



ELVIS | AT 21

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALFRED
WERTHEIMER



Smithsonian



HISTORY

Art is about choices.

The same scene presents itself to all of us. We are each given the same subject. It is in the selection of detail, what is included and what is left out, the angle of perception from which the scene is observed, that the true artist finds his or her own unique form of expression.



What is so remarkable about Al Wertheimer's documentary portrait of Elvis Presley, very much like the music of the artist it chronicles, is how fresh and contemporary the pictures still seem, how utterly unlike any other portrait of this endlessly scrutinized figure.

It is, clearly, not just a matter of access, for Wertheimer was with his subject for no more than a week, all told, on two separate occasions in 1956. Nor is it as if the photographer was being invited to record some momentous historic event. He was just there to photograph a couple of television appearances, on Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey's *Stage Show* on March 17 and *The Steve Allen Show* on July 2, with the rehearsals attendant on each performance.

Another photographer might simply have dismissed this as a not very challenging assignment about a not particularly interesting teenage fad. Another photographer might simply have taken it as an easy payday. Wertheimer saw the possibilities of the subject not because he was a fan (he had never even heard of ELVIS when he was called by the record company two days before the first shoot) but because he was a keen student of human nature, because he was curious, because, like Elvis, he could be swept up by the purity of experience, by the unscripted eloquence of the moment.

When Wertheimer discovered Elvis alone at the piano in the corner of a blank high-ceilinged room, with sunlight hitting a group of empty chairs, he saw it not as a symbol, not as the mythic logo for a generation, but as itself, as a powerful picture that could suggest multiple layers of moods and meanings. In the same way, Wertheimer took the recording session on the day after *The Steve Allen Show* not as the occasion for a pictorial news account of a mundane event

(as it happened, Elvis recorded both "Hound Dog" and "Don't Be Cruel" on that day) but as an opportunity to explore the unrelenting concentration, joy, pain, and release of the creative act. And, following the session, he jumped on a train to Memphis with Elvis not because he knew what was going to happen on the journey—but because he didn't.

"MIND IF I TAG ALONG?" was his only security badge, Elvis' shrug all the validation he needed.

The precise choreography of flirtation, the purchase of a ring from a worn-out-looking jewelry salesman, a transcendent instant on stage, grabbing a catnap on the train, an unrehearsed family reunion, all are captured without the slightest hint of irony or visual comment. WE ARE SCARCELY AWARE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER, THOUGH HE IS ALWAYS PRESENT. HE NEVER FLINCHES. HE NEVER TURNS AWAY.

Al Wertheimer continued, of course, to take photographs; he went on to a distinguished career as a documentary filmmaker and cinematographer; but he would never again, he has sometimes said, capture the moment in quite the same way. If he had been given the assignment two or three years later, he suggests wryly, he might have screwed it up by trying to improve on reality. But, whether because, as he suggests, he simply didn't know any better, or because, as his photographs show, he had a profound eye for the unmanipulated image, in this case he was content to simply leave matters alone.

"I LEARNED THAT WHEN SOMEBODY IS DOING SOMETHING THAT IS MORE IMPORTANT IN HIS OR HER LIFE THAN HAVING THEIR PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN, YOU'RE GOING TO GET GOOD PICTURES."

He understates his achievement. He got great pictures. Like Elvis, by embracing spontaneity, by prizing feeling over mere technique, he found something new in familiar forms, and the result is work that can stand gloriously on its own, unaffected by the eddying tides of fashion or the shifting sands of time.

— Peter Guralnick, author of the prize-winning two-volume biography of Elvis Presley, *Last Train to Memphis* and *Carless Love*. Text excerpted with permission from *Elvis at 21: New York to Memphis* (Insight Editions, 2006).



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Elvis is also in print! The exhibition's companion book is *Elvis 1956* (Welcome Books, 2009), with insightful essays from Smithsonian curators.

Elvis at 21, Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer was developed by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, Govinda Gallery, and the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, and is made possible through the generous support of The History Channel.

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