

ELVIS | AT 21

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALFRED WERTHEIMER

National Portrait Gallery
Learning resource

About the exhibition

Elvis at 21, Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer is a photographic exhibition capturing Elvis' rise to fame in the year 1956, before security and money built walls between him and his fans.

Photojournalist Alfred Wertheimer was hired by RCA Victor in 1956 to shoot promotional images of a recently signed 21-year-old recording artist, Elvis Presley. Wertheimer's instinct was to 'tag along' with the artist after the assignment and the resulting images provide us today with a candid look at Elvis before he exploded onto the scene and became one of the most exciting performers of his time. The 56 black and white digital pigment prints, produced by certified Tamarind master printer David Adamson, give Wertheimer's unique visual record a cinematic power that makes Elvis' road to fame palpable.

Elvis at 21, Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer was developed collaboratively by the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, and Govinda Gallery, and is sponsored by HISTORY™.

About the resource

This resource is a companion to the exhibition *Elvis at 21, Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer* and the associated website (portrait.gov.au/elvis).

The resource has connections with the Australian Curriculum and is designed primarily for year 10 teachers of English, history, music and visual arts. This resource includes an introductory essay, biographical detail and interview excerpts from Alfred Wertheimer and a timeline chronicling Elvis's activities in 1956 to provide context.

The resource focuses on twelve works presented in chronological order, selected from the exhibition to enrich students' understanding of Alfred Wertheimer's photographs. It promotes active learning by providing questions and activities before, during and after the visit to the exhibition at the Gallery or online. Activities and questions can be adapted to suit students' learning needs.

Curriculum links:

Visual Arts:

- Wertheimer's photographic practice in context
- Portraiture – audience, subject and artist relations
- Art making practice – examining viewpoints, meaning, technology, time and place, process, technique and medium

History:

- Comparing values and beliefs of society in the 1950s considering issues of rebellion, challenges to established ideas and national identity
- Popular culture and the impact of television and rock 'n' roll
- Major movements for human rights and freedom

English:

- Evaluating the photograph as a visual text – purpose, context, audience, perspective, stylistic effects and value systems
- Cultural stories and individuals
- Creative literary response to visual texts

Music:

- Connections between music, period, purpose and place
- Impacts of music on audience and culture in different contexts
- Role of the performer

National Portrait Gallery

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About the photographer

'Henri Cartier-Bresson was known for his decisive moments, that one instant when everything falls into place. But I wanted to be known for the moment before or after the decisive moment...'

Alfred Wertheimer *Elvis a King in the Making*

Soon after graduating from Cooper Union's school of art in 1951, Alfred Wertheimer began his career as a photojournalist, publishing his work in such popular magazines as *Life*, *Paris Match*, *Look*, and *Colliers*. When RCA Victor asked him to photograph the label's newest recording artist in 1956, Wertheimer turned the publicity assignment into a unique opportunity to document Elvis Presley. With the sensibility of a reporter and the imagination of a visual artist, Wertheimer observed his subject and environment as no other photographer had done before or after. He photographed Elvis again in 1958 after Elvis was drafted into the U.S. Army. Wertheimer's photographs are in the permanent collections of the Experience Music Project (Seattle, Washington) and the Folkwang Museum (Essen, Germany). Other subjects captured by his lens include Eleanor Roosevelt, Nina Simone, Dion and the Belmonts, Annette Funicello, Paul Anka, Rip Torn, Daddy Grace, Elizabeth Taylor, Leonard Bernstein, Rabbi Schneerson and the Hassidic Jews of Brooklyn, and the Regis DeBray trial. Moving on from the still image, Wertheimer became a documentary cinematographer working as one of the principal cameramen on the original film *Woodstock*. He also covered the 1960 presidential campaigns of John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. Alfred is aged 85 and is thinking of retiring soon when he is not so busy.

Jess Righthand from the National Portrait Gallery, Washington interviews Alfred Wertheimer

What do you find special about the photos you took at age 26 – so early in your career? All the images that I took are really of the authentic Elvis, who was directing his own life. That's what I think may be quite unique about the whole show. After all, in almost everything that Elvis did, starting with his early career, somebody was telling him what to do. Nobody really said to him: 'Elvis, just be yourself, and we'll tag along, and every once in a while we'll grab something that we think is interesting, and we won't ask you to do anything special for us, no posing, just go and live your life.' That's essentially what I did. Because not only was I shy, but he was shy also in a way, and I did not expect any more from him than to be himself.

