

## Shooting the King: An Interview with Elvis Presley Photographer Alfred Wertheimer

On His Book 'Elvis and the Birth of Rock and Roll'



Photo: Sonam Tsering of Rebkong

Photographer Alfred Wertheimer personifies the phrase *being in the right place at the right time*. On March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1956, his life changed forever with one phone call. At the other end of the line was RCA. Quickly taking up her offer, Wertheimer grabbed his cameras and headed to New York City's Studio 50 where he first came face to face with the rising star, and was provided all-access privileges to shoot the artist on and off stage.

Through his dynamic images of key TV appearances (*Stage Show*, *The Steve Allen Show*) concerts (Mosque Theater, Richmond, Virginia, Russwood Park, Memphis), backstage and private moments, an historic recording session (he shot photos during the session for *Hound Dog*, *Don't Be Cruel* and *Anyway You Want Me*), the train ride from New York to Memphis, candid shots at home and Elvis's 1958 departure to serve for the U.S. Army in Germany, Wertheimer's photographs captured the essence of Elvis better than any other.

In his new book *Elvis and the Birth of Rock and Roll* (Taschen/(a limited edition of 1,706 copies), Wertheimer's historic images—more than half are previously unpublished—brilliantly evoke the excitement, joy and innocence of the future king of rock and roll at the zenith of his powers. In a conversation with RCM, Alfred Wertheimer takes us back half a century to recount his landmark journey behind shooting The King.

**Rock Cellar Magazine: Your photography has been showcased in several outstanding Elvis books. What makes *Elvis and the Birth of Rock and Roll* different from the others?**

**Alfred Wertheimer:** Well, it's heavier. You have to be strong to lift it. (laughs) That's number one. Number two, it took a year and a half to put together. Physically it's huge. Benedikt Taschen is a good guy to work with; he doesn't always tell you what he's up to but after while you get to see what he's up to. For instance, I've never thought of putting a picture of Elvis where he has his eyes closed on the cover but that was his idea. So you can either give him credit or blame. There are about three hundred some odd photos in the book and I'd say about 100-125 of them are unpublished new ones.

**AW:** No. It's just anytime you put a book together depending on what your original source is, and my original source is 2500 images so you have to limit it otherwise you wind up with images the size of little postage stamps and they don't have any impact. So in this book there are a lot of huge pictures which are full page or double page. Taschen tends to favor large images over small images.

**RCM: This book has a nice selection of images you took of Elvis as a member of the U.S. Army when he was being shipped off to Germany.**

**AW:** I found out Elvis was gonna leave the country for two or three years to serve in Germany and I had an opportunity to photograph him for a fan magazine. Anne Fulchino, who was the head of RCA's Publicity department, said I better be careful, Colonel Parker (Elvis's manager) is here. I had to explain to her that I wasn't concerned or worried about Colonel Tom Parker. I had nothing to fear from him. The reason she thought I did was because he was always seeing how far he could push before you could push back. At one point we put out a magazine in 1956 called *The Amazing Elvis Presley*. We sold about 400,000 copies, a huge amount and it got me into my first lawsuit with a distributor because I found them to be dishonest.

It didn't sell for very much, it sold for thirty five cents on the newsstand and we were getting seventeen cents a piece for it. The Colonel sent me a bill for ten thousand dollars and also said, "You also owe me a thousand magazines." So we sent him a hundred magazines and that was the end of it. In the meantime, about six month later, he was using my own photographs which he obtained through RCA/Victor—he had access to the files that Anne Fulchino had of my work and he put out a one shot magazine with a record So I'm photographing Elvis at the Brooklyn Port of Embarkation. He's holding forth at a press conference in front of the media. He's got his hair cut into a crew cut and has his side burns clipped. He's not being used by the Army for recruiting purposes with posters behind him and who should sidle next to me at the podium but Colonel Tom Parker. He looked me straight in the face very sternly and says, "Wertheimer, are you taking any good pictures?" And I said, "Always Colonel, always." Hew said, "keep it up, keep it up" and those were the last words I've ever heard out of his mouth. So the day went by and Elvis ultimately wound up on the U.S.S. Randall, the troop ship, and the Colonel had prepared a packet of trading cards signed by Elvis which he took on board with him in a shoe box. As the boat was pulling out of NewHarbor, the U.S. Army band was playing *That's All Right, Mama* and *Tutti Fruitti*. This was the first time in the history of the U.S. military that a private person's music was played by the band.

