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“It is amazing how an image can revive the feeling of the moment.”
— Herman Leonard

Bill Evans in his New York City apartment, early 1960s. Photo by Chuck Stewart.

Moments in Jazz: The Photography of Chuck Stewart

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Moments in Jazz: The Photography of Chuck Stewart

By **Tony Mottola** Editor, *Jersey Jazz*

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Before Chuck Stewart found his life's work behind the lens of a camera he tried his hand at music, studying piano for eight years as a young boy. Unfortunately, he recalls that despite all those lessons "I still couldn't play 'Chopsticks.'"

Regardless of his musical shortcomings Stewart did once, briefly, have a chair in the Count Basie Band. As Chuck tells the story: "It was during a break at Birdland when the band was playing there sometime in the 1950s. Al Grey, whose chair was off to one side, had left the bandstand. The club was a small one and I had taken his seat to carry on a conversation. I had gotten so carried



Pee Wee Russell for Impulse Records.



left: Count Basie and Tony Bennett at Fine Recording Studio in the Grand Ballroom of the Great Northern Hotel, New York City.



John and Alice Coltrane listening to a playback at Van Gelder Studio.

away in the conversation that I didn't realize the band was back onstage, and Al Grey was usually late in getting back. Finally, Basie looked up and saw me and said, 'What do you play?' 'I play the camera, Mr. Basie,' (and Basie replied) 'Get the hell outta my band.'"

Basie's remark came with a smile and the two were good friends, with Stewart photographing the bandleader and his musicians many times over the years, both in the studio and in concert. It was in fact his genial and quiet

personality, as much as his keen artistic eye and superb craftsmanship in the darkroom, that enabled Stewart to make some of the most memorable images of the greatest jazz



Dizzy Gillespie at Newport Jazz Festival.



Wes Montgomery recording session.



Duke Ellington
for Reprise
Records.



Ray Charles
in performance.

musicians of the day. His subjects liked and trusted him, and that afforded an unfettered access that resulted in intimate un-posed images, like his photograph of John and Alice Coltrane lost in thought listening to a replay at Van Gelder Studios.

Charles Stewart was born in Texas in 1927 but “escaped” to Arizona at the age of six months. His father had gone on before his wife and son to find work, and secured a job

as a cook at a dude ranch in Tucson. He went on to become the head chef at the city’s top hotel.

Stewart took up photography in high school, taking pictures for his school’s yearbook. With the encouragement of a graphic arts teacher he enrolled in Ohio University, one of the only schools to offer a degree in photography at the time, earning a Bachelor’s Degree in 1949. It was at OU that he met a

fellow photographer named Herman Leonard, and the two became friends while working together for the university’s student newspaper and other school publications.

After graduation Stewart joined the US Army and served as a combat photographer. “I saw a Gene Smith photo of a guy jumping out of a plane,” Stewart said, “and I thought, ‘I’d like to do that.’ After I realized people were shooting and trying to kill me I wasn’t so sure.”

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Lee Morgan with the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band at Randall's Island.



Miles Davis and Paul Chambers in the 1950s at Randall's Island.

CHUCK STEWART *continued from page 33*

When he finished his Army service Stewart embarked on a photography career, doing travel, fashion and advertising work, but then came an invitation from his college friend Leonard to come to work for him at his New York City studio. The pair began visiting the city's jazz clubs and photographing musicians, Leonard making the photos and Stewart setting the lights. For Stewart, Leonard was a mentor and more: "Herman opened a

whole new world of portraits. He was my teacher, my friend, my daughter's Godfather and the best man at my wedding."

In 1956 Leonard accepted an assignment to travel to the Far East with actor Marlon Brando to do research for the film *Teahouse of the August Moon*. Leonard's travels eventually led him to Paris, where he decided to relocate, and he turned over the New York studio to Stewart.

From there on Chuck Stewart became one of the top photographers in jazz. He photographed hundreds of musicians in clubs, concerts and the recording studio and racked up an astounding 3,000 album covers, including many notable Impulse covers in the 1950s and '60s. He also made publicity photos in his studio and contributed to magazines, newspapers and books, including *Esquire Jazz Book*, *DownBeat*, *The New York Times*, *Life*, *Paris-Match* and others. Many of his photos were featured in Leonard Feather's *Encyclopedia of Jazz*. His own book, *Jazz Files* (De Capo Press), co-authored with Paul Carter Harrison, was published in 1985.

In recent years Chuck Stewart has been honored with a Jazz Journalists Association Lifetime Achievement in Jazz Photography Award (2001) and the Milt Hinton Excellence in Jazz Award (2008). When *Jersey Jazz* visited Mr. Stewart at his Teaneck home in August he was busy as ever, preparing large framed prints of his historic photos which will be on exhibit at the Bergen Performing Arts Center in Englewood throughout the month of October, and printing photographs of pianist Hank Jones for a book to be published in Paris next year.

About his photographs Mr. Stewart is characteristically modest: "I just saw a moment that I thought would be rather exciting, that moment when I pushed the button, and apparently it worked." Indeed it did.



Photographer Chuck Stewart in his Teaneck, NJ darkroom, August 2010. Photo by Tony Mottola.

Chuck Stewart: Intimate Jazz Images, September 28 – October 31, 2010, bergenPAC, 30 North Van Brunt St., Englewood, NJ. For information and gallery hours call 201-816-8160. For information about Chuck Stewart photographs, E-mail chuckstewart521@aol.com.