



# ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

in Celebration of the  
City of Sugar Land  
60th Anniversary



CITY OF SUGAR LAND



**Billy Stritch**  
Composer,  
Musical Director,  
Performer

**GOODSILL:** What brought your family to Sugar Land, Billy?

**STRITCH:** My grandmother, Mary Alice Blair, was born in Blessing, Texas, but her family moved to Sugar Land early in her life. My grandmother and Buddy Blair were cousins. Mary Alice was one of the founding families of First Presbyterian Church in Sugar Land, founded in 1920 or so. There is definitely a Sugar Land connection that goes way back for us.

At the time she married my dad, William Alfred Striech, they lived in Houston, where I was born in 1962. When I was about one, they decided to move out to Sugar Land and build a house. [Editor's note: Striech was the original spelling of the name. Billy goes by Stritch.]

**GOODSILL:** What was your paternal grandfather's name?

**STRITCH:** His name was William Alfred Streich. He was senior, my dad was junior, and I'm the III.

**GOODSILL:** What is William Alfred Streich's story?

**STRITCH:** I never knew my grandfather. He died before I was born, in 1957 or so. My older sister is the only one who vaguely remembers him. He worked for a philanthropist in Houston whose name was Alonzo Welch. He had a foundation, the Welch Foundation, which started in 1954, two years after Welch's death in 1952. My grandfather was Mr. Welch's right hand man. I know this through stories my grandmother told me over the years.

My dad who was an only child, who was raised in Houston. He went to Texas A & M for college and directly into the service afterward. He served two years in the Air Force. He met and married my mother, Jane Toffelmire, during the course of the war. They both went to Lamar High School. My mother was three years younger than my dad. I don't know exactly where or how they met but they got together pretty fast. Like people did in those days. I have two older sisters, Beverly and Susan, and a younger brother, Steven. So there are four of us.

**GOODSILL:** What do you remember about growing up in Sugar Land?

**STRITCH:** It was such a small town. And we lived on Alkire Lake so it felt like we lived in the country. The houses in my neighborhood were all on big lots, set off the street, and on a lake. There were lots of fields to play in. We always had bikes. I had a little mini bike when I was 10. I remember that neighborhood and the kids.

I went to kindergarten Merry Moppets Kindergarten right across Wood Street from Lakeview Elementary. It was run by Sally Rachuig Kelly and Mayme Rachuig Bass Hause. People often wonder if you actually remember events or you remember it because you've seen a picture of it. I think I actually remember dancing the Hokey Pokey with Melanie Wooley at the kindergarten graduation, which was in the Sugar Land School auditorium, now known as Lakeview Auditorium. It was hot as blazes because there was no air conditioning in that school, at all! I remember that every time we had to go to the auditorium, "OH, it is SO hot!"

I went to first grade at a private school in Houston because I was too young to enter the class. I started kindergarten at age 4, and you had to be 6 to start first grade. From second grade on I was in public school in Sugar Land. I went to Lakeview Elementary through 5th grade, then Dulles Junior High 6th through 8th grade. Right next to the Junior High was Dulles High School. Eventually it all became a high school and they built Sugar Land Middle School. In the 1970s, people started moving out there in droves. It really grew a lot. Nothing compared to the years since.

I had a huge graduating class at Dulles High School because we were the last class with the one high school in Fort Bend Independent School District. Then it split into two, with Clements, then Willowridge, and who knows how many there are now! I think there were 800-850 people in my graduating class. It was enormous. The high school was a big scene. I had great experiences in school. I loved the people I knew back then.

**GOODSILL:** I want to go back and trace your musical career, which may have started with the Hokey Pokey. In kindergarten were there any musical activities or education?

**STRITCH:** I started piano lessons when I was six. There was an old German man in Sugar Land, Curt Peter Schwalbe, who I think worked in the Engineering Department at Imperial Sugar. He and his wife were from the old country. He had been a concert pianist in Germany so he taught piano in his house on Brooks Street in Sugar Land.

**GOODSILL:** Their daughter, Constance, still has that house and gives piano lessons there.

**STRITCH:** All the kids in the neighborhood who took piano lessons took them from him. Both of my sisters wanted to take piano lessons, so of course, I had to have them, too. But I think I was jumping on the piano from age four. I have very early memories of playing the piano; I was very drawn to it. I always feel lucky that we had a piano in the house. I was intrigued by it. I was starting to plunk out little one-note melodies by ear. When I was six, my parents gave all three of us lessons.