But the general who was in charge of that day's functions kept reminding everybody that Elvis was being treated like every other soldier. It didn't make any difference that he was famous but that of course wasn't true, he was being treated much better.

**RCM: What do those photos evoke for you?**

**AW:** I don't intellectualize things too much. I just take it as it comes. I try to take it form the visual point of view of there's a certain amount of irony like Elvis having four people wait for him with their duffle bags ready to go on board. While this press conference is taking place there's about 5,000 other troops being herded on the ship at a lower entrance point. These people are being shunted on the ship onto a gang plank on the third floor level and they're usually attired in their Army fatigue outfits, these dark

green work clothes. Elvis had his Class A uniform on and he had four people standby to go on board with him and their function was to make it look normal but in reality they were there as actors to be there and make him look average.

So he gets through 250 media people, waves goodbye, waves goodbye to the RCA group that was there—Anne Fulchino, Steve Sholes and some of the executives—and goes up the gang plank with the other four or four soldiers. Then when he gets to the other side, after the photographers yell out, “Can we have one more?”, they turn around on the other side and come back to the shore. Then they line up again and try a second time only this time they stay on the ship and don’t come back to land. So that was all being done for the photographers. In the meantime, the bulk of the soldiers are continually going onto the ship down below where the real story was taking place. The Colonel was also on the ship and asked to get off being it was pulled out in New York Harbor being pushed by these couple of little tug boats.

**RCM: Hard to believe but it was 57 years ago when you landed the assignment of shooting a budding rock and roll hell cat named Elvis Presley.**

**AW:** This has been like a 50 year assignment. It started out on March 17, 1956 and it hasn’t ended yet. It’s still going strong. But there was a little bit of a hiatus in there. I photographed Elvis leaving the country on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September in 1958 and that’s the last time I ever saw Elvis in person alive. From that point on until the day he died on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1977, I didn’t get a single phone call for an Elvis Presley photograph, which covered a period of 19 years. From the time he died, the phone hasn’t stopped ringing. I get calls at least once or twice a week about something to do with Elvis.

I took the photos of Elvis in my first professional year in photography, which was right after I got out of the U.S. Army in 1954. I worked in the fashion industry for a photographer named Tom Palumbo and I spent about a year with him as a gopher/assistant. Then I decided to freelance. One of my early clients was RCA. Anne Fulchino came over to RCA from Columbia Records and she tried to set up a picture file for RCA for their various performers. There were zero photos of Elvis. She called me on March 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> and asked, “Al, what are you doing March 17<sup>th</sup>?”

With Elvis, the session wasn’t at RCA Studios, it was at CBS Studios on Broadway, which was a converted theater for television. Anne told me my assignment would be for the *Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey Show* and my ears perked up. I said, “Ooh, Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller are some of my heroes.” She said, “No, Elvis Presley.” And of course there was that pregnant silence and I said, “Elvis who?”

**RCM: You really didn’t know who Elvis was at that time?**

**AW:** I’d never heard of Elvis Presley in my whole life.

Elvis was signed to RCA somewhere around November of ’55 and he had done several performances on *Stage Show*, which was hosted by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey and produced by Jackie Gleason. So I didn’t know about Elvis beforehand, I was basically a Mozart, Vivaldi guy.

I came down to the theater and met Anne (Fulchino). There was the normal hustle and bustle backstage. There was a ring salesman with him. Elvis has ordered a ring several weeks earlier and the ring salesman was just delivering that ring the moment I walked into the room.

