

## Fateful assignment: Images of the King made photographer's career

By **Bob Mehr**



PHOTO BY ALFRED WERTHEIMER

Going Home: Elvis on the Southern Railroad between Chattanooga and Memphis.

On March 10, 1956 Alfred Wertheimer took a call that would change his life.

Wertheimer was a struggling 26-year-old freelance photographer working in New York City. On the other end of the line was RCA Records publicity woman Ann Fulchino offering him a job: she wanted Wertheimer to come to CBS's Studio 50 the following week to cover the Dorsey Brothers television show.

"I told her, 'Oh, Tommy Dorsey is one of my big band heroes,'" recalls Wertheimer. "But she said, 'No, I don't want you to photograph Tommy Dorsey. I want you to photograph Elvis Presley.' After about a 15-second pause, I said: 'Elvis who?' I'd never heard of him."

Fifty-six years later, the world knows Presley intimately, thanks in part to Wertheimer's stunning photographs of the singer.

Wertheimer's images of the young Presley are featured in the traveling photo exhibit "Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer." The collection, which has been shown at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington and the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles, opens Saturday at Memphis' Pink Palace Museum. It will be on display through Oct. 14.

Born in 1929, Wertheimer was a German émigré who'd gone behind the camera during a stint in the U.S. Army. "I had changed my vocation in the Army from mortar base plate carrier to photographer," he says. "That was useful for my civilian life."



PHOTO BY ALFRED WERTHEIMER

After working as assistant to fashion photographer Tom Palumbo at Harper's Bazaar, he began freelancing. "I was more into the documentarian school of thinking," he says. "I was going to change the world with my photography. I could never do it with fashion."

He was scraping by, doing a variety of assignments, when he got a call from Fulchino wanting him to shoot Presley. The label had purchased the recording contract of the rockabilly singer from Sun Records the

Elvis Presley on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle at his home on Audubon Drive on July 4, 1956.



In the privacy of the narrow hallway under the fire stairs of the Mosque Theater, while other performers are on stage before 3,000 fans in the audience, Elvis is concentrating on his date for the day.



Going Home: Elvis on the Southern Railroad between Chattanooga and Memphis.

previous fall. Presley was just at the start of his meteoric rise in '56, and would be making his fourth appearance on the Dorsey Brothers program.

A week later, on St. Patrick's Day, Fulchino introduced Wertheimer to Elvis backstage at the show. Presley was deep in conference with a jewelry salesman, gazing at a new diamond-encrusted horseshoe ring he'd purchased.

Fulchino asked if Presley minded having a few photos taken. "Elvis sort of grunted, 'Yeah, sure, why not?'" Wertheimer recalls. "And he goes back to looking at his finger. I then become the fly on the wall."

Shooting Presley over a period of months in 1956, Wertheimer would follow him during a couple of TV show rehearsals and telecasts, at a concert in Richmond, Va., and a recording session at RCA Victor in New York. He would travel alongside Elvis on three long train rides into the South, spend an afternoon with the Presley family at their home, and shoot Elvis' historic July 4 concert at Memphis' Russwood Park.

Wertheimer managed to capture some of the most iconic and indelible images of Presley: Elvis on his motorcycle; alone at a piano; combing his hair; touching tongues with a girl backstage. Six decades later, Wertheimer's black-and-white images remain fresh, powerful and remarkably personal.

"At the time, I was trying to find a way of getting intimate photographs consistently," he says. "The conclusion I came up with was, if you can find people that were involved with something more important than having their picture taken, you're going to get good photographs.

"Photography is the outer reflection of what's going on inside. If you tell people, 'Could you look here,' or 'Could you look a little higher, look a little lower,' then they're waiting for instruction from the photographer and they're not thinking. I was willing to forego that and not get the absolute sure photograph in order to get something else."

He would shoot some 2,500 photos of Elvis over the course of eight days. Aside from a couple of images — one of Presley with his mother, Gladys, and another of him with a stuffed animal — the rest of the shots were not posed or set up by Wertheimer.

"(Elvis) was essentially the director of his own life. I didn't attempt to tell him what to do, how to act ... whatever he wanted to do was fine with me."

It's the naturalism of Wertheimer's work that gives the images their enduring appeal. This was an Elvis that the public would never really see again.

"For most of the rest of his life, they were always telling him what to do. He was either scripted as a character, controlled by a director or someone. There's very

little that's recorded of him that's spontaneous Elvis. That's maybe what has fascinated people about these pictures. They're finally getting a look at his own personality, his own ... expression."

After the sessions in '56, Wertheimer met up with Elvis again two years later, on the day he left at the Brooklyn Port of Embarkation as a soldier in the U.S. Army. "The last time I saw Elvis was on the 22nd of September of '58 as he was pulling out on ... the USS Randall with 6,000 other troops heading to Germany."

Over the next two decades Wertheimer continued his career as a photographer, shooting other singers like Nina Simone and documenting religious cults and figures in the same naturalist style. "But I didn't get a call for an Elvis Presley photograph for 19 years," Wertheimer says. "The day he died .... that's when the phones started ringing."

In the wake of Presley's passing, Wertheimer's work became an important visual document, a portal into the early period of his career.

Wertheimer, who'd been running a film equipment company, finally got into the Elvis business full time in the mid-1990s. He began selling prints of his famous photos, struck a licensing agreement with Elvis Presley Enterprises, and published the book "Elvis at 21" in 2006.

Wertheimer is currently working on a new volume of Elvis images for art publisher Taschen. The 400-page book will feature some 200 previously unpublished photos. He's also licensed seven of his images as part a signature line of T-shirts, including the image known as "The Kiss." The identity of woman with Presley in the photo, Barbara Gray, was discovered last year by Presley historian Alanna Nash. Wertheimer will be appearing with Gray in Memphis as part of an Elvis Week panel on Aug. 15.

These days, the 81-year-old Wertheimer says Presley remains the main focus of his life and work. He chuckles, thinking how it all might have been different if he'd missed the call from Fulchino that day so long ago.

"I do wonder about that. If I had been out, she probably would've called one of the other photographers that were on her short list," he says. "I'd have never met Elvis Presley and my whole life would've been different."

#### **'Elvis at 21: Photographs Alfred Wertheimer'**

The exhibit runs Saturday through Oct. 14 at the Memphis Pink Palace Museum, 3050 Central. Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Special Elvis Tribute Week hours: Aug. 10-15, open until 9 p.m. Admission: \$11.75 adult, \$11.25 senior (ages 60-plus), \$6.25 children (ages 3-12).

*© 2012 Go Memphis. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.*