**GOODSILL:** What do you remember about Mr. Schwalbe?

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**STRITCH:** He was very stern. I remember the house smelled like pipe tobacco. It was dark and very formal. He had two old grand pianos in the front room. You would have a 40-minute lesson and then he would assign homework from the John W. Schaum piano books; the blue book, the purple book, those primers when you start. After a year or two I was jumping past my sisters, which greatly discouraged them!

**GOODSILL:** What kind of a kid were you?

**STRITCH:** I was pretty quiet. I wasn't an outdoor kid. We lived on a lake and my mom was very outdoorsy. "Let's take a boat ride; let's go fishing." And I would have been very happy to have been left alone in my room, listening to records or reading. I love to read. My dad and my grandmother had a bookstore, which was great for me. That's another very early memory, of going to work with my dad and hanging out with them. The first couple of stores were in Houston and then they had one out in Stafford, off of Wilcrest. In the summer I would work as a stock boy. If I handled the books with care, I could borrow the books and bring them back. I was a quiet, introspective kid. In my own head a lot.

**GOODSILL:** And took to music in an easy way.

**STRITCH:** Yes, I did. I really wanted to go my own way with the music. Mr. Schwalbe was a classical pianist and everything was by the book. You had to learn the correct fingering to do scales and I could not have been less interested in that. I just wanted to listen to things on TV shows, record them with my little cassette player, and then go to the living room and try to crack the code, and learn how to play it, which I was doing by the time I was eight or nine. That's when music really started to come alive for me. I remember playing in little talent shows in elementary school and getting noticed for that, standing out. I was never a team player or an athlete even at a young age when we played Red Rover and kick ball. I just wasn't a big fan of recess. I remember it was SO hot, especially in the early and late part of the school year. I found pockets of kids who were also musical and liked to sing so that became a real outlet for me.

**GOODSILL:** Was there any music taught at Lakeview?

**STRITCH:** Choir. Nancy Bowlin was the choir teacher. There was 1st grade chorus, 2nd grade chorus. Everybody sang; everybody took chorus class. By the time I was in 3rd, or 4th, or 5th grade, it was separated with four or five teachers who would teach the whole day. It wasn't like junior high were all of a sudden you are going to different teachers for different subjects. You were in your one class with the other 30 kids.

**GOODSILL:** Was piano the primary interest in your life, your main passion?

**STRITCH:** Absolutely. It's what I do. And in junior high, there was band. I played trumpet, trombone and the brass instruments. In high school it was really great because there was also stage band for which I played piano. There were opportunities for me to accompany the choir and play in talent shows, and play in bands that I formed with friends in high school. It was all about music at that point.

I started making money at it when I was 13 by forming a rock group with some older kids. We played at dances in Quail Valley and at some funky places in East Bernard. It was basically for older kids, like juniors and seniors. There was always beer and everybody smoked. The band's name was Ukia. It wasn't very good. I got to a better band once I was a senior in high school. A band in Houston was looking for a guy to play electric keyboard. We worked at weddings and bar mitzvahs and birthday parties. We also played at the Warwick Hotel and the Rice Hotel.

**GOODSILL:** You were beginning your career!

**STRITCH:** Oh yes, I was already into it. I actually played three summers in the cocktail lounge at Quail Valley Country Club. I started doing that when I was 15, from May to September/October, so there were a couple of months that would overlap with the school year. I remember I couldn't drive the first year because I didn't have my license yet. So my mom would pick me up at school at 3:40. I would jump in the back seat and put on my work slacks, shirts with matching ties, and I would play from 5:00 - 8:00 PM. My dad would come pick me up at 8:00 to go home. This would have been 1977-1978. And I was making money! At that point it was there really wasn't any doubt what my career would be.

**GOODSILL:** Tell me who your band and music directors were in high school.

**STRITCH:** In high school, it was David Lambert. The year before, when I was in 8th grade, my sister Susan had been in band. So I couldn't wait to get into high school and be in the band. When I was in junior high, she was in high school, and she was drum major when she was a senior. I loved it. We went to football games of course. And my dad was a big sports guy. He wrote a sports column for the Fort Bend Mirror. We were always going to the Dulles Viking games and I couldn't wait for half time to see the band. I knew that I was going to be in that band. By the time I got in band, David Lambert was the main band director. He also had the stage band. And there was Larry Matysiak, Bill Duggan, Richard Cammack, Joe Gutierrez. There were five band directors because there were a

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lot of kids in band. There was a symphonic band, concert band, the marching band, which was about 200 of us. We took trips to Six Flags for band contest. One year we took a trip to Disneyworld. It was fantastic! You had to raise money to pay for the band trip so we sold magazine subscriptions and chocolate.

