

‘Frank Stewart’s Nexus: An American Photographer’s Journey, 1960s to the Present’ Review: Visual Music

An exhibition at the Phillips Collection tracks Stewart’s movement through geographic, social, cultural and artistic realms, highlighting his passion for Africa and jazz.

By

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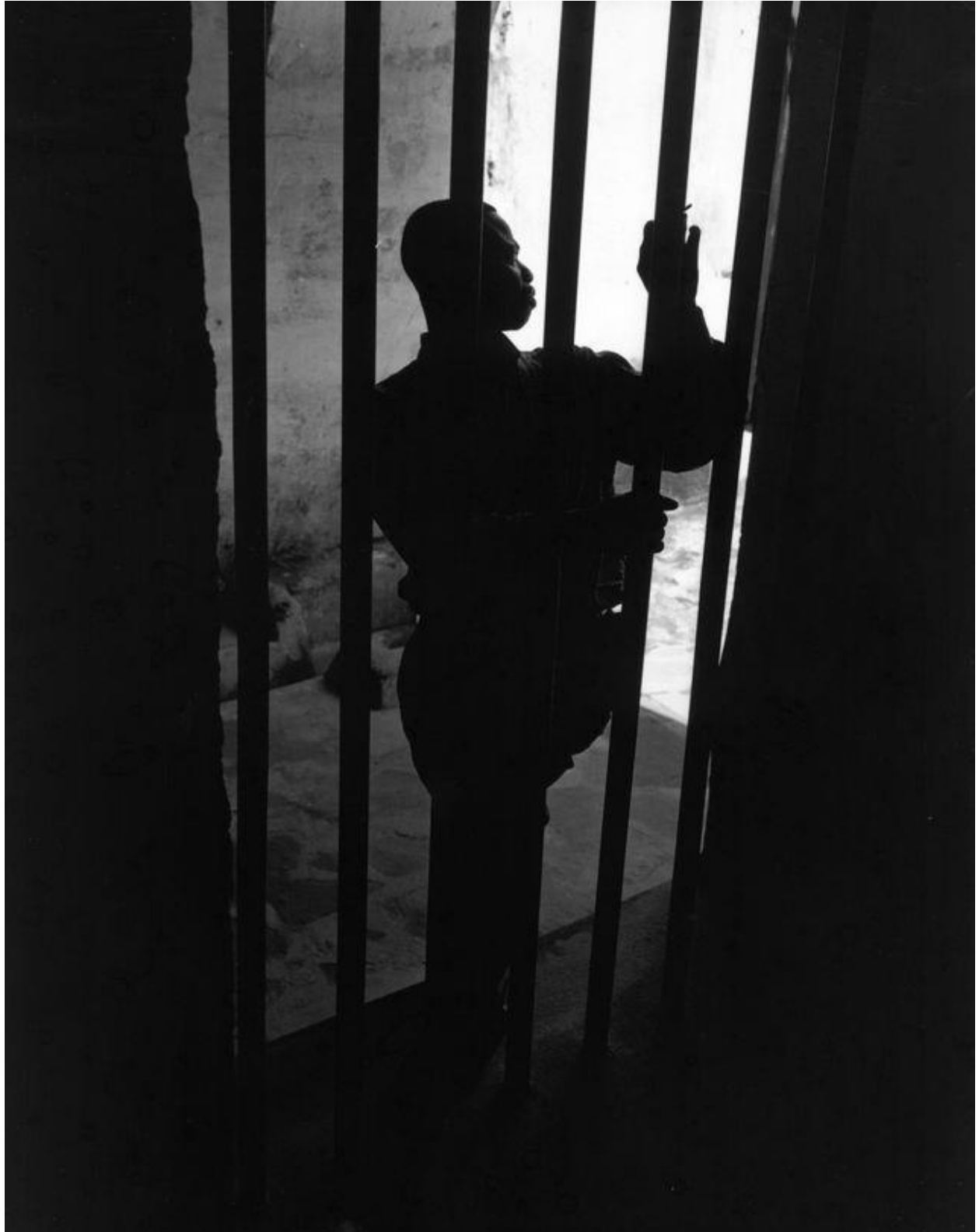
‘Boo and Humphrey’ (1989) PHOTO: THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