Then Anne said, “Elvis, I’d like you to meet Al Wertheimer, he’s going to be taking some pictures of you.” And Elvis basically grunted and nodded, “Sure, why not?” Elvis was more interested in the ring than me, I was sort of breaking his train of thought. Elvis was a very focused guy. Whatever he was into

he was focused like a laser. So the ring salesman had just delivered this ring and Elvis put it on his finger and he liked it.

It turned out to be a horseshoe ring with diamonds all around the horseshoe and a horse's head going across the shoe itself. That later on became a rather well known ring, so well known that many years later when I was down in Memphis and Elvis's Memphis restaurant had opened and across the street from it was a small park. There was a huge bronze statue with Elvis holding a guitar in one hand. He had his arm outstretched with the other hand and sure enough, what was on that finger of the other hand? It was the horseshoe ring with the diamonds and the horse's head except now it was two inches in diameter and it was made out of bronze rather than diamonds and gold.

**AW:** Anne Fulchino liked my style of work. At the time I only had one year of professional photography under my belt. I was a photographer in the Army, I wound up working for an Army newspaper in Germany. My style was greatly influenced by *Life* and *Look* magazine and photographers like (Henri) Cartier- Bresson, Berenice Abbott and Dorothea Lang. It was a fly-on-the-wall approach. In other words I didn't like introducing light into my photos. I was using miniature 35 millimeter cameras and they were black. I figured if I had a black camera no one could see me. The moment you introduced light you create a big fuss about yourself. My attitude was the more you get into darkness the more people tend to be themselves. The lighter the area, like neon rooms, the less people are themselves. To understand their body language you don't want to create a big fuss every time you shoot a picture. What you're doing is putting undue pressure on the subject and you're also creating too much of a fuss about yourself. The photographer is the messenger.

How can you achieve images that will truly affect the story that the subject is directing? The subject is the director of his own life.

**RCM: Had you known Elvis was a big rising sensation? How would that have affected shooting him?**

**AW:** Had I photographed him three years later I think I would have messed things up. If I'd photographed Elvis three years later I would have had more experience but I would have been more blasé about it. It wouldn't have been my first year in professional photography. I would have tried to direct Elvis and it would have ruined my fly-on-the-wall approach. He would have said, "Okay, we've got that, now what do you want me to do?"

When I shot Elvis everything was fresh in my mind. I'd never gone down south before so that was all new. The whole experience of dealing with the recording industry was all new to me. So it fed my curiosity and everything was interesting where three years later it wasn't so interesting anymore because I'd already done it six times with other people.

If I shot Elvis years later it would have been much harder to get close to him because he was already a success. At the point I met him he needed all the publicity he could get and he cooperated allowing for closeness. Two years later Colonel Parker had an awful lot of power, enough power to keep *Life* magazine away from Elvis. His attitude was, "Look, you need us, we don't need you."

Elvis was also getting more blasé. When he came back from the Army and did *The Frank Sinatra Show* and his Hollywood movies, everybody knew who he was. It would have been much more difficult for me to have gotten that close. Now he had the "Memphis Mafia" around him and I wouldn't have been able to get as close. I doubt very much he would have invited me in his bathroom and allowed me to shoot him combing his hair. He became too sophisticated as to the routine of promotion and publicity. By that time he had his hair dyed black. He had his little wart removed from his wrist. I sort of got him when he was

innocent and kind of a country bumpkin.

**RCM: What made Elvis a good subject?**

**AW:** He permitted closeness. He felt he was going to be famous one day and at this point in time he didn't have a gold record. I was there and was doing my job. I looked pretty professional. I didn't think about the three hours I normally shoot for a general RCA freelance assignment. I stuck with Elvis for the better part of ten hours on the first day and shot 20 some odd rolls of film. My deal with RCA was I owned the negatives and they had a certain amount of prints and a certain amount of reproduction rights. They encouraged me to go out and hustle more sales of the material. So I would go to *TV Guide*, I would go to fan magazines.