**GOODSILL:** I heard that one time you went to Honolulu.

**STRITCH:** Yes! The stage band went to Hawaii and that was very cool because there were just about 20 or 30 of us. David and Sheryl Lambert; Principal Shaver and his wife; and Bill Duggan and his wife, Cheri, accompanied us. It was a really, really cool trip. We got to play three or four concerts at different places. That was either my junior or senior year. I can't remember. It was really cool.

Dulles had a fantastic music department. High school was great fun for me because there were a lot of kids involved in drama, speech, choir, band, stage band - all the things I was involved in. I had a lot of friends. It was a big social thing. There were so many kids in the school that there were lots of different cliques. I was happy to be part of that.

**GOODSILL:** Tell us what happened after high school.

**STRITCH:** My parents wanted me to get a business degree, something to fall back on. But by the time I was graduating from high school, they were on board with my going to North Texas for a music degree. Well that didn't work out. I went away for a year and basically it was just being away from home and hanging out with the drama kids. I found a group of people to hang out with, but college really wasn't for me.

I enrolled at the University of Houston. I got involved with drama and was in some musicals and I met Sharon Montgomery and Sally Mayes. One night there was a cast party for one of the shows on closing night, and everybody got up to sing. Sally, Sharon and I got up to sing and we just fell into this great three-part harmony. It just kind of happened. A number of people that night said, "You guys ought to work together; you ought to form a group." So we did. We found our first gig and it just took off. That was in the early 1980s when there were lots of venues in Houston to work. That was the beginning of my real professional career.

During that time in Houston, 1980-1981, I worked with other jazz singers who were much older than I. That's when I first met Marilyn Maye. You must look her up. She was Johnny Carson's favorite singer and was on the Carson show more times than any other singer. She was working a club in Houston called Roscoe's and everybody that I was working with said, "Oh my God. Marilyn is just fantastic. You've got to go see her." So I went there and I was hooked. I was there all the time. I think I was just 18 at that point, maybe 19. That was the first time I had seen someone do a nightclub act, a real show, and entertain a crowd like that. I realized I wanted to work in nightclubs and cabarets and sing in addition to playing the piano.

Up to that point I had sung in the church choir, so I knew I could sing. And I had sung in musicals, but I had never really incorporated singing into my piano playing. Around that time is when that started to happen. I formed this vocal group and we were together for almost nine years. Sally Mayes left and Rebecca Plant took her place. We spent all of the 1980s doing concerts and nightclubs all over the country, and



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Europe as well. It was an incredible time. We had a manager in New York. We worked at Carnegie Hall; we were at the jazz festival at Carnegie Hall; we opened for Mel Torme. We worked the Venetian Room at all the Fairmont Hotels. It was quite a time, especially in Houston because that was the time of the big oil boom. There were lots of places to work and people were going out spending money on entertainment. The name of the group was Montgomery, Mayes, and Stritch; then it was called Montgomery, Plant, and Stritch. I was at the piano and singing with the women in wonderful three-part harmony. We did a lot of parodies and a lot of comedy and a wide range of styles but it was mostly rooted in jazz and swing and a little bit of Broadway.

The ultimate goal for us was get a national recording deal. We had a manager. We just couldn't break through. So, in 1990, we all agreed that it was time to say goodbye to it. At that point, because we had worked in New York so many times, I decided it was time for me to move to New York. I figured I could either stay in Houston and work in a smaller market and probably do very well, or I could do the New York thing. And I am so glad I moved to New York.

Within a few short months of that, I was working in a piano bar and Liza Minnelli came in. We became very connected right off the bat. She liked the way I

played; I was a big fan of hers. We just hit it off like we had known each other forever. There was no barrier. We became fast friends. Right away I was doing arrangements and creating vocal arrangements for a show she did at Radio City Music Hall. Then I went on the road with her. Had I not positioned myself in New York, that whole part of my life would not have happened. Liza was really the one who brought me to greater notoriety. I got to meet some wonderful people in the business and great stars, and travel. She really featured me and presented me which led to people knowing who I am. It was an incredible 25 years. It was off and on, but mainly on. It was a beautiful time during which we did a lot of great recordings and concerts together. We got to perform two times in London in the presence of Princess Diana and Prince Charles and meet them after the show. I met Audrey Hepburn at a UNICEF benefit. I met Gregory Peck. We got to have dinner at Frank Sinatra's house several times and stay at his place in Palm Springs. Experiences I couldn't believe I was having, being able to move in those circles.

**GOODSILL:** That must have been fun! Since you are the piano guy, you probably didn't have to worry too much about the paparazzi the way she did.

