



Taking Stock: Three Masters Speak

**Exclusive Interviews with Jim Erickson, Chuck O'Rear, and John Lund
By Jennifer Sauer, Managing Editor**

We asked three top performers in the stock image trade--Jim Erickson, Chuck O'Rear, and John Lund-- just a handful of questions, and came back with some pretty interesting and unexpected answers. All three are Bay Area photographers whose achievements transcend excellence; and when they turn that talent into commerce, they go laughing all the way to the bank (especially Jim, whose recipe for stock success includes "joy and mirth").

In a landscape of rapid economic and technological change in photography, many photographers vying for a piece of the stock pie have a lot of questions. Each photographer was asked the same four questions, and each offered some pretty sound advice, which I'll pass on to you now:

Jim Erickson counts as one of the most thoughtful and humorous photographers to be found, which says a lot, as photographers often take the cake in these categories. A Bay Area paragon of commercial photography with a client list that reads like a snazzy dream—Kodak, American Express, L.L. Bean, Cisco, General Motors, Merrill Lynch, and AT&T, to name a few—Jim has circumvented the corporate stock scene, keeping the big commission bucks on his home team. A great juggler as well as comedian, Jim shoots on assignment, for stock, and has also carved out some time to found the highly regarded post-production group, Fat Cat Digital. Ringing up over a million dollars last year in stock alone, with projected growth at a consistent fifty percent per year, Jim's words are worth hanging on, and it's a fun ride to boot.

Q: What are your best selling stock images and why?

My best sellers are the ones I put my heart into. We all have an idea of what a stock photo is supposed to look like. Creating inventory for stock is a trap—trying to figure out how it's 'supposed to look.' This is the worst thing you could do. For me, if the fun meter goes off when I'm shooting pictures, this is the stuff I love to shoot. This is the key. The stuff that sells best is personal—of my family, of my own life—which I shoot tons of. Even when I shoot business subjects, I try to find something that is interesting to me. I want to like the people and the idea, and to bring a human element to it. I also want my subjects to have a lot of fun. [I like to shoot] people having an emotional moment in an everyday situation. I ask myself, 'Do I like the people I'm photographing? The wardrobe?' Then I mess with them until they stop projecting and posing and start being, until it feels real to me. Emotional connection sells in stock.

As an example, ten years ago, I took my son out to get pumpkins for Halloween. I asked a stylist if she would cut out some pumpkin heads because I had seen an Andrew Wyeth painting of people wearing pumpkin heads. I shot my first assistant and the stylist with my son with the pumpkin heads on. Who is going to buy that? Well, that shot just sold for ten to fifteen thousands dollars. People don't want to buy ordinary crap. If you're laughing and having fun when you're shooting, you'll sell images. Stock-ish images sell for small usage and small amounts. All of our stock has such a kinship and sensibility that clients are creating campaigns out of it. The ones they respond to are ones created with joy and mirth.

Q: How do you choose what to shoot for stock? What are your recent stock projects?

I try to find a balance in my personal and commercial work. I went to Argentina five months ago with a crew of three from here and a full crew in Buenos Aires. I planned for nine shooting days on my own nickel. We cast 25 talent. I decided to spend one third of my time on healthcare. So we cast doctors and nurses, rented out a hospital wing with extensive machinery. We also shot nurses at a mansion. It was all about healthcare and wellness. The other six days I shot art for myself. I didn't care if it had commercial value or not. I shot a tango class, took over the whole school for a day, for

example. We were extremely productive. We came back with 2000 images we were willing to put up for stock. And that takes a real commitment to each image, to shoot it, prepare it for stock sale, and so on. Our business is growing at 50% per year every year. Our clients are big companies like Walmart, Ameriprise, United Airlines.

Q: Why do they come to you instead of Getty or Corbis?

I have a long association in the assignment world. I've been riding the horse a long time. I've worked with top clients for 25 years. I spend a couple hundred thousand dollars a year on marketing, including buying the back page of Communication Arts, and I'm also still doing assignments. There's a reason why high profile clients have used me as their voice for 25 years. I use skills I have honed by years of making pictures that people relate to. People want to buy images they can relate to.

My clients know when they search for stock on my site that there will be a point of view. They know there will be quality. All of our pictures are loved up—retouched (by Fat Cat Digital)—which is enormously expensive. Selecting an image, shooting it, and prepping an image for sale is a lot of work, but it's worth it. Our clients want something good. I choose people who are sophisticated retouchers to begin with, and we talk about pictures until they know what I like. I like a sophisticated clean fresh color palate, and I like to draw the viewer's attention to the subject compositionally.

Last year (2005) we did a million dollars in stock. No commission to agents or lawyers. And it's on track to grow 50% this year. Once they (clients) go to my website, they shop. They like the way it looks and works. We've doubled our inventory in stock in the past two years.

When I shoot assignments, I am also thinking about stock. And the client ends up winning out of that. The truth is that the client gets a way better submission because I work my ass off for them and they're thrilled. A lot of people have a stigma against stock photography—as if it a path of less integrity—but I find the reverse to be true. I've found that it's profoundly changed the way I shoot. When I shoot for an assignment, I have found that there is a benefit to shooting in many dimensions. The idea 'stock' in the back of your brain forces you to probe the subject more deeply and to think differently. It becomes a highly valued tool to find that valuable moment. If you can find that, you've got something. That's what people are searching for. Stock is like a good wine. You open it up and let it breathe.