That's what the publicity department loved. They loved photographers who were willing to hustle and do the job of the publicity department. After all, it was their job to get as much publicity about Elvis as possible. Ultimately, I wound up selling *TV Guide* the first Elvis cover they used when the magazine still cost 15 cents.

It was a color head shot of Elvis in the recording studio. That almost paid more than RCA ever paid me. RCA got you into recording sessions, now it was up to you to get good pictures so magazine editors and art directors would use your work.

The other element that made Elvis a good subject was he made the girls cry. When you make the girls cry it means you're reaching them so deeply. You're making tears flow in their eyes. When you see that through your lens you know you've got a winner. Nobody else knew that. You have to be willing to be observant. When you're using a medium lens and you're focusing on the reaction of the young ladies where they're hugging each other and the mascara is dripping down their faces, you say to yourself, "What does this guy got that is making them so emotionally limp?" Elvis let it all hang out, as Trini Lopez would say. He got onstage all perfectly groomed and then within 15 minutes of being onstage he would sort of fall apart in front of your face. He'd have one knee on the ground and he'd be sweating and the hair would be in front of his face. And as he started to disintegrate in front of the audience the audience just melted. There was a symbiotic relationship. It was almost a sexual experience.

**RCM: You caught Elvis at a time where you were fortuitously provided all-access.**

**AW:** Those were different days. In those days if you looked like you knew what you were doing, they wanted you to be there because Elvis needed all the publicity he could get.

What's the point of being a star if nobody's there to record it visually?

**RCM: What were your impressions the first time you saw Elvis perform?**

**AW:** I felt that he was definitely unique. Hey, I was 26 and had been in the Army. I didn't have much experience shooting many personalities. All I knew is I was getting good images of Elvis. I was getting close.

After the first time I shot him on *Stage Show*, we wound up going back to his hotel room. It was just Elvis and me alone. He's on the street alone, between the rehearsal and the evening performance of *Stage Show*. Nobody knew him. Who is Elvis Presley? This was his 5<sup>th</sup> TV performance. He hadn't even got a gold record yet. His first gold record for *Heartbreak Hotel* would come the next month (April 1956). But he was considered most promising artist by *Billboard*. So here we're going back to the hotel and we go into the two rooms there. There's a big shoebox on the couch and it's filled with fan mail. Elvis was trying to

I figured if he's resting up, I'll rest up too because I worked hard too. I've got one picture of him where he's just about to fall asleep. I call it my "Naked Maja" look except he's got his clothes on. It looks very much like (Francisco Jose de) Goya's "Naked Maja". Next thing I knew Elvis was asleep or so I thought he was and I dozed off.

Then 10 or 20 minutes later I heard this buzzing coming from the bathroom and it was the sound of his Norelco electric shaver. Elvis had been smart enough to get up and clean himself up and I asked whether I could come into the bathroom and continue to photograph him. When's the last time you had a photographer come into your bathroom while you were cleaning up, showering and combing your hair? Never. But he didn't seem to think there was anything peculiar about it. He felt if I wanted to come in there and photograph him that's okay.

**RCM: It's often been reported that Elvis was incensed by Steve Allen's treatment of him, forcing him to wear a tux and tails and sing to a basset hound. What's your take on the situation?**

**AW:** RCA's public relations woman Anne Fulchino was essentially Elvis's surrogate mother while he was in New York. He didn't trust the big city. He felt much more comfortable at home or down south. Anne told me that there was a point in the morning where Elvis was in one of those penny arcades on Broadway. They were looking for him at the theater and nobody knew where he was. Anne sensed he might be at one of those places right around the corner from the theater. Sure enough Elvis was there. They were afraid that he wouldn't show up. She talked to Elvis and he was a little bit upset. He felt that he was being used. She told him to be a good trooper and go with the flow. Elvis knew it was Steve aired two or three weeks earlier. On that show Elvis wound up bumping and grinding to a microphone stand and causing a big upset among the Baptist church people down south. They were threatening to break his records and ostracize him.

