, his music was immediately adopted by the jazz and pop communities. The score to his next show, 1962's "All American," was recorded in its entirety by both Duke Ellington and Clark Terry. Two years later, "Golden Boy," which told the story of a young black athlete (played by Sammy Davis Jr.) struggling to find himself in a white world, was subsequently recorded by black bands and singers such as the Jazz Messengers, the Jazz Crusaders, and Nina Simone.

Fittingly, Mr. Strouse began his career as a rehearsal pianist for

Harold Arlen, whose music also had both an operatic side and a jazz-blues side. As the composer told The New York Sun in a phone interview last week, "I was in the pit [for 'Saratoga'] when the stage manager, Ed Padula, who had never produced a show, asked me: 'I hear you're a composer. I have an idea for a show. Would you like to talk about it?' It was about teenagers, although it wasn't with an Elvis character yet." "Bye Bye Birdie" opens with a motion picture montage of Conrad Birdie, singing idol of teenagers, whose resemblance to Presley — draft notice included — is certainly not accidental. They were already at work on the show well before Presley was drafted into the army in March 1958 (although by the time they finished, in April 1960, the King had already returned home following his two-year hitch in Germany).

Mr. Strouse's roots were in classical music; at age 10, he actually wrote a song titled "The Best Tunes of All Come From Carnegie Hall." It wasn't long before this Eastman School of Music graduate began exploring rock and rhythm and blues. "I played in a lot of pickup bands," he said, "traveled a lot in the South with some black acts. It was a paying-your-dues time." A side benefit of this exploratory work came in 1958, when Mr. Strouse composed a chart hit, "Born Too Late," for one of the early rock-era girl groups, the Poni-Tails.

After the Tony-winning and Hollywood-certified triumph of and Adams's next success was

"Golden Boy," which was an even purer example of a score that was Carnegie Hall and 125th Street at the same time. They followed it with "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman," which played 129 performances; Mr. Strouse feels that the high-camp "Batman" TV show, which had launched two months earlier, "took some of the air out" of their superhero musical. Nevertheless, the idea of putting a comic strip on Broadway eventually paid off like gangbusters with the 1977 megahit "Annie," which had begun as a TV special to compete with "The Wizard of Oz."

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In between, Mr. Strouse landed his second of three Tony Awards with 1970's "Applause!," which is commonly cited as his masterpiece. One of the first stage musical adaptations of a classic movie ("All About Eve"), "Applause" also brought to Broadway a legendary leading lady of the silver screen, whose vocal talent was hitherto unknown.

Today, Mr. Strouse acknowledges that Lauren Bacall's singing ability was less of a problem than her chronic

stage fright. With the help of Mr. Adams's lyrics and an expert book by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Mr. Strouse crafted a brilliantly integrated piece of musical storytelling. Though the show failed to produce a hit single, many of the songs are heard frequently in cabaret; here also, Mr. Strouse's music for "Applause" alternated between classical and contemporary, using power pop chords of the sort Stephen Sondheim employed that same season in "Company."

As he approaches 80 this June, Mr. Strouse is working on the first commercial studio recording of his songs and a memoir. He's one of a tiny pantheon of composers representing the great living masters of traditional musical theater, the others including Sheldon Harnick, Jerry Herman, Fred Kander, and Mr. Sondheim. Yet one must wonder how "traditional" a Broadway composer can really be if his music is associated with rock and rap. "I wouldn't call myself a rock 'n' roll composer, although we like to think we did it first," he said. "I write in my own style. I don't know what you call it. It ain't 'Hair,' and it ain't 'Spring Awakening!'"

wfriedwald@nysun.com

"This is the Life: Eric Comstock Salutes Charles Strouse @ 80" will be performed tomorrow at 8:30 p.m. at the Allen Room (33 W. 60th St., between Ninth Avenue and Broadway, 212-258-9800).

