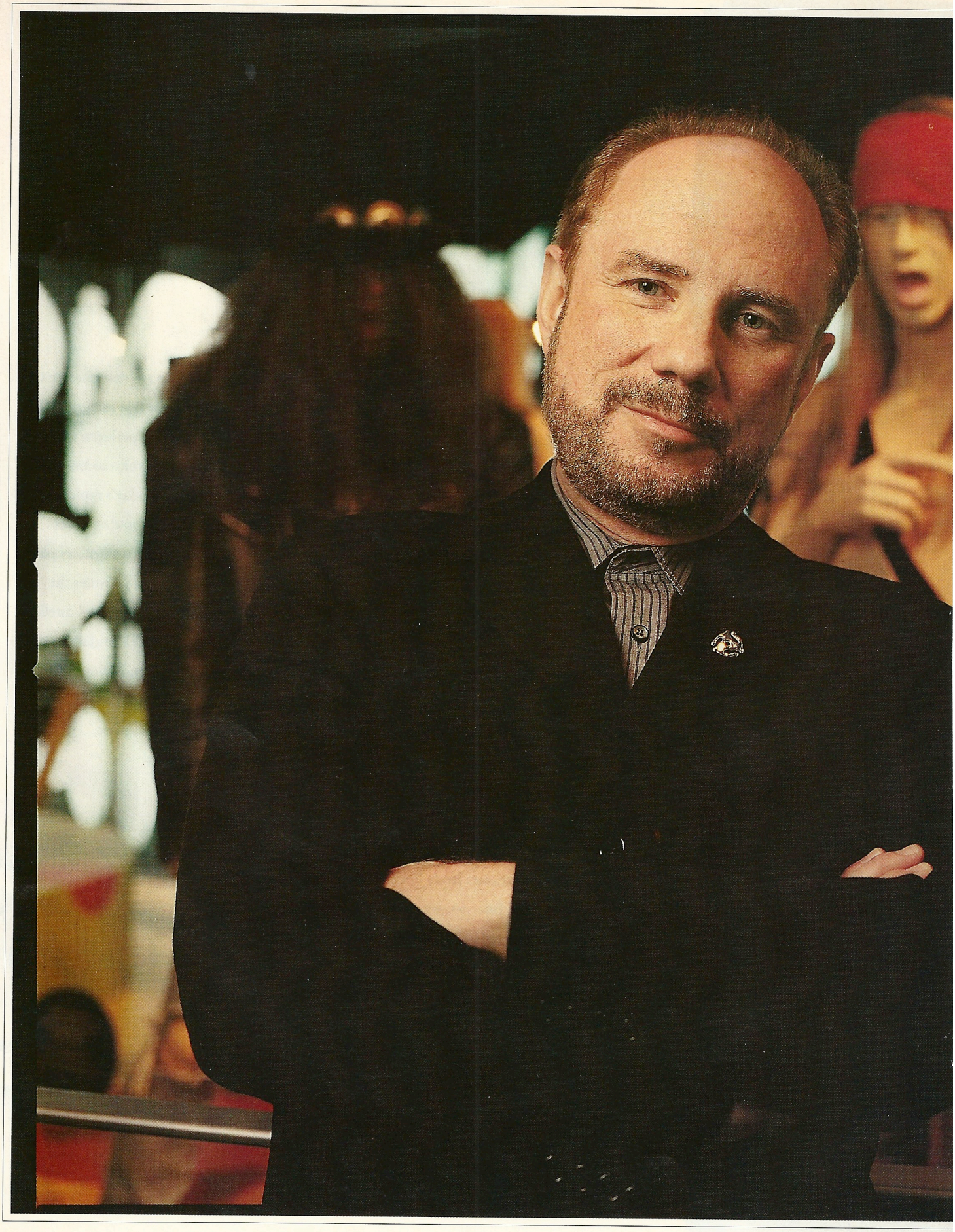
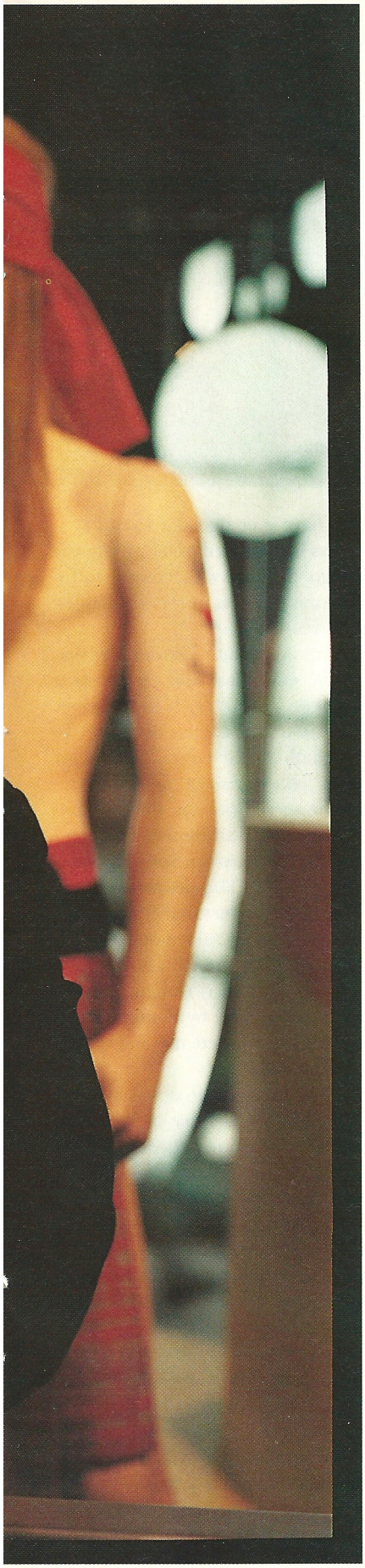