These various preachers and newspapers practically considered him a disciple of the devil. Elvis didn't see what he did as being lewd, he was just having fun. So Steve Allen introduces Elvis with this scroll, which he claimed had 21,000 names on it that said, "We forgive you Elvis and we love you anyway." Elvis came out on the stage with his top hat, and his tuxedo, he actually had a blue shirt on, not a white shirt. Elvis was gonna have to sing to a hound dog. They didn't want Elvis to move. If he moved too much the hound dog would jump off the pedestal and that would ruin the act so he couldn't do that.

**RCM: The first time you shot Elvis in concert was at the Mosque Theater in Richmond, Virginia.**

**AW:** The rehearsal for *The Steve Allen Show* was on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June (1956) and the episode was going to be filmed on July 1st. The Colonel didn't want to waste a day so he had Elvis travel by train from New York to Richmond, Virginia. They had The Mosque Theater booked for two performances that evening. Tom Diskin was put into the box office. The Colonel took out some local advertising and got some high school kids to hand out flyers. The Colonel booked all the other acts.

It was called *The Elvis Presley Show*. It was eight to ten performers who were doing their thing, from playing the fiddle to square dancing. It was a variety show except Elvis would come on in the last 15-20 minutes of this hour and a half show.

Never before seen color shot of Elvis circa 1956 on "The Steve Allen Show" taking part in a comedy skit.

We get to the theater and you had all these girls in crinoline type dresses, no blue jeans and they all want to pose with Elvis outside of the theater. So they're all exchanging Brownie cameras, clicking and snapping. Finally Elvis went into the theater and greeted some of the other musicians including The Jordanaires. They're trying to rehearse in the green room and there's an open window. It overlooks a ramp

that goes down on the street and there's about 50 girls outside on the ramp and they're making a lot of noise and Elvis and The Jordanaires could hardly hear themselves sing. So Elvis went over to the window and asked them to tone it down a bit. And sure enough they toned it down and they listened to him. So Elvis and The Jordanaires rehearsed the various songs they were going to do at the show. Then they departed and wound up in the men's room on the floor above the stage. That was the dressing room for everybody. They hung their clothes up behind the doors and Elvis was trying to get himself to look good in the mirror.

Then Elvis kind of disappears and I'm saying to myself, "Where is he?" I've got to get back to my subject. I go down this fire stairwell that leads down to the stage floor and as I'm making my turn towards the stage I look down this long corridor and I see these two figures at the end of the corridor and I sense it to be Elvis and the girl, his date. And she's on her tippy toes in her four-inch heels. When you ultimately look at my picture of what I call "The Kiss" where Elvis is sticking his tongue out and he and the girl are touching tongues.

He was determined to kiss her and she was determined to be kissed but not that easily. So she finally said, "Elvis, I bet you can't kiss me." And she sticks out her tongue and he said, "I'll bet you I can." First, he moves in and he bends her nose and then without missing a beat he backs off a little bit and touches the tip of her tongue. That was this hot picture that was supposed to be so erotic. It was like ten year olds playing games. He didn't lose his cool and she finally got what she wanted. Then you could hear the chorus of "WE WANT ELVIS! WE WANT ELVIS!" coming from the theater. I went back past them again using my maintenance voice and I wound up back onstage with the other musicians.

There Elvis comes from the wings to the edge of the stage and begins to perform. It was a small theater with maybe 4,000 girls, mostly in their teens, some women and a few fellas and maybe five or six policeman standing around the periphery of the stage. I was very impressed with him as a performer. The reason I stuck with Elvis was he permitted closeness and he made the girls cry. In that theater, especially in the front rows, you saw 13, 14 and 15 year old girls in their prim and proper dresses and they'd cry and scream and react. It was a give and take.