Washington

Frank Stewart gets around: “Frank Stewart’s Nexus: An American Photographer’s Journey, 1960s to the Present,” the exhibition of his pictures at the Phillips Collection, has him

moving through various geographical, social, cultural and artistic realms. Mr. Stewart was born in 1949 in Nashville, Tenn., to black parents who had musical careers. They divorced when he was about a year old, but he had continuing contact with both and so, from an early age, had personal relationships with many of the great jazz figures of the era. His mother's second husband was famed pianist Phineas Newborn Jr.; his father lived next to Miles Davis's sister and Mr. Stewart met the great trumpet player there. He studied photography at several institutions and got a BFA from Cooper Union in 1975; his teachers included Roy DeCarava, Charles Harbutt, Joel Meyerowitz, Arnold Newman, and Garry Winogrand, a brilliant array. The impress of their teaching is evident in the 103 prints co-curated by Fred Moten, a poet and theorist at NYU, and Ruth Fine, a retired curator from the National Gallery of Art.

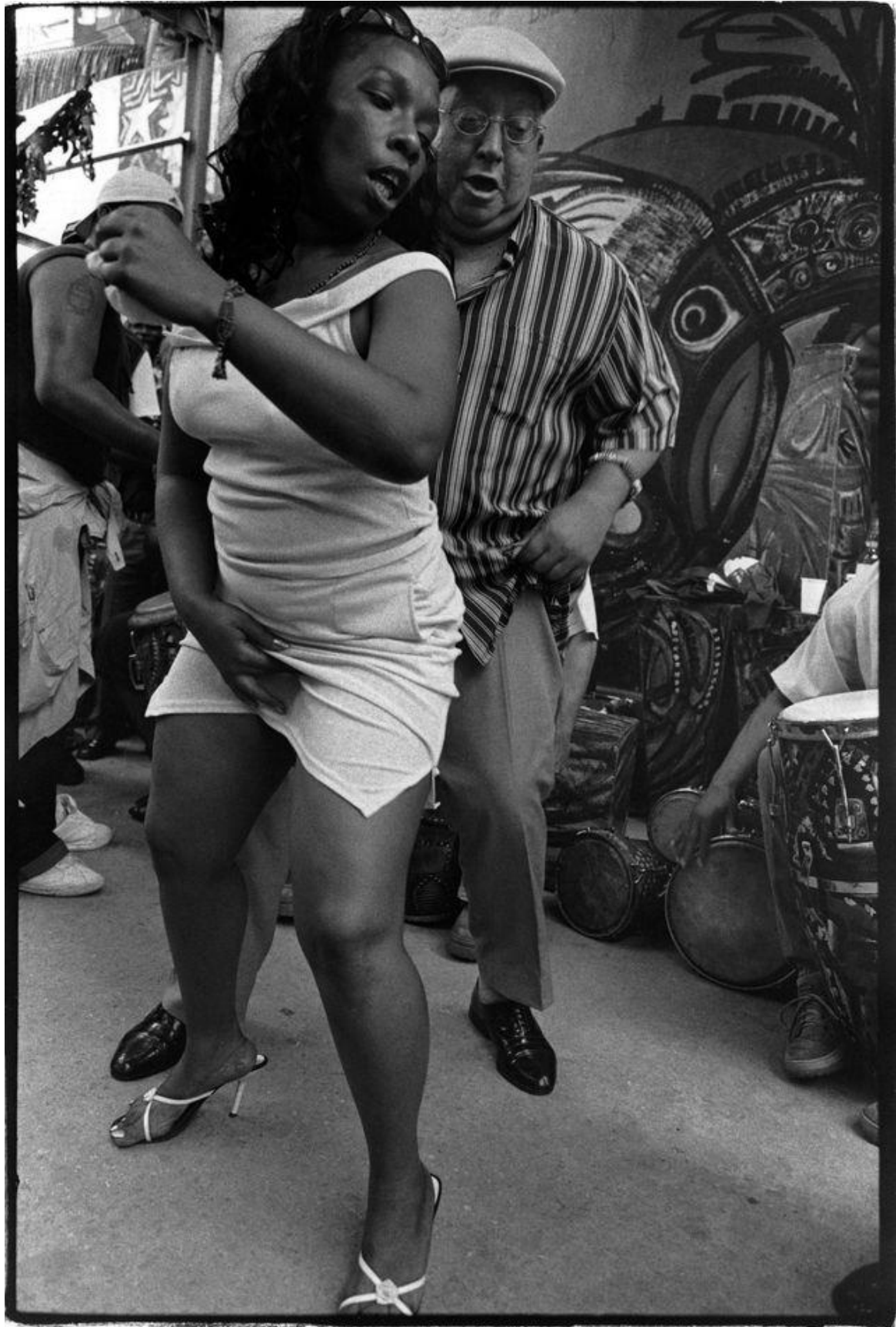
The earliest pictures are "Nine Snapshots From March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" (1963), fading 3¼-by-3¼-inch color prints taken with his mother's Kodak Brownie and processed at a drugstore. The pictures from the march are pretty good for a teenager with a plastic camera, but by the time Mr. Stewart went to West Africa in a Cooper Union program, he had learned a lot about both African culture and photography and had a professional camera. (A vitrine displays six of Mr. Stewart's cameras, including a battered Leica M2.) In "Call and Response, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire" (1974) the woman in the foreground bends her body as she responds to the drummers beating rhythm behind her; a crowd of onlookers is included, as in some of Garry Winogrand's classic street photography. Mr. Stewart made most of the prints in the exhibition himself and this one, like nearly all the black-and-white images here, has a black border. The black border is an indication that the entire frame was included in the print, that nothing was cropped; it means the decisions about what to include and what to exclude were made as the photographer framed the shot. This is a demanding way to work.