Terry Stewart is in the building

The new director of Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame wouldn't trade places with anyone—not even Elvis.

by Bill Glovin

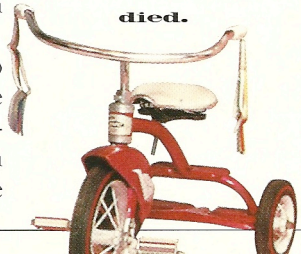
photographs by *Nick Romanenko*

When Terry Stewart picked up the phone last fall and heard the voice of his old fraternity brother, David Regina, he braced himself for another bad joke or a plan for the annual summer reunion of Delta Kappa Epsilon's Class of 1969. The pair had remained friends since their days at Rutgers, where Stewart (Eng'69) was known for the staggering proportions of his record and comic-book collections and the eclectic range of local musicians he booked for DKE's house parties. In fact, if music wasn't blaring from Stewart's room, it was a safe bet that he was leading a road trip to catch a performance at the Mosque in Newark, the Latin Casino in Cherry Hill, or the Uptown Theater in Philadelphia.

But Regina (Eng'69)—who had watched Stewart climb the corporate ladder until his business acumen intersected with his pop-culture passion at the top rung of Marvel, the comic-book publisher—wasn't calling to reminisce. "David had seen an article on a back page of *The Wall Street Journal*," Stewart recalls. "It said that the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland was looking for a new director."

Three years before, when the hall opened on Labor Day weekend in 1995, Stewart had been one of the specially invited guests who first walked through its doors. As president and COO of Marvel, Stewart had worked hard to expand the company's interests beyond comic books into other publishing ventures, and had led efforts to acquire the company that published the rock hall's original program and guide. Inside, he had been impressed with the hall: its architecture, a glass pyramid designed by I. M. Pei; its location, the Lake Erie waterfront next to a new science museum; and, most importantly, its mission. The hall, he found, was not merely a vehicle to promote mega-stars. In its selection of

American Pie: The hall owns Lisa Marie Presley's tricycle, one of her dad's many guitars, and a piece of the plane in which Otis Redding died.



both exhibits to showcase and performers to honor, it paid close attention to the cultural evolution of rock and roll and gave deserved respect to pioneering artists like Robert Johnson, Woody Guthrie, and Jimmy Rogers.

Stewart had assessed the exhibits with a critical eye: In his personal collection of rock memorabilia were artifacts that rivaled the hall's holdings: the union card Buddy Holly was carrying when his plane crashed; a disbursement ledger from Sun Records, the label of Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash; and the grand-jury documents used to convict Cleveland's Alan Freed in the disc jockey–payola scandal of the 1950s. He also had more than a mere enthusiast's knowledge of many of the hall of fame's inductees. At Marvel, he had tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to create his own line of graphic novels and comic books based on Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, Bob Marley, Alice Cooper, Cheap Trick, and others.