What I like to do is capture what people do in between time. Elvis was totally exhausted after this performance and he's sweating. The curtain gets drawn and he sits down at a stool and taps away on the drums. Then a little girl comes along. She must be about 7, 8 or 9 and he knows her, she's one of the musicians' daughters. She sits down just as comfortable and calm as you can be and she takes one of the drum sticks and starts tapping away as Elvis is tapping on the middle drum head and he likes that. He liked her being near him. She became a mascot. After the reporter is finished Elvis asked the girl, "Would you like to learn how to play the piano?" She said, "Yeah."

He took her down into the orchestra pit and he leaned back on the stool and put his two feet up on the piano keyboard and started banging away with his feet. The little girl thinks it's silly and she's playing "Chopsticks" with her two little fingers on the other end of the keyboard. Who would have thought at coming up with that? What kind of imagination would you need as a photo director to say, "Elvis, play the piano with your shoes and have the little girl stand next to you." These were wonderful images that I especially remember in my mind's eye. Then he came back onstage and spoke to another reporter and before you knew it he's getting a drink between these two doors where people are moving in and moving out.

I sacrificed a roll of film during his next performance on those movement shots and I think out of the whole roll I got five or six decent shots, which indicate still movement rather than everything being sharp. This is one of the challenges I saw as a photographer. I shot a little color during the show also.

When the performance was finished, somebody said, “Elvis has left the building.”

The kids didn't believe it so they hung around and they wanted more Elvis. But where was Elvis after the show? He was sitting in a paddy wagon outside the theater and nobody knew he was in there. He was hiding out. Then we wound up back on the train heading north that evening and Elvis had an upper berth bunk reserved. We were now on our way back to The Big Apple for his next day's appearance on *The Steve Allen Show* at the Hudson Theater.

**RCM: You attended Elvis's historic recording session for *Hound Dog*, *Don't Be Cruel* and *Any Way You Want Me*.**

**AW:** I didn't know those sessions were historic until years later when people told me they were historic. My memories are very vivid of those sessions. I put out a book with Ger Rijff called *Songs Of Innocence* and there's a hundred some odd photographs in it and it's basically the story of that day.

Elvis was very professional. He kidded around but he never expressed that he was excited. The sessions took place at RCA Studios down on 24<sup>th</sup> Street. The studio was a large room with these curved walls that would bounce the sound in such a way where it wouldn't come back like it did if they had flat walls. There were rugs on the floor so it would dampen the noise. They also had a large 14-inch speaker at the front of the room, which looked like a piece of furniture. Then they had a side door entrance to the studio where they could roll in a piano. Out in that hallway area there were some vending machines.

**RCM: Did you sense while you were shooting Elvis at that session that these were great rock and roll songs?**

**AW:** I didn't even know about the phrase 'rock and roll'. It just didn't cross my mind. VH1 accused me of being the granddaddy of rock photography. Nonsense.

I was a photo journalist and I happened to take photographs of a musician who ultimately became known as a rock and roll musician.

In those days my concern was to explore and document a personality and his involvement with his own profession. My concern at the session was not the music but with getting good pictures—framing, lighting and getting close to him.

The next morning we would be on a train heading south to Memphis. I insisted on going to visit Elvis's

**RCM: You chronicled Elvis's train ride to Memphis, share your memories.**

**AW:** Elvis wasn't that famous yet. There were two instances on that trip from New York to Memphis where Elvis was trying to prove to the ladies that he truly was Elvis Presley. We were in the Chattanooga train station and we had to change trains to get to Memphis. Elvis is waiting for the other train to be ready and the porter is transporting things from one train to the other. The Colonel is sitting around and waiting too. Elvis, Junior Smith and I wound up at this candy stand, which also had a magazine rack.

