

Bringing Back “Buddy”

Charles Strouse's childhood nickname typifies the composer who has spent the last 80 years making people happy

by Harry Haun

Broadway composer Charles Strouse is such a sunshiny, straight-arrow sort of guy you probably could have predicted he'd call his tell-all *Put on a Happy Face* (after, of course, a song he and lyricist Lee Adams wrote for their first Broadway hit, *Bye Bye Birdie*). What you likely would not have guessed is the dark irony intended in that title, which Union Square Press put out to mark his 80th birthday.

On W. 70th St. in N.Y.C., Strouse grew up fat, depressed and “Buddy,” a moniker hung on him almost at birth by his older brother David, who couldn't get his three-year-old mouth around “brudder.” “I think ‘Buddy’ will always be with me somehow,” Strouse believes. As Buddy, he was the pudgy adolescent spending an inordinate amount of energy trying to make his clinically depressed mother happy. “I

was dedicated to making her feel better, to make her smile.” That turned into a worldwide mission, and music became his means of putting a happy face on millions.

This was achieved largely, but hardly entirely, by three shows—his Tony-winning triumvirate: *Applause*, *Annie* and *Bye Bye Birdie*. Not counting the incidental music for two straight plays, Strouse has been on Broadway 15 times. A third of that lasted—fleeting—all of 19 performances: *Dance a Little Closer* and *A Broadway Musical* were both one-night stunts; *Rag* and *Bring Back Birdie* lingered four performances each; and his most anguished collaboration (with director, book writer and former friend Arthur Laurents), *Nick & Nora*, languished fitfully for nine performances before expiring.

It's a hard-knock life, but it has carried him to great theatrical heights. Lee Adams is his first and most frequent collaborator—they're now working on their musical version of Paddy Chayefsky's *Mary*—but there've been a slew of others, from Stephen Schwartz to Alan Jay Lerner. His latest is lyricist Susan Birkenhead, with whom he's writing *Minsky's*, based on a movie he scored in 1968, *The Night They Raided Minsky's*. It will world-premiere on January 21 at L.A.'s Ahmanson and could come in by late spring.

Strouse's ease at changing partners speaks volumes for his adaptability—a lesson he learned at home in his 45-year marriage to director-choreographer Barbara Simon, mother of their four now-grown children. “Marriage taught me a lot about collaboration. Long relationships do. The overall need is exactly the same—to be very supportive of the other person. I guess that's a philosophy. I want to make my collaborator feel good.”



Musical theatre was in a peak state in the mid-'50s when Strouse professionally lunged on the scene—through an improbable backdoor. Because of Rex Harrison's success at talk-singing, Lee Strasberg started a program at Actors Studio for actors to work on musicals, and Strouse was the pianist-in-residence. He made a pal for life in Anne Bancroft, getting her through “Just You Wait, Henry Higgins,” and introduced her to her husband of 40 years, Mel Brooks, when he and Brooks were toiling on a Joshua Logan musical, *All American*. The artistic mix of Brooks and Logan was, in Strouse's view, “much like buttermilk and shoe polish,” and the show sank in 80 performances, but one of his most heartbreaking and

we wrote it for utilitarian reasons—to cover a scene change. The first night it went in, it got a terrific hand. I went up to [lyricist-director] Martin Charnin and said, “That was some great scene change. Didja hear the applause?” It took me two months before I realized people liked that song.”

If there was one song he'd prefer to be remembered for, it's “Children of the Wind” from his golden score to *Rag*. “I wrote it for Teresa Stratas. She's a wonderful woman. I remember when I got to know her voice, I said, ‘We ought to lower this just a key,’ but she wouldn't change it. She said—and this is the kind of musician she was—I know when you wrote it you felt it in that key.”



l-r.: Strouse at the piano, circa 1945; rehearsing *Applause* with Lauren Bacall; with Sammy Davis, Jr. backstage at the Majestic Theatre at the 1964 opening night of *Golden Boy*; and backstage at the Alvin Theatre in 1977 with Broadway's original *Annie*, Andrea McArdle

beloved ballads—“Once Upon a Time”—made it to the charts through the solid-gold pipeline of Mabel Mercer, Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett.

His best-known tune may be the one left in weekly tatters by Carroll O'Connor and Jean Stapleton at the top of their “All in the Family” show: “Those Were the Days.”

Certainly, the song he'll most be remembered for is his *Annie* anthem, “Tomorrow” (as in “The sun'll come out / Tomorrow”)—a fact that doesn't sit well with him. “‘Tomorrow’ is a very conflicting thing for me, for two reasons. One: It was, with the exception of ‘Hard-Knock Life,’ the only song that could not have been written in the '30s. The harmonies and the melodic turns in it are definitely '70s. I thought for sure critics would say, ‘Hey, wait a second—that ain't Harry Warren,’ which all the other songs tried to be. That, plus the fact

Some stars have ridden roughshod over Strouse's melodic line. Sammy Davis insisted every note of the *Golden Boy* score be run by him—more often than not in the wee small hours after his last nightclub act. After four measures, he'd jazz-riff Strouse's well-worked-out melody into “his own thing,” which some sycophantic chorine would cheer on.

Strouse thought Ann-Margret too worldly and all wrong for the *Birdie* movie, and his point was well made by her sexy coterwauling of the title tune during the credit crawl—but it also made her a star, and he's doomed to go through life hearing about it. After one college lecture recently, a student told him that opening number made him want to go into theatre. “You mean you want to be a composer?” Strouse asked. “No,” the lad said, “I want to be Ann-Margret.”