



THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURE

Chris Murray

Henri Cartier-Bresson was known for photographing the decisive moment, that moment when everything falls into place. But I was more interested in the moments just before or just after the decisive moment....

—Alfred Wertheimer

WHEN PHOTOGRAPHY WAS INVENTED, it created a sensation that reverberated throughout the world. Visual imagery up to that time was the exclusive domain of artists and craftsmen. Suddenly everything changed. Now a person with a camera and some light could make a “true to life” picture of someone or something. Some people, including prominent artists, heralded photography as now, perhaps, the best way to make a picture. Others were uncertain and even fearful of this new method of image making. Some even felt the camera was the work of the devil, stealing a person’s very soul.

When Elvis Presley came on the scene in 1956, he had a similar effect. Elvis’s performances on TV and his recordings made him wildly popular, as he redefined American music. At the same time, his artistry caused feelings of fear and loathing among some people. His records were burned and he was denounced from the pulpit. He was accused of being immoral.

When a young freelance photographer in New York City named Alfred Wertheimer started taking photographs of Elvis Presley, he had never even heard of him. That’s how fresh Elvis was when Wertheimer first observed him with his camera on March 17, 1956,



Elvis is prepared for his performance on the Dorsey Brothers’ *Stage Show*, New York City, March 17, 1956
OPPOSITE: Elvis and his band perform at the Mosque Theater, Richmond, Virginia, June 30, 1956

in New York City. Elvis was appearing on *Stage Show*, the popular TV show hosted by the Dorsey Brothers. Wertheimer was hired by RCA’s pop record division to take some press photos of the young, new recording artist they had recently signed. Wertheimer shot about twenty rolls of film that day with Elvis at CBS’s Studio 50, where *Stage Show* was broadcast. He sent one set of contact sheets and six blow-ups for immediate use in press kits to RCA publicist Ann Fulchino, who had hired Wertheimer for the job.

Just a few months later, Elvis returned to New York City to appear on *The Steve Allen Show* and to record a few songs for RCA. Elvis and television were made for each



Waiting outside of Penn Station, Elvis reads about an air disaster over the Grand Canyon, New York City, July 1, 1956

other. The new medium of TV was entertaining and exciting and so was Elvis. Wertheimer photographed Elvis during rehearsals for *The Steve Allen Show*. One of those photographs, *First Arrival*, shows Elvis sitting alone at a piano singing and playing gospel music. It is a remarkable photograph that captures the charismatic twenty-one year-old in a private and unguarded moment. It was that image on the cover of *Last Train to Memphis*—Peter Guralnick’s extraordinary biography of Elvis Presley—that first drew me to Alfred Wertheimer’s photographs.

Wertheimer, “having a foot in the door,” decided to take advantage of the opportunity to shoot Elvis again and, on his own, took a train to Richmond to photograph Elvis’s two shows at the Mosque Theater. I once asked Wertheimer, what was it about Elvis that made him decide to follow and observe him as a photojournalist, and not for hire? Wertheimer replied that Elvis “permitted closeness and he made the girls cry.” It was a remarkable phenomenon.

Wertheimer’s photographs of Elvis in Richmond taken on June 30 are amazing. His picture of Elvis with a young woman he had just met, sitting at the Jefferson Hotel lunch counter, called *Grilled Cheese 20¢* is a classic look at 1950s America. Wertheimer’s “fly on the wall” approach to photography is dramatically illustrated in a masterpiece image taken that hot summer day called *The Kiss*. Photographed in low light at the end of a long, narrow passageway under the fire stairs, *The Kiss* cap-

tures the beauty, style, and sex appeal of the young man from Memphis. Elvis’s performances that evening left the audiences in a frenzy.

Wertheimer returned to New York City that night with Elvis and his band, along with Elvis’s traveling companion and cousin, Junior Smith. Elvis performed live on *The Steve Allen Show* the next day.

On July 2, Elvis recorded three songs at RCA’s Studio One. Two of those songs, “Don’t Be Cruel” and “Hound Dog,” were released as the A and B sides of the same single. To this day, it is the only single ever released where both sides went to number one on the record charts. Alfred Wertheimer was there, in Studio One, documenting that legendary recording session. Wertheimer’s photographs of that session are a rare record of a great moment in American music. They capture Presley in full command of his artistry, not only as a singer and musician, but also as musical arranger of the sessions themselves.

