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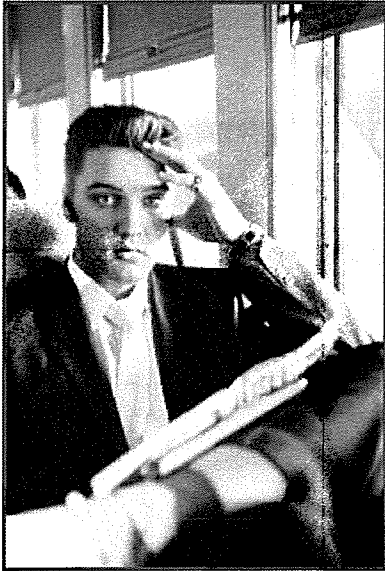
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## **National Portrait Gallery Features Photographs of American Musical Legend**

Images of Elvis: A Pop Icon in the Hallowed Halls?!

Posted on 22 October 2010 | By Amy Henderson



Alfred Wertheimer, Going Home (1956) Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Wash. D.C.

**F**rom October 23, 2010 to January 23, 2011, the National Portrait Gallery will host Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer, a collaborative exhibition developed by the National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, and Govinda Gallery, and made

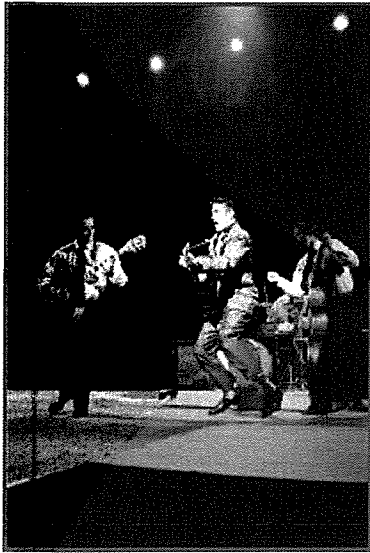
possible through the support of the History channel. The idea of images of a pop culture icon displayed in such hallowed halls may raise the eyebrows of those whose sense of the Portrait Gallery is of a museum dedicated to the “art of portraiture,” or as an august arena for the presentation of such notable figures as the presidents. But—just as he did when he electrified the nation in 1956—Elvis at 21 will inevitably alter the beat of everyday Gallery life.

In photographs taken by Alfred Wertheimer in 1956, Elvis at 21 documents the explosive rise of a 21-year-old singer named Elvis Presley. A young freelance photographer, Wertheimer was hired to take publicity shots of Presley, but then “tagged along” and was able to capture Elvis’s transit to superstardom. For this exhibition, Wertheimer took his negatives to pioneer printmaker David Adamson, and the resulting 56 large format pigment prints provide a stunning storyboard of fame. *fine arts magazine*



Alfred Wertheimer,  
Starburst (1956) Courtesy  
National Portrait Gallery,  
Wash. D.C.

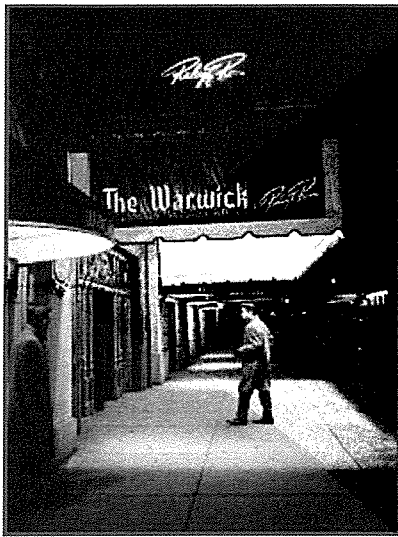
But—Elvis at the National Portrait Gallery?! Indeed! The Gallery is primarily a museum devoted to the personality of history, with a focus on those “who have had a significant impact on American life and culture” through “the art of portraiture.” Amidst this bipolar identity, the Gallery has managed to establish a reputable pop culture repertory with such major exhibitions as *Champions of American Sport* (1981), *On the Air: Pioneers of American Broadcasting* (1987), and *Red, Hot & Blue: A Smithsonian Salute to the American Musical* (1996). Located in the heart of the sports and entertainment district of the nation’s capital, the Gallery is working to spotlight its sports and entertainment collections: the recent *Americans Now* exhibition of contemporary popular culture stars has proved to be a magnet for visitors.



Alfred Wertheimer, *Jump*  
(1956) Courtesy National  
Portrait Gallery, Wash. D.C.

Focusing on a pop culture icon also allows us to consider the idea of “portrait” from a different perspective—that of “the image.” Elvis’s image fits well with the postwar intellectual framework established by Marshall McLuhan, in which “the image” becomes a cultural medium with a specifically-crafted “message.” As these photographs of Elvis illustrate, the idea of “the image” was a defining element in the rise of media-generated celebrity culture. In the late nineteenth century, the graphic revolution created a technology able to disseminate stories and illustrations of famous people in an ever-widening arc. The emergence of such mass media as recordings, motion pictures, magazines, radio, and ultimately television vastly expanded the audience for fame and celebrity. With the rise of modern celebrity, the selection of “the famous” became an election, only instead of a ballot box there was a box office, a corner newsstand, a recording industry, and a pop culture media that made celebrities part of everyday life.

In the mid-1950s, television was the new celebrity-generating medium, and Elvis—through several live performances in 1956 that launched him to stardom—broadcast a message of cultural transformation. The photographs in *Elvis at 21* depict an image of youth and newness, but also document the face of a personality who jangled the calm of “peace and prosperity.” To a culture of conformity, conspicuous consumption, and cars with fins, Elvis represented an intrusion as shocking as Sputnik would be a year later: he energized the emerging youth culture and helped create a new consumer market fueled by radio, recordings, and movies. His popularity also helped catalyze a revolution in the entertainment industry, paving the way for rhythm and blues, gospel, and rock into mainstream culture.



Alfred Wertheimer, Entering the Warwick (1956) Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Wash. D.C.

When the keepers-of-tradition began to understand the message of the Elvis image, red flags of warning sprouted across the landscape. Elvis was lumped with such other threatening new pop culture figures as James Dean—clearly, the image of leather-and-denim-clad “juvenile delinquents” clashed harshly with the gray-flannel suit generation. One cultural steward, popular television host Steve Allen, invited Elvis to appear on his variety show, but forced him to wear white-tie-and-tails and sing “Hound Dog” with... a hound dog.

Elvis’s rise to stardom happened in a single year—from January 1956 to January 1957—and reflected television’s emergence as a cultural denominator. These were years of enormous social change, a feeling well-captured by the photographs of Elvis’s 27-hour train ride from New York to Memphis. These images evoke a different America altogether in a journey that rolled through cities, small towns, and farmlands with “all deliberate speed.” Elvis is shown still remarkably alone, mixing unnoticed with everyone else on board, family and strangers, black and white.

With a cinematic luminosity, the photographs document a time when Elvis could sit alone at a drugstore lunch counter or wander unnoticed in mid-town Manhattan. But then things change, and he walks through the door to the rest of his life. What is remarkable is that Wertheimer was there. The exhibition’s final image is a brilliant moment of culmination: Elvis is onstage, saturated by a light that Wertheimer describes as a “starburst.” It is an epochal image—the literal flashpoint of fame.

by Amy Henderson, Co-curator, *Elvis at 21*

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Visit the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery at [www.npg.si.edu](http://www.npg.si.edu)

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