Stewart, then, was no stranger to the rock hall, and after thanking Regina for the heads up, he lost little time. "I knew that there would be at least 500 to 1,000 applicants for the job," he says. "But I had been around long enough to know that when you see something you want that bad, you figure out a way to put yourself in front of the decision-makers." Writing to every insider he could think of who might be able to help, he spelled out the reasons why he should head the rock museum and made sure his determination was clear: "I'm the guy," he wrote, "who wants this job more than anyone, and I'm willing to crawl on my belly to Cleveland to get it."

Would *Elvis* have found *fame* and *fortune* without his chance meeting with Colonel Parker? If George Martin hadn't liked "Love Me Do," would the Beatles have ever signed a record contract? Suppose Muddy Waters had decided to take his guitar to St. Louis instead of Chicago? So it was with Stewart: Fortuitous timing and helpful connections had properly aligned themselves with Regina's phone call.

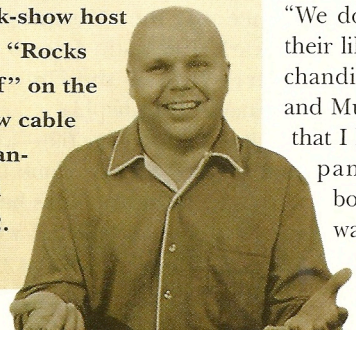
Stewart left Marvel to join a private partnership that hoped to build entertainment centers and find a permanent home for the Ice Capades; if he had still been with Marvel, he wouldn't have had the time and energy necessary to chase the position at the hall. As for contacts, Stewart phoned some folks on two of the five volunteer boards he served on: the Rhythm and Blues Foundation in Washington, D.C., and the Summer Stage Concert Series in New York's Central Park. "The people on these boards weren't close, personal friends, but they knew that I could raise not-for-profit money and was passionate about their work," says Stewart. "I was coming at them from every direction, and by the time I was through, a recruiter called me and asked, 'Who the hell are you?' "

With his dream job in sight, Stewart wasn't deterred by the fact that in five years, the hall had already gone through three directors. After all, none were specialists in pop culture; none had a particular affinity for rock music; and none had Stewart's mix of experience. "I understood the concept of intellectual property, that the hall's sole asset is the building and its name," says Stewart. "We don't have the rights to the artists or their likenesses, so we have to sell and merchandise the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Also working in my favor was that I had managed an entertainment company and worked on not-for-profit boards that had already found creative ways to raise funds. And I had a passion for the subject matter; my house

Rock 'n' Rutgers

Matt Pinfield

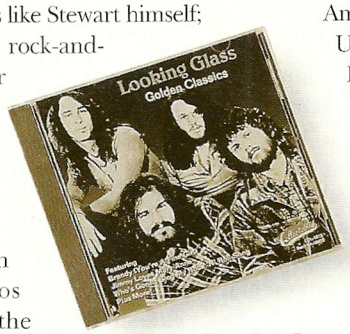
The moon-faced MTV VJ developed his encyclopedic knowledge of music at Rutgers–New Brunswick in the 1980s, DJing at WRSU and The Melody. On MTV, he hosts the video program "120 Minutes," featuring music from the fringe, and the game show, "Say What?" His next gig: talk-show host for "Rocks Off" on the new cable channel M2.



Inner Visions: The hall traces the evolution of rock and roll with exhibits that focus on subjects like Sun Records and stage costumes. Among the latter are David Byrne's oversized suit (left) and one of Little Richard's splashy stage jackets (right).

in Connecticut looked like it could be its own museum."

He also was undeterred when he learned that the hall was run by two separate boards that sometimes squabbled: a founding board in New York, which represents the interests of the music industry, and a local one in Cleveland, which concentrates on generating tourism and redevelopment for the city. The boards agreed on many key concerns: declining attendance; competition for memorabilia from companies like Planet Hollywood and private collectors like Stewart himself; and the establishment of a world-class rock-and-roll library and archive. But each year the high-profile October induction ceremonies became a point of contention. The Cleveland board, with its eye on economic development, wanted to move the ceremonies to the city. But the New York board insisted on holding them in New York and Los Angeles, close to the floodlights of the country's two entertainment capitals.



Stewart knew that having the right résumé was only the beginning. He would be asked his views on a wide range of concerns, and he needed to be ready with reasonable and intelligent proposals, including his firmly held opinion that moving the induction ceremonies to Cleveland would complicate and ultimately deter industry involvement.