Because of stock, my assignment clients benefit. We're very respectful of clients. Everything is discussed up front and we don't sell stock until the rights are up. Stock is a game for someone with patience. It's a long race. Anyone who wants to make fast money will be disappointed.

Q: What trends do you see in stock?

You read that stock agencies are going towards more competitive pricing & royalty free. I'm not sure, but I think some of the larger stock agencies are not up to the same caliber that they used to be [in terms of how they work with photographers]. When people really want a picture and they compare it to placement costs, the cost of the stock is a fraction. We'll never be royalty free. Ever. Because it's not healthy for the photo community. As artists we shouldn't be compartmentalized. One of the glorious things about being a photographer is that you get to be a curator – and the definition of a curator is 'a caretaker of the soul.' You can't forget that you became a photographer to meditate on the qualities of soul. You are an artist first.

For me, the trend I want to go in is to shoot more projects that I pay for myself that I can direct and truly enjoy. I want to do projects as if I were doing a book on something and then turn it into stock. Not for more money, but so that I can be an artist full time, to have the freedom to express myself without commercial influences.

Finally, I would advocate that everyone support APA and pay particular attention to recent copyright laws. Pick up your pencil and write to your congress people. Be careful to protect the rights that enable us to be creators of original art and not just puppets of big business.

Chuck O'Rear is the Clint Eastwood of stock photographers, ascribing his success to "decades of hard work, rarely taking a day off, and shooting everything that moved in front of me." His 25-year history as a National Geographic photographer affirms his talent, varied interests and technical agility. He has shot dozens of stories on such diverse topics as Indonesia, ultra lights, and computer chips. His work for the Geographic eventually brought him to Napa Valley where he relocated in order to feed his passion for shooting wine and winemaking. Fast forward about nine books, and we catch up with Chuck taking an anomalous break from his 45,000-mile journey around America to shoot his next (self-published) book on winemaking in the US. He is a veteran stock shooter, and founder of the LA stock agency West Light, which was bought by Corbis in 1998.

Q: What are your best selling stock images and why?

My best selling stock image is, I think, the highest selling single image in the history of stock. Green hill, blue sky, white clouds. It was bought by Microsoft as a screen saver for Microsoft Windows XP, and is called the "Bliss" screensaver. Microsoft bought it from Corbis, but I can't say for how much. But it was a lot of money. It's their main photo screensaver on Windows. Anyone who owns a PC loaded with Windows XP knows this image.

Q: How do you choose what to shoot for stock?

It's not easy. I look at Corbis on a regular basis. I look at the photos they're accepting. I look at the sales I've had to see if there's any trend, and then I try to look for holes that need to be filled. I will go to Getty for example, and I will look at a subject that I might be shooting (destination or subject) and see what has already been shot, and then try to find a hole.

Q: What are your recent stock projects?

I haven't shot for stock in the last year because I've been on a long term book project, but the images from the book will be sold as stock later. My current project is a book with the working title, "Wine: 50 States." It's a self-financed book, and I have traveled 45,000 miles around the US to shoot it. I'll be making photos that no one else has made, so there will be (stock) material that will be made from that.

Q: What trends do you see in stock?

I wish I had a crystal ball. It seems that royalty free is still viable. On Demand speculation shooting is there. You can't discount it, I would hate to see it go that way, but -- Consumer cameras have such good quality. It's not about the price of the camera. If you are at the right place at the right time, you too could sell pictures for stock. It's not limited to rich doctors shooting safaris in Africa anymore. That's the competition photographers have right now. The consumer wants to be entertained.



Waiting Room

© John Lund

John Lund's eclectic career began in 1976, when he first began making photographs. Since then, he has worked as a teacher, writer, editor, and, of course, a stock shooter whose images can be found on gift books, calendars, greeting cards, and numerous other items. One of the original creative pioneers to explore digital imaging, John started out with Photoshop 1.0, and is considered one of the leading authorities on digital imaging. Lund has taught digital workshops, written numerous articles on digital photography, served as Digital Imaging's Digital Photography Editor, been a Photoshop columnist for Picture Magazine, served on APA's National Digital Committee, and lectured extensively and written a book on Photoshop: Adobe Master Class Photoshop Compositing with John Lund. He has been shooting stock for 17 years, and his stock imagery is now licensed through Getty, Corbis, Jupiter, and BLEND. We were in luck to catch John making a rare email connection from Outer Mongolia to answer a few quick questions:

Q: What are your best selling stock images and why?

Conceptual images are my best selling ones. I think because there is less competition (fewer conceptual images) and a real need for more of that kind of image.

Q: How do you choose what to shoot for stock?

I take into account suggestions from my editors, but primarily, just come up with ideas that I think will sell and will be fun to shoot.

Q: What are your recent stock projects?

I just finished doing some composites in which I made clouds into different concept images, and I am just returning from shooting travel stock in Mongolia.

Q: What trends do you see in stock?

Well, more concept images are finding their way into RF. RF is getting so crowded that the revenue per image is dropping. Getty has come out with a new business model in Rights Ready that may well start a new trend, and a healthy one! All the agencies are creating more and more wholly owned images, not particularly good for us! But there will always be a need for new fresh images!