What was your relationship with Elvis like? How do you think he allowed you to take so many photographs?

I think most of the time Elvis didn't even know I was taking photographs. See, I had practiced to become an available light photographer, because I did not use strobe or flash, except in rare occasions where it was absolutely pitch black. The other thing is that Elvis had a feeling, I think, that he knew he was going to become very famous, but nobody else did. In order to become famous, you have to have somebody recording your actions at the time when you're doing things. And what better way of doing that than to allow a photographer, who is very inconspicuous himself, and allow him to be close to you, so that when you do things, it's recorded for posterity. You were a young freelancer at the time you took these photos. Do you have any words of advice for those in a similar place in their lives who can only hope for a moment in their careers such as this?

You know, I've done quite a few assignments, but the one assignment that people still want to see more and more of is the Elvis material. And in a way, that is almost unpredictable. On the one hand, you have to do the best you can with every chance you get at an assignment. On the other hand, because the Colonel [Elvis' manager] was so uptight about allowing other media in and behind the scenes, my stuff took on much greater value than it really had a right to have. Most things of interest really happen behind closed doors. How do you get behind closed doors?

I'm not talking about being technically competent to handle the problem once you get behind these closed doors, but your first job is to get in. Then you can quietly stay out of the way. Don't kick the furniture over. Don't bump into any microphone stands if you're in a recording studio. And be curious.

If your pictures are too dull, generally it means that you aren't close enough, so get a little closer. But don't get so close that you become an annoyance. That's all the difference in being able to use a wider-angle lens and still fill the frame with information and get texture. Texture is the thing that gives a photograph life. I mean, without texture it's boring. It's flat. Texture of the clothing, texture of the metal, texture of the pavement, texture of the guitar, texture of the skin. All of these things add up to believability, realism of sorts. I was into realism.

Elvis Presley in 1956: The flashpoint of fame

In 1956, Elvis hip-swinged post war American culture out of complacency. Gradually at first, and then inexorably, he altered the beat of everyday life. The world changed. It was an era that embraced the idea of 'peace and prosperity', conspicuous consumption, cars with fins, and men in grey-flannelled suits. Most of all, it was an age of conformity, and Elvis's electrifying intrusion was as shocking as Sputnik would be a year later: he energised the emerging youth culture and helped create a new consumer market fuelled by radio, recordings, and movies. His enormous popularity also helped catalyse a revolution in the entertainment industry, paving the way for rhythm and blues, gospel, and rock into mainstream culture. Remarkably, his journey to fame happened within a year – January 1956 to January 1957 – and testified to the emerging importance of television as a cultural denominator. Elvis made his first live television appearance at 8 p.m. on January 28, 1956, on *The Dorsey Brothers Stage Show* broadcast from New York; this CBS program was produced by Jackie Gleason and existed mainly as a warm-up for Gleason's own hit show, *The Honeymooners*, which followed immediately. Virtually an unknown personality at this point, Elvis sang 'Shake Rattle & Roll' and 'I Got A Woman' and suddenly magic happened: it was reported that 'hundreds of girls began screaming' when he came onstage and sang. Two days later, Elvis made his first recordings for his new studio, RCA – a session which produced the hit 'Blue Suede Shoes'. He appeared on four more Dorsey shows in late winter and early spring. In the midst of these broadcasts in March, RCA noticed the incipient Elvis groundswell and hired Alfred Wertheimer to take publicity photographs of their new protégé. Luckily for history, Wertheimer chronicled the Elvis phenomenon over the next several months, and was there to capture his extraordinary transit to superstardom. The 'cool medium' of television became a key player in Elvis's heat-seeking stardom. His appearances on the Dorsey shows were followed in April and then in early June by live performances on *The Milton Berle Show*, where he propelled audience pandemonium by singing 'Hound Dog' and 'I Want You, I Need You, I Love You'. The frenzied reaction of the television studio audience not only fed his fame, but broadcast a 'way to behave'