After countless rounds of interviews with recruiters, the hall's staff, search committees, and key members of boards of directors in both New York and Cleveland—none of whom asked him to crawl on his belly—Stewart got the gig. Since last December, he's been like a kid in a candy store: "For me, this is the best job in the world," says the president and CEO of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. "I'm actually getting paid to put all of my energy and passion into preserving, memorializing, and encouraging the study of this wonderful art form."

Rock 'n' Rutgers
Looking Glass

The group came together in the 1960s when Elliot Lurie, Larry Gonsky, and Pieter Sweval met as students at Rutgers. Looking Glass found fleeting fame when the infectious "Brandy (You're a Fine Girl)" hit No. 1 in 1972, but Lurie forged a solid career as a music supervisor in films like *Die Hard 2*, *Alien 3*, and *Last of the Mohicans*.

"How did you like *Elvis?*" Stewart asks a young couple as they descend the stairs leading from a special exhibit devoted to Presley. As they exit onto a landing near the top of the hall's airy atrium, an oversized American flag from Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." tour and an enormous float from Pink Floyd's "The Wall" tour grapple for their attention. They nod their approval absently, and Stewart smiles. Six feet tall and fit, with a closely cropped reddish beard, Stewart looks the part of a 53-year-old hip executive. Always dressed with tasteful aplomb, Stewart, according to inside skinny, is an acknowledged clotheshound who may own more shoes than Imelda Marcos.

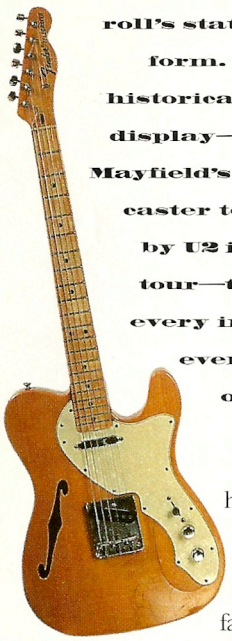
That's hardly surprising in the context of everything else he has acquired in a lifetime of collecting: 200,000 vinyl records, 5,000 compact discs, autographs, jukeboxes, concert posters, and all kinds of other memorabilia. "We recently needed to fill a wall with a temporary exhibit so I sent 40 pieces from my personal collection," he says matter of factly.

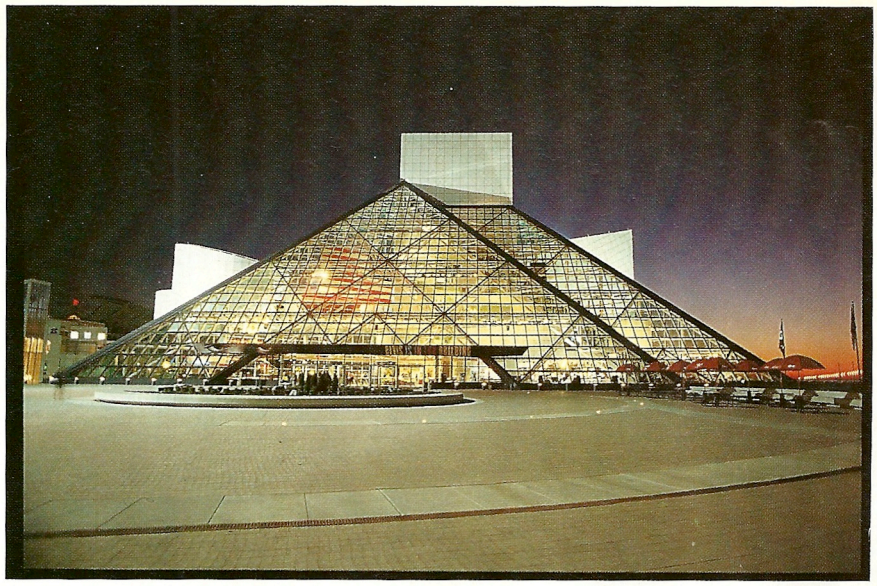
Stewart began stockpiling his favorite things as an only child growing up in Daphne, Alabama, opposite the port city of Mobile. His father, a graduate of Bound Brook High School, migrated to the South to work as a seaman. His mother, born and raised in Mississippi, worked in a grocery store. "My father was always between jobs, and we were dirt poor," he says.