Sure enough Elvis found one of those silver screen magazines where there's a two page spread on him, which has a photo of him sitting on his patio at his new house at 1034 Audubon Drive. Elvis said to me, “Al, let me have a pen.” So I gave him my pen and Elvis signs it, “Sincerely, Elvis Presley.” He goes over to the two girls behind the counter and he has this magazine open and hands it to them. He doesn't say a word and he kind of looks at me and smiles. They're looking at each other and saying, “What is this supposed to be? Are you buying the magazine, mister?” And he said, “I'm Elvis Presley and this is for

you.” He didn’t ask them if they wanted it and they didn’t ask for it. He sort of dumped it on them and he never paid for it. But they didn’t recognize him at first.

Later on when we finally go on the train, and these train rides were long and boring, Elvis was always looking for something to occupy his mind. Besides sleeping, there was this four foot stuffed panda doll. So what does Elvis do like any other clean-cut American 21 year-old, he puts this four foot animal on his hip and walks down the center aisle of this train. He doesn’t say anything to anybody. He didn’t say anything to me or The Colonel but I get up with my camera and follow him and start taking pictures. He wound up at the water cooler. Does Elvis put the panda down? No. He still keeps it on his hips and instead of using two hands to take this triangular paper cup and pushing the button on the water cooler, he does all of this with one hand.

He doesn’t drop the cup on the floor and splatter all over everything. You could see he’s thinking, he’s thinking, he’s thinking. What is he thinking about? He doesn’t tell me. He drinks the water, throws the cup into the trash and turns around immediately and marches back down to the end of the train. But halfway down the corridor he turns abruptly and looks at these two girls and says, “Are you coming to my concert tonight?” They sort of sit there and say, “Concert? Who are you?” And he says, “I’m Elvis Presley.” And they say, “How do we know you’re Elvis Presley.” He says, “You see that photographer over there?” And he points his fingers at me and I’m standing on the seat shooting down. “You see him? Would he be taking my picture if I wasn’t Elvis Presley?” And that seemed to satisfy them and they continued their conversation. In the meantime I had what I wanted. That was the payoff. He did all of this in order to meet these two girls who were halfway up the aisle.

This was a transition period. Elvis knew he was gonna be famous but outside of Memphis people didn’t know he was going to be famous.

**RCM: Detail the story behind the remarkable series of photos of Elvis disembarking the train at the White Station train stop in White, Tennessee stop and walking home, perhaps one of the last vestiges of freedom he would have.**

**AW:** He didn’t want to disembark in Memphis and take a cab with all the guys to his home on Audubon Drive. He felt that his new home was closer to a stop called White. I had two cameras slung around my neck. The train stop was a suburb of Memphis called White. The only things he had tucked under his arm were the acetates from the RCA Records sessions. So Elvis gets off the train and is going down this grassy knoll towards the sidewalk. He was completely alone. The first person he meets is this black woman. I couldn’t hear the conversation because he was 60 to 70 yards away. She turned around and pointed in some direction, which meant 1034 Audubon Drive is that way. So Elvis passes her and the train is now moving again and he waved to us and said, “See ya later fellas” and he’s gone. All by himself.

**RCM: Your photos of Elvis at his home reveal the real Elvis.**

**AW:** 1034 Audubon Drive was a ranch style home and there was no fence around the property. There were about 50 people milling around, mostly young girls, young boys. It was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. I wandered up the driveway and I ring the doorbell and I’m let in. I introduce myself to Elvis’s mother, Gladys, and told her I was the photographer on the train with Elvis and I’m here to cover her son. She figured if I was with Elvis I was welcome to come in. His parents were glad to have Elvis home, he’d been away for a while.

Elvis was more relaxed because he was at home and was among his people. He didn’t have to worry about William Morris agents or Steve Allen. He’s down south and he’s got his Marlon Brando little cap on with the star and he’s gonna ride his motorcycle. That became his preoccupation. He’s focused now on the motorcycle. One of them holds it and one of them does this or that. Elvis tries his damndest to start the

bike and it won't turn over. So Dad comes out with his tool kit and starts fooling around with the carburetor and nothing helps. Elvis just gets all sweated up and the girls love it. This is all happening in the backyard beyond the pool.