that motivated crowd exhilaration as his fame mounted. By the time he ultimately made three appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (in September, October, and January) his audience numbered 60 million out of a total population of 169 million Americans. The press perked up, and contributed a new sobriquet to the cultural lexicon, 'Elvis the Pelvis'. America's keepers-of-tradition were also waking up: television critic John Crosby of *The New York Herald Tribune* described Elvis's performance on the Berle show as 'unspeakably untalented and vulgar'. By this point, Elvis was beginning to be lumped with such other new cultural icons as James Dean, and red flags of warning sprouted across the landscape: PTA's in particular cautioned parents about dangerous role models who fomented juvenile delinquency. Television's small screen continued to carry the sights and sounds of cultural transformation. Still in its youth, TV was live and in black and white – a perfect metaphor for Cold War America, where (as we learned from watching Westerns) the Good Guys were distinguished from the Bad because they wore white hats instead of black. On 1 July, Elvis appeared on *The Steve Allen Show*. Steve Allen was a popular host of this prime time TV variety show, and saw himself as a cultural steward: shocked – shocked! – by rock n' roll, he enjoyed mocking the lyrics of hit songs on his show. By July 1956, Elvis was fair game. Although Allen was worried about suggestive hip gyrations – this was live TV after all! – he felt he could keep control of his program if he had Elvis introduce his new single ('Hound Dog') while wearing top hat and tails and singing to a basset hound. Elvis took it all in stride and performed with great élan. Even the basset liked him. Before leaving New York, Elvis recorded 'Hound Dog' and 'Don't Be Cruel' at the RCA studio; he then embarked on a twenty-seven hour train journey home to Memphis. He was still remarkably alone. Traveling with a small entourage, he was unrecognised and able to mix unnoticed with everyone else on board, family and strangers, black and white. The train ride was redolent of a different America altogether, a passage unimaginable in today's high octane celebrity world. It was a journey rolling through cities, small towns, and farmland with 'all deliberate speed', and it suspended Elvis in time and place. Traveling home, he listened to the records he had just cut, read magazines, and looked out the window, waiting. When the train stopped to



Starburst, Memphis, Tennessee, July 4, 1956
© Alfred Wertheimer. All rights reserved.

let him off near his home, he walked away and waved back. Whether he realised it or not, it was a farewell gesture to the world that had brought him this far. The Memphis visit began as a respite, with Elvis visiting his parents and, like one of his own heroes, Marlon Brando, riding around on his motorcycle outfitted like Brando in *The Wild One* (1954). But then he went to work, and this chapter of his life was over. With a cinematic luminosity, photographer Alfred Wertheimer had chronicled a time when Elvis could sit alone at a drugstore lunch counter, to the beginning of the rest of his life, when he would never again be able to stroll unnoticed down any street in the world. The concert at Russwood Park in Memphis marked this transformation: Elvis now had to be escorted from his limousine into the stadium by a police phalanx that separated him from his fans. Once onstage, the air exploded, and at one point, as light sprayed around Elvis, Wertheimer captured a veritable 'starburst' – the flashpoint of fame.

Amy Henderson
Historian, National Portrait Gallery,
Washington

Timeline of Elvis, 1956

(Red = Alfred photographs Elvis)

This timeline was compiled by The Grammy Museum., Los Angeles.

January 8 Elvis Presley turns 21.

January 10 Elvis records 'Heartbreak Hotel' and 'I Got a Woman' in Nashville for RCA, his new record company.

January 28 Elvis performs on *Stage Show* in New York City. The television variety show is hosted by big band leaders, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey.

January 30 Elvis records four songs at RCA's studio in New York, including a cover version of Carl Perkins' 'Blue Suede Shoes'.

February 3 Elvis records Big Joe Turner's 'Shake, Rattle, and Roll' and Lloyd Price's 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy' at the RCA studios in New York.

February 4 Elvis performs for a second time on *Stage Show* in New York. He sings Little Richard's 'Tutti Frutti' and 'Baby Let's Play House', a song he recorded for Sam Phillips and Sun Records.

February 11 Elvis performs for a third time on *Stage Show*. He sings 'Heartbreak Hotel' and 'Blue Suede Shoes'.

February 18 Elvis performs for the fourth time on *Stage Show*. He again sings 'Tutti Frutti' along with a ballad, 'I Was the One'.

February 23 In the midst of a three week tour of the South, Elvis collapses in Jacksonville, Florida. He is taken to the hospital. Doctors declare that Elvis is exhausted and tell him to slow down.

February 25 Elvis's single, 'I Forgot to Remember to Forget' reaches number one on the *Billboard* pop charts after spending 24 weeks on the country-and-western charts.

