

## STROUSE-ICAL

From "Birdie" and "Annie" to "Marty" and "Minsky's," composer Charles Strouse writes the songs that put on a happy face. >>>



*"Grey skies are gonna clear..."*

*"The sun'll come up..."*

*"You're never fully dressed..."*

Yes, you've probably had a tune by Charles Strouse stuck in your head at one time or another. The composer of a pair of Broadway classics, Bye-Bye Birdie and Annie, as well as a number of strong contenders (Applause, Golden Boy, Rags, Annie Warbucks) and high-profile also-rans (Nick & Nora, Mayor, It's a Bird...It's a Plane...It's Superman), Strouse turns 80 this week, and yet he's still in the prime of his career. Currently he's working on Minsky's, the 1920s-set musical based on the 1968 movie The Night They Raided Minsky's, with Drowsy Chaperone director/choreographer Casey Nicholaw and lyricist Susan Birkenhead. A project with his wife, director Barbara Siman, is in the works, while a recent musicalization, with his usual lyricist Lee Adams, of the classic film Marty still awaits a Broadway berth.

A series of June events in New York will ring in Strouse's momentous 80th, building up to the July release of his memoir, Put On a Happy Face, as well as a special 30th anniversary edition of the Annie cast recording. Strouse recently took a break from composing in his poster-lined Manhattan office to chat with TDF about his illustrious--and still unfolding--career.

TDF: You studied classical composition with Nadia Boulanger and Aaron Copland. At what point did you decide you wanted to write for the stage?

Charles Strouse: There was a very neat turning-off point. One dreary summer I won a fellowship to the McDowall Colony, where I was going to work on a big piece I'd started, and at the same time I was playing for dance classes. One of the members of the class asked me to be choreographic pianist at a summer resort called Green Mansions in Adirondacks. It was like a fantasy--all those beautiful girls--and it was a switch from living alone in a room, so I said yes.

If anything was a turning point in my life, that was. We did new revues every week. We had to write new songs, sketches. We would do a Spanish ballet one week, then a hillbilly thing the next--it was awful work, but I loved the atmosphere.

TDF: Did you feel you had to overcome a barrier between classical music and theatre music?

Charles: I think so, and maybe in a way it's still a problem, but it's not one that haunts me anymore. I have a talent for light music. But I've written piano concertos and quartets and song cycles. So I would say there's a conflict, but I've been lucky and have managed to fit it all in.

TDF: Like a lot of writers for musical theatre, you've adapted shows from films, comic strips, books, etc., but your first big hit, *Bye Bye Birdie*, was an original musical.

Charles: Yeah, there are very few originals. The idea of doing a teenage musical, which was kind of radical in a sense, was the producer, Ed Padula's, but the idea of a rock singer was [lyricist] Lee Adams' and [librettist] Mike Stewart's, and mine--we'd been writing special material for a guy by the name of Dick Shawn, and Dick did an Elvis impersonation, so we kind of fit that in.

TDF: You've had big successes, and you've had shows that didn't run past opening night. Can you tell what makes a show work or not work?

Charles: The best way to explain the success or failure of a show is in terms of marriage. People always say, "What comes first, the words or the music?" It's the same thing with a relationship. It took me and my wife years to really carve out a loving relationship. It's the same thing with songs: Sometimes you're all loving the same thing and loving each other, so you get the best work out of everyone. That's what I've found in the things that have worked for me. And with the ones that didn't work, I take blame, too, but it was usually that the relationship wasn't right.

TDF: You started in what is now thought of as a Golden Age for musicals, the 1950s and early '60s. Did it seem like that at the time, and has it felt like the musicals since don't measure up?

Charles: I don't know. I'm going to be 80 in June--which seems crazy; I was 17 about a week ago, or so it seems. I mean, I'm not a rock composer, though *Birdie* had rock in it. I wouldn't mind writing a rock musical, but I don't have those thoughts necessarily.

I loved Spring Awakening. It told a wonderful story. As soon as the rock hit me, I said, "Wait a second, this is the 19th century..." Then I gave up on that idea, and I liked it. I've had a show, Annie, where all the kids flocked to it. Now I pass Spring Awakening, and even The Little Mermaid, which is not to me a terrific show, but kids love it. It's a wonderful audience to have.

TDF: If someone came to you and said, "Write a hip-hop musical," would you take the job?

Charles: I think I would try and get myself into that world, and in getting in the world, I think I would hear the characters' heartbeat to an extent. I mean, I think it's my business to do that. But I don't think anybody would come to me for that; I haven't written a big song for Whitney Houston or Jay-Z--well, I did write a big song for Jay-Z.

TDF: Inadvertently.

Charles: Inadvertently--that was weird. But now that you ask the question, if somebody came to me and said, "We have a story about a neighborhood in New York where everyone is Latino and a girl goes to college," I would research it. I mean, I didn't know anything about rock 'n' roll when we wrote Birdie; I went to the music library and I listened to Fats Domino and Elvis Presley. I'd like to think I'm smart and sensitive enough that I'm not going to write a Viennese waltz for a kid who lost his brother in a razor fight.

It's a tough problem, because it's the commercial theatre. You don't get the luxury of writing for an erudite, select kind of audience that understands the technique. I mean, that's what made Broadway, a lot of businessmen. I don't get it.

TDF: You say you don't get it, but you've done pretty well by it.

Charles: I've been fortunate, I really believe.

[Click here for more information about Charles Strouse and events honoring his 80th birthday.](#)

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