The next day, Presley, along with his band, his manager Colonel Tom Parker, Junior Smith, and Wertheimer, boarded a train at New York City’s Penn Station. Elvis was returning home to Memphis and a much-anticipated concert at Russwood Park stadium. After their hometown boy made it big on TV in New York City, this concert was going to be a homecoming of sorts. It was a 27-hour trip home, and Elvis spent some of the time listening to the acetate copy he had of his three new songs, playing them over and over on his portable record player. Wertheimer’s pictures of Elvis on the train reveal a young artist deeply and critically immersed in his music. Presley’s absorption in his music was not a casual thing.

When the train finally got near Memphis, Elvis asked to get off at a stop near the outskirts of town called White Station. It was closer to his home on Audubon Drive than the main station in Memphis. Wertheimer did not miss this moment with his camera and as a result, he captured a truly remarkable series of images of Elvis walking as a regular person for what may have been the last time. Wertheimer describes that moment:

With only the quick acetate cuts, no luggage or instruments, he hopped off the train and headed down a grassy knoll towards the sidewalk of this little town. Between telephone poles and Cadillacs, Elvis stopped to ask a black woman on the street for directions and then turned to wave to us on the train. As the train started moving, I quickly figured that I was better off taking pictures of what was going on in front of me instead of jumping off the train and following Elvis. If I had stopped to collect my bags and all my equipment, I would have missed what was probably one of the last times he could just walk down the street like an ordinary guy.

Within a few short months, Elvis Presley would be the most talked-about entertainer in the world. No one would ever again be able to photograph Elvis as Alfred Wertheimer had. Wertheimer captured Elvis at a crossroads of culture. He, with his camera, was our witness to the hero’s return.

When Elvis reached Audubon Drive, he was welcomed home by his beloved mother, Gladys, his father, Vernon, his grandmother, Minnie Mae, and his high-school sweetheart, Barbara Hearn, along with other cousins, friends and neighbors. Wertheimer photographed Elvis’s homecoming, even going so far as to photograph Elvis while swimming with him in his new pool and while riding with him on the back of his Harley Davidson motorcycle. Wertheimer has repeatedly said that “Elvis permitted closeness,” and he appreciated the opportunity to get close to Elvis as a photojournalist.



Elvis with his mother Gladys, 1034 Audubon Drive, Memphis, Tennessee, July 4, 1956

Wertheimer accompanied Elvis to his concert that evening at Russwood Park stadium. The sheriff arrived

at the Presley home in his police car. Elvis sat in the middle of the front seat, in between the sheriff and the colonel. Wertheimer sat in the backseat alone. When they arrived, Wertheimer photographed Elvis moving through the surging crowd that was trying to get as close as possible to him.

Elvis was dressed all in black when he took the stage, backed by Scotty Moore on the guitar, Bill Black on bass, and D. J. Fontana on drums. Elvis and his band were as tight as could be. The air was electric. Fourteen thousand people were on hand to celebrate the new, liberating, and thrilling music performed by one of their own. Just a few days earlier, Elvis had had to follow a script and perform in a tuxedo on *The Steve Allen Show* in New York City. Feeling good and happy to be home, Elvis told his Memphis audience, “Tonight, you’re going to see what the real Elvis is all about.” Elvis put on a mesmerizing performance, the crowd loved it, and Wertheimer photographed it all.



Elvis waves to his fans upon arriving for his performance at Russwood Park that night, Memphis, Tennessee, July 4, 1956

After Elvis left the stadium, Wertheimer hopped a night train back to New York City. Elvis went on to unprecedented fame and fortune as a musical artist. But it is Alfred Wertheimer’s photographs, and his alone, that remind us of a time in America when a young man from Mississippi could change the world with a song.

We are fortunate indeed to have Alfred Wertheimer’s photographs of Elvis Presley in 1956. They are the most compelling photographs of the greatest rock ‘n’ roll icon of all time.