'Slave Castle, Cape Coast, Ghana' (2004) PHOTO: THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

Mr. Stewart's practice has been to return again and again to subjects and places that interest him. Back in Africa in 1997, he took "Girl Reading, Mamfe, Ghana," a simple, tender picture of a blind girl with a page of Braille. In 2000 he used light from a window to dramatically silhouette "Abena Pounding Fufu, Mamfe, Ghana" as she prepared cassava. The shadowy man and steel bars of 2004's "Slave Castle, Cape Coast, Ghana" are a grim comment on the transportation of Africans as chattel to the Americas. Very different from them, the extensive green savanna in the large-format color print "Three Young Camels, Mali," taken in 2006, hints at an Edenic Africa.

It is music, though, that threads through all his interests. In Africa it was "Call and Response" and in Cuba it was middle-aged rumba dancers, "Callejón de Hamel, Havana" (2002), and a conga drum, "Going for Salsa, Santiago de Cuba" (2005). Among the portraits are artists "Alma W. Thomas" (1976) and Mr. Stewart's friend and mentor Romare Bearden, "Romie in the Ocean" (c. 1977), but the musicians predominate: "Miles in the Green Room" (1981) harried by reporters; a pensive "Cassandra Wilson" (1994); gospel singer "Keisha at Lola's" (1986), eyes shut and body arched; "Boo and Humphrey" (1989), pianist-composer Walter Davis Jr. (Humphrey) and drummer Art Blakey (Boo) shot informally; and many more.



‘Callejon de Hamel, Havana’ (2002) PHOTO: THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

Mr. Stewart spent 30 years as photographer for the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, who became “family” as he traveled with them across America and around the world. He developed a close relationship with the orchestra’s leader, Wynton Marsalis, whom he photographed in the family home in New Orleans playing a duet with his father, “Ellis and Wynton Marsalis” (1991). A saxophonist and other musicians in the large-format “Blood on the Fields” (2014) are silhouetted against an artificial orange background created by using a gel, as they perform the younger Mr. Marsalis’s piece of the same name, which is about slavery and its aftermath.

New Orleans, famous for its music, is another frequent destination. “Canal Street Shout, New Orleans” (1978) catches buskers singing amid the pedestrians and traffic. A submerged car is in the foreground of “Katrina’s Houses I” (2005), one of a series taken soon after the disastrous hurricane. “Katrina: Hammond B-3, 9th Ward, New Orleans” (2007), taken later, is a close-up of the now useless keyboard of an electric organ; it is an elegy for the city’s disrupted lives and music.

“The Bow, Modena, Italy” (1996) is an appropriate place to end: From the back of the stage, Mr. Stewart peers over two shiny cymbals as nine jazz musicians in uniform dark suits bow to the applause coming from six tiers of audience members in the elegant 19th-century opera house.

Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at www.williammeyersphotography.com.



'Katrina: Hammond B-3, 9th Ward, New Orleans' (2007) PHOTO: THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

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