**STRITCH:** That's exactly right. It was very interesting to be on the other side of the cameras, and to get a taste of what that is like. That was when I decided that it was more important to me to be successful and to make a living doing what I do than to be a 'big star'. You always think, "Oh, being a big star must be so fantastic." I definitely saw the down side being adjacent to it all the time. Liza was chased by paparazzi, so we dealt with that a lot. You have to learn to maneuver your way through that. We were in a lot of tabloids together, in a lot of magazines together. It happened all through those years.

**GOODSILL:** It must have been hard to watch your friend go through that.

**STRITCH:** It was. She handled it with tremendous grace and stayed on an even keel. But if they want to go after you, they will go after you. I remember early on, a man called my grandmother, my sweet little grandmother in Sugar Land. By this point I had brought Liza home and they had met in New York a couple of times. My grandmother really felt like she knew her, and of course, she did. But somebody called and befriended her on the phone. I don't know whether he said where he was calling from (he probably did), but she was thrilled to talk to somebody about Liza. We realized later it was somebody from *The Globe*, one of those tabloids. That was not cool. I had to tell her, "Grandma, you can't just talk to everybody who calls you on the phone." "Well, he just seemed so nice. He seemed like he was so interested in everything."

**GOODSILL:** You said an interesting thing, which is that you decided you were going to use music as a way to make a living as opposed to having the goal of being famous.

**STRITCH:** I feel like my path was pretty clearly drawn out for me. I was traveling with Liza as her accompanist and later on as her conductor, and also singing with her in shows. I was getting the gratification from performing in all types of venues all over the world. I was very happy to be included in a bigger show rather than try to go through what it takes to become a headliner myself. I still headline in smaller clubs and I've done concerts at medium size venues. But those are geared toward performing art centers that do cabaret series or jazz series. I do well in certain markets but I'm not going for that national name. And the type of music that I do, which is basically jazz, is more of a throwback to *The Great American Songbook*. It's more like Tony Bennett, Mel Tormé, and people like that. That's the type of music that I love and I've always loved. And there are not a tremendous number of spots for new people to come along. Michael Feinstein, and Harry Connick, Junior succeeded in that. More recently Michael Buble has done well. But there weren't a ton of spots for male singers who did that kind of music. I've done well and it's been great. I've been very gratified with the way that it has all gone. I'm very happy to be known as a top accompanist and a vocal accompanist and a singer in my own right.

**GOODSILL:** What's it like for you to manage the business world? A person who has talent doesn't always know how to manage the business.



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**STRITCH:** I had to learn to do all that. At one point I had a manager and I have agents who work for me here and there, but I handle the business part of it. I've seen other people not do that well and have been taken advantage of.

**GOODSILL:** Or get burned out because they are not managing their energy.

**STRITCH:** Absolutely. If you give up that control to someone else, it's very easy for them to take money off the top. It happens all the time. I kept an eye on it, myself.

**GOODSILL:** I wonder what Mr. Schwalbe would be thinking about your playing all this music.

**STRITCH:** Lord, who knows. He finally told my parents "I cannot teach your son." I think he was frustrated because I just wanted to learn things by ear and I really didn't want to do it by the book. After that my parents found some great teachers for me in Houston when I was 11-12-13. They would drive me to lessons. These were teachers who would actually teach me how to hone my ear and to figure out what the chords were and how to create my own arrangements and how to play songs, and do the kind of music I wanted to do. They were terrifically encouraging.

**GOODSILL:** Is your main home still New York City?

**STRITCH:** Yes. I moved to New York in 1990 and it's hard to believe, but it will be 30 years next year. I work steadily here; every Monday night at a very famous jazz club called Birdland, a guy named Jim Caruso, who is one of my best friends hosts an open mic night for the Broadway people and jazz singers called "Jim Caruso's Cast Party". I'm the musical director.

Most Sundays I work at the Carlyle Hotel, a very famous hotel on the East Side where all the foreign dignitaries stayed, such as JFK stayed. Bobby Short played there for years and years.

The rest of the time I travel a lot. I'm just about to go to the west coast to do nine shows; two of my own shows, two with Jim Caruso, and then I also work with singers like Marilyn Maye. I just worked a year with Tony Bennett. I work with Linda Lavin in her nightclub act. She was on the television show, Alice. And I've worked with Christine Ebersole, who has multiple Tony awards. I go where the gigs are.