March 17 Elvis is back on *Stage Show* in New York. He performs 'Heartbreak Hotel' and 'Blue Suede Shoes'. Ann Fulchino, RCA offers Alfred Wertheimer an assignment to take photos of Elvis at the rehearsal and telecast on Elvis' fifth *Stage Show* to release to newspapers: headshots, Elvis at the microphone, Elvis with fans and celebrities. By the time he left Elvis at the Warwick hotel late that night he had taken over 400 photos including casual and intimate off stage moments, before, during and after the live telecast.

March 24 Elvis performs yet again on *Stage Show*. He covers a version of the Drifters' 'Money Honey' and 'Heartbreak Hotel'.

March 26-28 In Los Angeles, Elvis does a screen test for Hal Wallis at Paramount 33Studios. He performs two scenes from *The Rainmaker*.

March 31 Elvis makes his last appearance on the *Louisiana Hayride* in Shreveport, Louisiana. The *Hayride* is one of the South's most prestigious music shows and did much to make Elvis a star in the South.

April 3 Elvis performs on *The Milton Berle Show* which is broadcast in San Diego from the deck of a navy ship.

April 11 *Variety* reports that 'Heartbreak Hotel' has sold million copies, giving Elvis his first gold record.

April 23 Elvis begins a two week engagement at the New Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas. *Variety* would review the show and conclude 'for teenagers he's a whiz; for the average Vegas spender, he's a fizz'.

May 5 Elvis' first album, *Elvis Presley*, reaches number one on *Billboard's* album chart.

June 5 In Los Angeles, Elvis performs *The Milton Berle Show* for a second time. He performs 'I Want You, I Need You, I Love You' and 'Hound Dog' with 'all the bumps and grinds of a stripper'.

June 29 In New York, Elvis rehearses for *The Steve Allen Show* and meets up with photographer Alfred Wertheimer, who photographed him on his fifth *Stage Show* appearance. Wertheimer will spend the next week with Elvis and shoot his historic photographs.

June 30 Elvis performs at the Mosque Theatre, Richmond.

July 1 Wearing a tuxedo, Elvis performs on *The Steve Allen Show* and performs 'Hound Dog' to a basset hound.

July 2 Elvis records 'Hound Dog' and 'Don't Be Cruel' at the RCA studios in New York.

July 3 Arrives at Penn station to begin the 27 hour train journey home from New York to Memphis.

July 4 Elvis performs at Russwood Park, Memphis, Tennessee. This is a benefit concert with many performers for the Cynthia Milk Fund of the Memphis Press-Scimitar and the Variety Club's home for Convalescent Children.

August 20 In Los Angeles, Elvis begins work on his first movie, *The Reno Brothers*, later re-named, *Love Me Tender*.

September 9 Elvis appears for the first on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, one of television's highest rated variety shows. His performance is filmed in Los Angeles at the CBS Studios.

September 26 Elvis performs in his hometown of Tupelo, Mississippi at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show, where, at ten years old, he did his very first public performance.

October 11 Elvis performs for more than 26,000 fans at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas.

October 24 *Variety* proclaims 'Elvis a Millionaire in One Year'.

October 28 Elvis performs a second time on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, singing four songs: 'Don't Be Cruel', 'Love Me', 'Love Me Tender', and 'Hound Dog'.

October 30 RCA announces that Elvis, thus far in 1956, has sold over ten million singles.

November 15 Elvis's first film, *Love Me Tender*, opens nation-wide.

December 4 While back home in Memphis, Elvis visits Sam Phillips' Sun recording studio where he got his start and jams with Sun recording artists Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis. Johnny Cash joined them and a photo is taken. The rock 'n' rollers are tabbed 'the million dollar quartet'.

December 25 Elvis spends Christmas in Memphis with his family and reflects on his historic year.



Reading fan letters, March 17, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

Why do you think Alfred Wertheimer chose this point of view to take this photograph? What impact does it have?

Alfred printed photos from this night, March 17, 1956 for Ann Fulchino at RCA Victor. 'Of course, I knew she wasn't going to use the images that interested me, like the ones of Elvis lying asleep on his fan mail...those weren't publicity shots in those days.' Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*, p 22. What are publicity shots of musicians like in 2013 compared to in the 1950s? Why do you think Alfred Wertheimer found this photograph to be interesting? Do you think it is interesting? Why? Why not?

