

BROOKLYN BOOGIE THE GAS COMPANY DISCO CLASSIC THAT WASN'T

IF EVER BROOKLYN needed boosters, it was in 1978. As the city at large groaned under its historic fiscal crisis, swaths of the borough lay abandoned. What little civic pride Brooklynites could muster had been freshly wounded by the previous summer's blackout riots, which burned much of Bushwick and looted downtown storefronts.

So a champion came forward, and it was the gas company.

At a block party or community event that year, a representative of Brooklyn Union Gas might have handed you a 45 rpm single called "New Life in Brooklyn." If you took it home and dropped it on the turntable, you would have heard, over a booty-shaking disco beat: "Brooklyn is cookin', a moovin' and a groovin', Brooklyn is cookin'—ooh!"

The song was part of a campaign that the utility's ad agency, Moss & Co., had worked up to promote a local development effort that, among its many projects, helped build and support Restoration Plaza in Bedford-Stuyvesant and restored decaying brownstones in Park Slope and Boerum Hill. The program is still running today, but the song is largely forgotten.

Brad Strickland, however, remembers it fondly. He played guitar on the recording, and his father, the late Willy Strickland, arranged and conducted it.

One evening in June, at his home in Ventura, CA, his wife Anna called him upstairs to see what she had found online. She had been searching for his dad's name, when she turned up an mp3 of "New Life in Brooklyn" posted on my website.

"I said, 'Oh, you've got to be putting me on. No one could be finding this,'" Brad told me on the phone recently.

I found it, in fact, lying in a planter outside the Caffè Carciofo on Court St. last summer. There was no sleeve with the record, so I knew no more than what was printed on the label. Curious about the song's origins, I made inquiries, assuming that longtime New Yorkers would remember it, like the Yule log on WPIX. No one had heard of the song or of Willy Strickland. But Brad, who inherited the master tapes from his father, was happy to fill me in.

When "New Life in Brooklyn" came along, Willy Strickland was well into a distinguished, although uncelebrated, musical career. As a teenager in the late 1940s, he had been invited to play trumpet in Elliot Lawrence's swing band. Instead, he took a degree in music composition from Hofstra University and studied at Juilliard. According to his son, "He would have told you he really learned music from a gentleman named Tibor Serly." Serly, a protege of Hungarian composer Bela Bartok, considered Strickland his prize student, even though he taught many of the top arrangers in New York.

Strickland went on to compose and arrange for orchestras including the New York Philharmonic and the Vienna State Opera, but his "serious" work couldn't support the family he had started on Long Island. "He wasn't making a fortune from writing, so he ended up being music director of the Rockville Center public school system," Brad said.

On the side, he did commercials for Ivory soap, Stroh's beer, and Texaco. "He got a lot of work because he could do that John Williams thing, that big orchestral sound and cinematic style," Brad said.

He had also been doing jingles for Brooklyn Union Gas television spots, so he was tapped for "New Life in Brooklyn."

"It made a little noise for its time," Brad said. Records were handed out free at events all over town, but the song ultimately lacked the mass appeal of Kander and Ebb's "New York, New York," or Milton Glaser's "I Love New York" campaign, both debuting the year before. "I took the record around to some local DJs, to see if it could get spun in the clubs," Brad said. "It didn't quite make it."

Credit for the lyrics goes to Jack Aaker, then a copywriter at Moss. As for the name of the singer, who belted so soulfully—"Got new life, got new life/I got a brand new life right here in Brooklyn/I love the life that I'm living in Brooklyn here today"—Brad doesn't remember. He recalls that the producers courted Ken Page, who was starring in *Ain't Misbehavin'* on Broadway, but the deal fell through.

Had "New Life in Brooklyn" been lent some star power, or had anyone really believed that Brooklyn ought to be lauded in song, perhaps it could have become the borough's de facto anthem. In any case, the brownstones like those the Cinderella Program rehabbed in 1978 are now a bargain at a million dollars.

—Martin F. Downs