



Welles Garage

by John Leuba



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Commentary

Years ago, I was given some terrific advice on how to develop a relationship with a stranger: **engage in a mutual group project.** I have no doubt that this wisdom is as old as the hills, but it was a revelation for me. It suddenly explained why women from my grandmother's generation would gather together and sew a quilt. The group project bonded them in ways that sitting around and gossiping would not. In my case, I was meeting some long-lost family relatives whom I knew nothing about and with whom I had no relationship whatsoever. I dreaded the small talk I knew would fill the hours. But with this idea of a "mutual group project" I felt there was the potential to begin a relationship that was more meaningful and spend the time in a way that would create a new memory.

Strangely enough, I found this same advice works equally well in my photographic life. John Leuba illustrated this perfectly with this project photographing Welles Garage. He explained that rather than to simply ask permission to photograph there, he explained his project in detail and solicited Peter Welles' cooperation. This involved a number of photographic sessions, including a series of wonderful portraits like this one. Such a photograph cannot be made without the willing participation of the subject. In turn, that willing participation is the result of cooperation in the Leuba's photographic project.

We receive lots of portfolios of garages and machine shops. Perhaps this is because of my work that

appeared in my book, *Made of Steel*. Perhaps photographers assume I have a soft spot for such work — which, I confess, I do. It's amazing, however, how many times we will review a project like this that includes lots of photographs of the shop, the tools, the building, the windows and doors, the piles of stuff — and not a human being to be found anywhere. The project — and the place — appears vacant, abandoned, in-human because there is no human. Add a few portraits, as Leuba does in his project, and suddenly the place is alive. Capture a portrait that includes *movement* (e.g., the smoke in this image) and suddenly we feel as though we are *there*. We connect. The project becomes not only human, but sensual.

Leuba's original submission consisted of 37 images of which only 10 included portraits. Of these, three included only Welles' hands, only four showed his face. In *LensWork*, we published 16 images, five of which included Peter — but only one of which included his face. I don't cite these statistics to suggest any kind of ratio, but rather to imply that a project like this comes alive with humanity even if it's only sprinkled with a few portraits, or partial portraits. And, those portraits are possible only when the subject has agreed to your photographic project. You only need a few, but they are needed.