In elementary school, Stewart couldn't get enough of local heroes like Hank Williams and Eddie Arnold. At the age of 10, he began listening to gospel and blues on two local black stations, and he liked what he

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

I. M. Pei's glass pyramid validates rock and roll's status as an art form. With a lot of historical artifacts to display—from Curtis Mayfield's Fender Telecaster to props used by U2 in the Zoo TV tour—the hall uses every inch of space, even the ceiling of its atrium.





heard. Radio was one of the few means for a white kid in Alabama to be exposed to black culture. "My high school wasn't integrated until quite a few years after I graduated," says Stewart. "I was lucky because my father had traveled, and he saw things differently than the typical redneck. My mother was also very enlightened. Segregation and the civil-rights movement had a lot to do with my not wanting to attend college in the South."

An excellent student, Stewart had applied to Rutgers as a lark after visiting relatives in New Jersey who lived near the campus. He was accepted to West Point, but, fearing that an old knee injury might come back to haunt him during the academy's rigorous physical training, he began to have second thoughts. When he learned that Rutgers had granted him a full scholarship, he changed his plans and headed to New Brunswick.

Although Stewart preferred liberal arts courses, his parents, who remembered the Great Depression, pressured him into majoring in engineering, a field that almost guaranteed a job. He joined DKE, played four years of baseball, and was appointed to the University's judicial review board, where he came face to face with the student dissent that was a reflection of a rapidly changing America. "Vietnam, drugs, and a move to create a pass-fail grading system had a huge impact on campus life," he recalls. "I was a weirdo, someone from the conservative South who had been on the verge of going to West Point, a person who had uncles in the military. I came to Rutgers with a crewcut, and when I left my hair was almost as short. In four years of college, I never owned a pair of jeans."

But Stewart didn't need long hair to appreciate music and realize that new bands like the Who, the Doors, and Santana and performers like Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, and James Brown were changing the cultural landscape. The College Avenue Gym, halfway between New York and Philadelphia—two major cities where performers flocked—hosted acts like Vanilla Fudge; Peter, Paul, and Mary; and Howlin' Wolf. Stewart also kept his ear to his favorite radio stations, and when the campus was quiet, sought out his beloved rhythm-and-blues acts elsewhere.

One of Stewart's favorite pastimes was searching for out-of-the-way record stores that might hide a new gem. David Regina remembers that, at the end of each academic year, Stewart would sell off his chinos and sports shirts to make room in the U-Haul for his ever-expanding collection. Ater graduating from Rutgers, he purchased a ticket to Woodstock, but when his mother became ill, he sold it and hurried home to Alabama. Later that summer he caught many of the same acts—if not his generation's seminal cultural event—at a similar festival in Louisiana.

That fall Stewart entered a five-year Cornell University graduate school program that offered an MBA in finance and a law degree. Faced with entering the draft, he received a medical deferment because a motorcycle accident had left him with a pin in his leg. "I had been hammered on campus about the war. By the time my second year in graduate school rolled around, I realized we were in Vietnam for the wrong reasons," he says. "I grew my hair down to my elbows."

Armed with a law degree and an MBA, Stewart entered the work force at a bank in Hartford, Connecticut. "I knew it was a mistake and spent three of my five years there looking to leave," he says. In the late 1970s, he moved to New York, married and divorced, and worked as a mergers and acquisitions specialist at two large corporations. Companies were swallowing one another at a record pace, and he traveled the world putting together deals. "It exposed me to a lot of wonderful places, but mergers and acquisitions just didn't float my boat," he says. "I lived inside pop culture: music, comic books, films."

When billionaire Ronald Perelman bought Marvel, the company first searched for a COO from publishing, advertising, or another traditionally aligned business. "I lived, breathed, and understood their product, and they decided to take a chance on me," says Stewart. "It turned out to be a huge break because it brought me into another world." From 1989 to 1997, he helped the company increase revenues from about $65 million to nearly $1 billion a year. The company had always concentrated on comic books, but under Stewart's watch, it expanded into theme parks, restaurants, sports-trading cards, and toys. The 1994 baseball strike, however, badly hurt the trading-card business, and an influx of

Photograph of Curtis Mayfield's guitar by Andrew Moore/Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

new comic-book titles turned collectors and readers off. Marvel, saddled with mounting debt, filed for bankruptcy in 1996. Stewart left the following year.

