

Feature bio:

In 2009, when he was 65, Zan Stewart felt it was time for a major life change.

He decided to leave daily journalism – where he had worked for 35 years at such publications as *The Los Angeles Times* and the *Newark Star-Ledger* – to focusing on playing and composing music, and teaching.

“It felt like it was time to see what might happen if I devoted myself to the horn, to writing music, and to teaching, seeing where they might take me,” says Stewart, a student clarinetist at age six and a tenor saxophonist since 1966. “I had done a ton of writing – around 1000 profiles plus many more reviews and other short pieces. I had contributed to the music that way, and now I wanted to explore another avenue.”

And so he has. The multi-talented Stewart – who has also written for *Down Beat*, among other music magazines, and has penned liner notes to over 200 albums and multi-CD sets, earning a prestigious ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award in the process – has moved to the East San Francisco Bay after a 9-year-stretch in West Orange, N.J., and set up shop.

“My days are centered around practicing, writing music, and developing other aspects of my musical career,” says the saxophonist. “It feels great, like I am being nourished.”

Since arriving in Berkeley in 2011, Stewart has been an active participant in the Bay Area’s jazz scene, sitting in at jam sessions and fronting a quartet in monthly performances at Nick’s Lounge in Berkeley, with dates booked through August. The group features drum master Ron Marabuto, the excellent bop-based pianist Keith Saunders, and the on-the-rise ace bassist Adam Gay, with the leader on saxophone, vocals, scat vocals, and microphone commentary.

“We’re mixing it up, playing hip songs from the jazz repertoire with an original here and there,” says Stewart, whose jazz heroes include Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Sonny Rollins. “We play a lot of bebop, a music all the musicians in the band love, as well as standards, trying to give it all a twist, make it interesting. Same with the originals.”

In playing gems from jazz’s past, like Charlie Parker’s “Quasimodo,” Bud Powell’s “Webb City,” and Fats Navarro’s “Nostalgia,” Stewart feels he is helping keep a deep music alive.

“These songs may have been written in the 1940s,” the musician starts, “but when played with vigor and punch, as is our style, they have a contemporary aspect, because they are being played in the present, not the past.”

“In this context, the idea – currently in vogue among many artists and writers – that playing older music is simply a voyage in sentimentality is absurd,” Stewart goes on. “What’s important is whether the music has life, not what era it comes from. That’s also why classic standards can be so vital and engaging, both for players and listeners, if they are played with emotional heft.”

Stewart’s originals are often upbeat tunes with potent rhythmic feels. “I try to write listenable tunes with good melodies and interesting, varied rhythms that the players can dig into and which listeners can enjoy,” he says.

Stewart’s passion for jazz has been at the center of his life since he was about 15 and fell in love with the music. That love led to many fruitful bandstand experiences as a saxophonist, and to that long run as a writer.

“I have been very lucky,” says Stewart, who was born March 29, 1944 in Los Angeles, Ca. into a particularly fertile artistic environment. “I’ve been able to express myself both as a musician and a writer, and have made my living in and around this music I love.”

In the course of his life, Stewart encountered many creative people whom he interviewed and wrote about. “These men and women expressed their inner feelings through artistic action, setting an example which played a major role in shaping my life,” he states. “When I interviewed them and they spoke about their lives in music, I felt like I was taking a music lesson as well as getting a story.”

As a journalist, Stewart, who has a BA from the University of California Santa Barbara, first wrote for the *Santa Barbara News & Review* (1975-1977) and the *L.A. Weekly* (from 1979 to the mid-1990s). He subsequently wrote for the *Times* (1980-2000), the *Star-Ledger* (2002-2010), *Down Beat* (from the 1980s onward) and other publications.

His liner notes cover such top-drawer musicians as Sonny Rollins, Sonny Stitt, Horace Silver, Joe Henderson, and Eric Dolphy.

For the 9-CD Dolphy box – *Eric Dolphy: The Complete Prestige Recordings* (1995) – Stewart’s biographical essay, “Out There: The Angelic Passion of Eric Dolphy,” earned him the ASCAP–Deems

Taylor Award. He was also awarded the Los Angeles Jazz Society's Leonard Feather Jazz Communicator Award in 1994, which included a Certificate of Commendation from the City of Los Angeles.

From 1972 to 1982, Stewart was also heard on the radio, playing jazz on such FM stations as KBCA, Los Angeles' lone commercial jazz radio outlet, KCRW, KCSB, and KTMS. "That was enjoyable, exposing music that I enjoyed, and hearing from listeners how I improved their days," he notes.

As a musician, Stewart has fronted bands with that boasted such fine artists as pianist Tardo Hammer, trumpeter Joe Magnarelli, guitarist Bob DeVos, bassists Paul Gill and Mike Karn, and drummers Gary Frommer, Clarence Johnston, Steve Johns, and Tony Reedus.

The saxophonist has also shared bandstands in spontaneous situations with such notables as saxophonists Gary Bartz, Art Pepper, and Joe Lovano, guitarists Dave Stryker and Peter Bernstein, pianists Albert Dailey and Mike LeDonne; and drummers Jimmy Cobb, Brian Blade, and Billy Drummond.

"As fortunate as I have been to have written about so many great musicians, I have been equally blessed to have been on bandstands with scores of ace jazz artists who showed me first hand what playing jazz was all about," relates Stewart.

Stewart considers himself a bebop-based modern artist who tries to follow Charlie Parker's conceit: to play clean lines and to look for the pretty notes. "My heroes played beautiful music that had a ton of energy," he says. "That's what I try to do."

Tone is one last essential element of Stewart's oeuvre. "I was fortunate to study briefly with saxophonists Victor Morosco, Lew Tabackin, and Grant Stewart, and extensively with Charles Oreña, all of whom stressed getting a full, rich sound out of the instrument," he reports. "Following their advice, I think I have ended up with a nice, weighty sound that is my own."

Stewart's performances include a degree of mike patter. "I feel it's important to communicate verbally with your audience, make the listeners really a part of the goings-on," he says.

Since arriving in the Bay Area – where Stewart previously lived in 1966-67 (in the Haight-Ashbury) and 1971-72, and now lives in Berkeley – he's found a very fertile community with scores of fine players.

"There's a strong sense of creativity in the air, and musicians have good opportunities for self-expression," he says. "I look forward to

seeing what direction not only my music will take me, but also my writing, as I have a book or two in mind. It's an exciting time in my life."