The yard of one house and another house were not separated by fences. It was one huge sprawling lawn that connected all the houses. Now the girls love the fact that the bike didn't start. He's got that perplexed look on his face, which became one of my relatively iconic photographs where he's looking down. Everybody swears it's a posed picture but it isn't a posed picture. And he's thinking, what could cause the bike not to operate? Then somebody brings a can of gasoline and pours it in and sure enough it turns over. There was no gas in the tank, that's why that photograph is called "No Gas in the Tank." Now that he's got the motorcycle going, he waved his arm and told the girls, "Back off, I'm coming through."

So they back up about five or six steps and he revs his engine and drives up the lawn past the swimming pool. He comes through the carport and decides he's gonna go for a ride. He said, "Anybody wanna ride?" And *everybody* wanted a ride.

He took a few people for rides. Then I said to myself, "Why not me?" I'll get on the back of the bike, maybe I'll take some pictures of him and me riding through a Memphis neighborhood. I figured a Memphis block is no different from a New York City block. What did I know? When he came back the second time I asked, "Elvis, do you mind giving me a ride? We'll take some pictures on the way."

This is the story about the best pictures I never got and it taught me a lesson. The lesson was never go out on a momentary assignment, which you think might last five minutes without an extra roll of film in your pocket. I had a half of roll of film in my camera. I took my camera and off we went down the driveway onto the road past the various houses in the neighborhood.

I clicked off a few photos and then the roll was finished. Didn't know what I got. Then we ran out of gas. This time he coasted up into a little shopping area that was closed because of the holiday. Me, the worry wart said, "Elvis, what are we gonna do?" And he said, "Just hang loose, you'll see. Something will happen." Sure enough a car comes by with this woman and she recognized him and said, "Hello Elvis, can I help you?" he said, "We're out of gas" and she said, "Okay, I'll be right back" and comes back with a can of gas. So Elvis pours the can of gas into the tank. Now all of these pictures I could have gotten but I didn't have any film therefore it goes unrecorded. So what does Elvis do? He doesn't think about paying for the gas. He thinks about giving her a peck on the cheek and she's very happy with that kind of payment. Now we're gone for a lot longer than anybody expected. Who was there at the head of the driveway when we came back but his mom, Gladys. She said, "Are you all right son?" And he said, "I'm all right mom."

**RCM: You shot Elvis at the Russwood Park concert in Memphis. How was it a different experience**

**AW:** Elvis was already a star in the south. He had been on the Hank Snow Jamboree and he wound up as the closing act even though he started out as just one of the other acts on the bill. He was a regional star but he was not a national star. Because of television, there were six performances on *Stage Show*, two with Milton Berle, one with Steve Allen and then three with Ed Sullivan. That's 12 performances and he was a made man. He was a national figure by the following January because of television. When he was onstage at Russwood Stadium, because of the Steve Allen affair, after getting a small award for the

*Memphis Press-Scimitar* Milk Fund, he got up to the microphone and said, "Tonight folks you're gonna see what the *real* Elvis Presley is all about." That was a comment on what the Steve Allen Elvis Presley was all about. He was gyrating all over the stage and being himself.

**RCM: Why do you think you were able to capture the essence of Elvis more than any other photographer?**

**AW:** You have to be prepared. You have to know who you are. I was concerned with documenting Elvis as if I'd been around at the time of Christ. If I was living at the time of Julius Caesar or Napoleon I would have liked to have seen a good journalist with a camera follow these guys and give us a real non-heroic view of the person, not the hero. So I captured a few moments in Elvis's life at a point when he was young and I'm glad I did it. The other thing was I was shy and Elvis was basically shy except when he was onstage. He was a very inward kind of person. The pictures I took of Elvis sort of speak for themselves.

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