At this year's induction ceremonies, Stewart was introduced to Bruce Springsteen and Billy Joel and talked to Paul McCartney about an upcoming photo exhibit featuring the work of his late wife, Linda. "It was a thrill meeting them, but I'm not here to make friends with artists," he says. "In the industry, there's a dichotomy between the artists and the 'suits.' I'm definitely considered the latter. I try to keep in mind that what I'm here for is to assist in the collection of materials and to make sure that the inductees are remembered."

Stewart won't need to tinker much with the part of the hall that the public experiences. It's already energetic and entertaining with just the right mix of imagery, sound, and nostalgia. Level 1, the most comprehensive of six levels, contains several small theaters that present short documentaries on the evolution of rock and roll. Visitors exit the theaters and move through a circular corridor that contains a series of glass-enclosed cases that cover themes like the British invasion, the San Francisco scene, and the punk-rock era. Computerized kiosks with headphones allow visitors to listen to landmark albums or interviews with artists. A large Legends of Rock exhibit features mannequins of performers like George Clinton, Tina Turner, and David Byrne and bands like Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, and Queen, all decked with their instruments and the clothes and costumes they performed in.

Stewart's major goal is to give the hall a new, scholarly dimension through a center for popular-culture research. Toward that end, he will need to find new revenue streams. The plan is to initiate a rock-and-roll oral-history project that would archive the memories of musicians, recording-industry executives, technicians, tour managers, radio personalities, and even roadies. Currently, there is no room in the building to house the personal papers of musicians that curators are constantly gathering.

Without some unforeseen turn of events, attendance isn't likely to foot the bill for an expansion. The hall, which has no endowment, pays its own operation primarily through the proceeds of the entry fee and the busy retail store. After drawing 850,000 visitors in its first year—far beyond expectations—attendance dipped below 600,000 last year, a figure that is still considered very good. One of Stewart's challenges will be to find novel ways to lure new visitors, bring former visitors back, and attract families bored with the thought of another trip to Disney World. "This summer the airport opened its first international gate, and Continental Airlines is planning to offer a direct flight from London to Cleveland. That should help us market ourselves more effectively in Europe," says Stewart.

Stewart considers the host of ways the hall can raise the $10 to $20 million it needs to purchase artifacts and to build a center for popular-culture research: educational grants, individual donations, benefits and special events, and better marketing of the institution's brand name. The museum, with a small cafe, currently trucks in food for events; a kitchen and restaurant would enable it to attract and hold more functions. Stewart also hopes to expand the 200-seat auditorium to 500 seats so that the hall might raise some additional funds through special performances. Building a stronger relationship with VH1, which already televises the induction ceremonies, might encourage the network to promote the hall throughout the year.

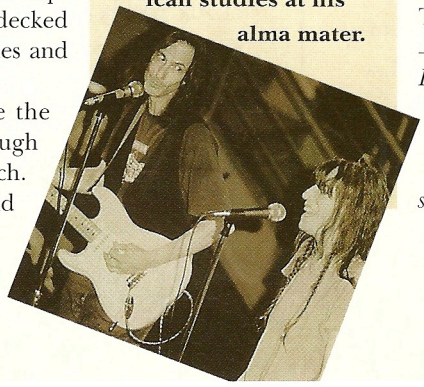
"Landing this position was certainly a challenge, and moving forward from this point will certainly be another challenge. But I've never been more ready or excited about anything in my life," says Stewart, sounding a bit like a Beatle landing in America for the first time. Working in his favor are surveys showing that the hall is the reason most tourists come to Cleveland. With its new sports facilities, a new commercial theater district, a first-class art museum, and a new science museum, the city has been called a model for urban revitalization, a buzz that should help keep them coming. For Jann Wenner, Stewart's hiring is the high note in Cleveland's transformation into a premier tourist destination. The publisher of *Rolling Stone* and a vice chair of the hall's board told *The New York Times*: "We were without leadership, without competence. Terry is a gift from heaven." ❑

In 1997, senior editor Bill Glovin made his own donation to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—five songs hand-written by folk singer Phil Ochs, who was honored by the hall at a special symposium this past May.

Rock 'n' Rutgers

Lenny Kaye

A 1967 graduate of Rutgers College, this founding member of the Patti Smith Group might be the only rocker to also produce albums, become a respected critic, write a biography of Willie Nelson, and land an appointment as a visiting professor of American studies at his alma mater.



Photograph of Lenny Kaye by Gary Malerba/Corbis