Stewart, Rex,
in full REX WILLIAM STEWART, JR. (b. Feb. 22, 1907, Philadelphia, Pa., U.S.--d. Sept. 7, 1967, Los Angeles, Calif.), black American jazz musician unique for playing the cornet, rather than the trumpet, in big bands as well as small groups throughout his career. His mastery of expressive effects made him one of the most distinctive of all brass improvisers.

Stewart grew up in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., and began playing in New York City groups in 1921. The most important of his early associations was with the classic Fletcher Henderson band (1926, periodically in 1928-33) and McKinney's Cotton Pickers (1931-32). His greatest work took place during his years with the Duke Ellington band (1934-45), when he was featured in recordings such as "Across the Track Blues" and "Boy Meets Horn."

On his own Stewart toured Europe and Australia in 1947-51, then freelanced in upstate New York and New York City in the 1950s. After 1960 he lived in southern California, where he was a disc jockey, played music, and wrote articles on jazz for Down Beat and Playboy magazines.

Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke were important early influences. Ellington created a new role in his band for Stewart's unique melodies, full of bent notes and "half-valve" playing (depressing a valve on his cornet halfway) and quirky, mysterious sounds that suggested laughing or sobbing through his horn. Stewart also displayed a masterly use of mutes for expressive effects. Other Ellington sidemen joined him in his early small-group recordings; the most remarkable of these groups was his 1939 Paris quartet with guitarist Django Reinhardt. Late in his career Stewart continued to be a witty lyric artist, as evidenced in The Big Challenge, a recording of sessions he and Cootie Williams led together in 1957. Jazz Masters of the Thirties (1972?; reprinted 1980) is a collection of his articles.