**GOODSILL:** What's involved with arranging?

**STRITCH:** There is a thing called orchestrating, which is when you arrange for a symphony or for a large band. I mainly arrange on a smaller scale for a cabaret singer or a nightclub singer. It's basically taking a song or a song or two and setting them in a different way. All sorts of elements go into it. Are you going to set the song as a swing song or put a Latin beat to it? There are many elements of rhythm and style and tonality that goes into creating an arrangement specifically for the singer you are working with. Take for example the song "Our Love is Here to Stay". It has been recorded by probably a thousand people. I've heard it with a big symphony orchestra behind Frank Sinatra; I've heard it done with small groups behind Ella Fitzgerald. I've heard it done SO many different ways. You could take a song like that and combine it with another song and

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make what they call a medley; two songs that go together that have some sort of lyrical element that makes them fit together. It's just as much about the lyric as it is about the music. And because I am also a singer, I'm very drawn to the song mainly first because of the lyric. It has to have a great tune and great harmony, but if it doesn't have a great lyric that I can relate to in some personal way, then it doesn't appeal to me to perform it.

When I work with other singers it is a collaboration about trying to find the material that is right for them. And create it in a way that really suits their personality and makes their imprint come through and sets them apart.

**GOODSILL:** And when you are doing arrangements for yourself?

**STRITCH:** What I do is write for a small group comprised of piano, bass drum, sometimes guitar, sometimes maybe a horn. If I need it for a larger band, I'll take my arrangement to someone who really does that and can do it quickly. I'll show them exactly what I want and let someone more technically adept than I am create it for me. So that's the kind of thing I job out. Or if I had an opportunity to do a show with a big pops orchestra, there are a number of talented people in New York that I would hire to create arrangements for me. Then I have those arrangements and I can use them the rest of my life.

**GOODSILL:** Do you ever do any songwriting?

**STRITCH:** I do. I used to be more involved with songwriting in the 1980s and 90s. I had a very special collaboration with a songwriter named Sandy Knox. She lived in Houston when we met, then moved to Nashville and has had a lot of success. We had a song that we wrote together called, “Does He Love You” that was recorded by Reba McEntire and Linda Davis back in the early 90s. That was a big hit song for them and several other artists recorded and performed it. It still gets a lot of air play. That was my biggest success as a songwriter. I’ve always had this dream that maybe I’ll create a score for Broadway but so far I haven’t really put the necessary work into that, because I’m so busy working all the time and traveling.

**GOODSILL:** Are you still feeling creative relating to your work these days?

**STRITCH:** Absolutely! It just comes from the opportunity to work or to create something new. When I’m creating my own show, I like to keep it fresh. I’m very lucky that I have a club here in New York where I can work anytime I want. At least once a year I’ll book a week of shows and put together a whole new act. The last one I did was Nat King Cole’s music because this is the 100th anniversary of his birth year. I go through as many musical sources as I can find. I go on Apple Music, iTunes, YouTube, and search. Quite often they are NOT new songs. It’s the songs from The Great American Songbook or from the 70s or the 80s. Then I wonder, “How can I take that song and put a different spin on it, my stamp on it?” That’s inspiring to me. And I’m always hearing music in my head that doesn’t ever go away. I wake up with a different song in my head. And I’m always aware of it, everywhere. It’s part of who I am. I’m humming all the time. I’m sure it drives people nuts! I was always encouraged to do it. I love performing. It’s such a joy to be able to make a living doing something that is different every time you do it.

**GOODSILL:** Four or five years ago you came back to Sugar Land because they named the stage at the auditorium after you. You’ve been in HUGE venues and performed in front of thousands of people, and here you were, performing for about 300 of us. And it was SO much fun and you put on a full, personalized show. It was a nice gift you gave to our city.

**STRITCH:** It was such an unexpected, delightful surprise to have that happen.

**GOODSILL:** They have done such a nice job with that little auditorium at Lakewood School. I think of it as a little jewel box.

**STRITCH:** I was just stunned! I remember it as a young, young child. And to see it now, is inspiring. When Chad called and said they wanted to name the stage after me. I said, “WHAT?!” It was a wonderful day. Great friends I hadn’t seen in a long time. The Lamberts came. It was overwhelming. I was nervous. I feel like it is very easy to be on stage and do what I do, and talk extemporaneously, and speak about the music. But then to see everybody afterwards. That was a whole different show.

I have such affection for that time of my life. I feel so pleased and honored and humbled that I’m still known there and people want to celebrate me. That’s a wonderful thing.

**GOODSILL:** I think that’s part of the reason why the City wanted to do an interview with you to celebrate the 60th year since the Sugar Land became a city. Thank you so much for your time and energy, Billy.

**STRITCH:** It was my pleasure, Jane. Thank you

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*Sugar Land*   
**HERITAGE**  
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