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The man behind the songs: For composer Strouse, music's the melting pot

by Jaime Banks

You may not recognize his name, but surely you know his music. Charles Strouse has composed 14 Broadway musicals -- including Tony Award winners *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Applause* and *Annie* -- in addition to numerous other shows, film scores and various popular and orchestral works.

Remember the catchy soundtrack for the film *Bonnie and Clyde*? He picked up a Grammy for that one. And the song, "Those Were the Days," sung by Carroll O'Connor and Jean Stapleton in the opening credits of the TV show *All in the Family*? He composed that, too.

The celebrated composer was in town last weekend to promote his most recent production, *Put On A Happy Face-A Broadway Memoir* (Sterling Publishing Co.), at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington's Jewish Book Festival.

Strouse's book offers insights into his 50-

year career in which he worked with some of the leading luminaries of stage and screen, including Alan Jay Lerner, Mel Brooks, Hal Prince, Edward Albee, Warren Beatty, Lauren Bacall, Sammy Davis Jr., Dick Van Dyke, Carol Burnett, Sidney Lumet, Norman Lear and Mike Nichols, to name a few.

Strouse, who turned 80 this year, entertained the JCCGW audience at the piano on Sunday night, crooning some of his best-known tunes, like "Put on a Happy Face," "Once Upon a Time" and "Tomorrow," interspersing them with personal stories and backstage vignettes.

In an interview, Strouse described how, as a child, he turned to music to cheer his parents. "My mother was severely depressed and needed a great deal of support; and my father was often ill. It was my big ambition to make them happy."

At age 15, he entered the Eastman School of Music, where he studied musical composition. After graduation, he went on to study with the legendary Aaron

Copland, at Tanglewood, Mass., and Nadia Boulanger, in Paris.

It was Boulanger who first identified Strouse's "talent for light music," which blossomed after he teamed up with lyricist Lee Adams. They initially wrote music for summer stock revues, but were soon approached to work on a new musical that would become Broadway's first rock and roll hit. In 1961, *Bye Bye Birdie* snagged the Tony for Best Musical. It was Strouse's first Broadway production.

"It was pretty unusual," Strouse admits. "I didn't take it for granted then, and I still don't. I've been very fortunate in my life."

Strouse would later partner with other lyricists, but he collaborated more with Adams than with anyone else. Usually the melodies would come first, and then the lyrics, says Strouse, although they worked closely together. "There's a lot of give and take," he explains. "It's like a marriage."

Compared to the back and forth of collaboration, composing involves a sort of "letting go," says Strouse. "I clear my mind and try a progression of notes that leads to sunlight or gray clouds. I don't know where I'm going exactly, except that it's going to be a love song or a comedy number, perhaps. It's a strange process and a very difficult one."

Of German Jewish descent, Strouse says he is not at all religious (in fact, more of an atheist), but nevertheless highly conscious of his Jewish heritage. "I can feel that I'm descended from the

immigrant wave of Jews. I always felt very close to Irving Berlin, [George] Gershwin and [Leonard] Bernstein, who was a friend."

Strouse describes *Rags*, about the Eastern European Jewish immigrant experience, as "a great personal favorite" because it involves "all the things I've thought a great deal about -- my lineage and the lineage of American musicals."

In composing that show, he researched the many cultural strains that contributed to American music and began to see that music was the one domain where all these cultures truly came together. "While Italians lived among Italians and the Irish among Irish, the real melting pot was music."

With his wife of 46 years, Barbara, at his side, Strouse is enjoying a milestone year. Touring to promote his memoir, he has received tributes on both sides of the Atlantic. The couple has four grown children and, as of last week, newborn twin grandsons.

Strouse has no plans to retire. "I'm a workaholic. That's what I do for fun. I don't know what else to do with myself." His most recent work, *Minsky's*, about the famed New York City burlesque theater, is scheduled to open in California next month. The story takes place in 1928, just before the stock market crash.

The backdrop, he thinks, will resonate with the current economic crisis. Plus, he notes: "The show has great dancing!"