By the time we got back to the hotel, I was really tired. It had been a long day, and Elvis was pretty tired as well. A box full of fan mail was left for him on the couch, so he flopped down and threw his feet up. Taking a fistful of letters, he began opening and seriously reading them. Some of them were six or seven pages long. Looking at him on the couch, I thought, 'What do I photograph now?' this was a normal part of his life. This was his reality, not a fashion shoot where you tried to capture fantasy on film. Once Elvis finished reading, he tore each letter up into little shreds and put them on the coffee table. 'Why are you doing that, Elvis?' 'I'm not going to carry them with me. I've read them and seen what's in them. It's nobody else's business.'

Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*



'Grilled Cheese 20 cents', June 30, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

What evidence can you find in this photograph to determine the time period in which it was taken? Do you consider this photograph to be a portrait? Why? Why not?

I found Elvis sitting at the counter inside the luncheonette with some soup and crackers, a cup of coffee, and (of course) a young woman next to him...He had with him the script for *The Steve Allen Show* featuring Tumbleweed Presley. Flipping through some of the pages, he was trying to impress this young lady whose name I forgot to get. But she remained cool, not wanting to look too impressed. Elvis continued to try and loosen her up with conversation. At one point, he came in close, within three inches of her face, and just shouted, 'Ahhh!'

Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*



A little girl breaks series, July 1, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

What narrative is created in this photographic sequence? What emotions have been captured? Have you felt strong emotions like this towards any musician or celebrity? If so, how have you expressed it?

As Elvis, Tom Diskin, Junior, and I got out of the cab in midtown Manhattan, we were greeted by a girl in a white dress and her father. Her father had brought her into the city from Long Island. A devoted Elvis fan, she was elated when he arrived. All dressed in white as if she were going to a prom or wedding, she had waited for quite some time. Elvis took her hand in his and I took some pictures. Holding her hand tightly, Elvis looked into her eyes and listened to her story. Her father stood a few feet away...he told her some beautiful things that she wanted to hear. Then he said, 'I've got to go now, I have rehearsal,' and disappeared into the Hudson Theatre. Everyone else went in but I kept my camera on her. I continued shooting as she broke down and started to cry. There was no one else outside the theatre. Later on, at the end of this show, about a hundred girls showed up and had to be held back by metal gates and cops. But this was just one girl having one of the most special moments of her life.

Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*



Steve Allen Show, July 1, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

Think of five words to describe this photograph. What do you think this photograph captures? Describe how the two subjects are interacting with each other.

In the final performance, Elvis would sing to a hound dog wearing a little black top hat and sitting on a pedestal. If Elvis jumped around too much, the dog would jump off the pedestal, and you couldn't have that. Not only was Elvis being put in a tux, but Steve had devised ways to contain him and keep the show clean. Elvis didn't like the idea of singing to a hound dog but had enough good humour to go along with it since he was a guest on Steve Allen's show. Moreover, Elvis was a twenty-one-year-old singer being introduced to the American public. He didn't have much weight to throw around...yet. Steve was a bit nervous because this was his second Sunday broadcast. He had just gotten this spot for a family show opposite Ed Sullivan, who owned Sunday night television. Running up against Sullivan was like David challenging Goliath. The only thing Steve had going for him was Elvis Presley, but that also came with a risk. Several weeks earlier, Milton Berle had aired that controversial performance, so Steve had to be careful and control how Elvis would be presented on Sunday night. He couldn't have Elvis running away with his show by doing anything that would cause negative reaction that Milton's did. Steve was going to introduce America to the 'new' Elvis Presley. There would be no 'disciple of the devil' on The Steve Allen show...to prove this was a new Elvis Presley for family audiences, Steve pulled out this scroll and, opening it up, announced that thousands of people had signed this petition to forgive Elvis, or something like that.
Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*



Reviewing playback, July 2, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

How would you describe the emotional content that has been captured in this photograph?
Alfred Wertheimer's objective at this recording session was 'to get material for use on an album cover or fan magazines.'
In your opinion would this photograph make a successful album cover?
What song by Elvis would it best suit?
'Elvis, how do you feel about that one?'
'Steve let's try it just one more time.'
'Okay but remember we've got two more to record.'
That day, three songs, 'Hound Dog,' 'Don't Be Cruel,' and 'Any Way You Want Me,' were recorded. The first two became Elvis's third and fourth gold records, respectively.
Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*



Separate but equal, July 3, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

What do you think Alfred Wertheimer's intention was in taking this photo? Do you think anyone is aware their photograph is being taken? Why? Why not?
What do you think the title means?
What does this photograph reveal about human rights in America in the 1950s?

At the lunch counter, he started chatting up the waitress who took his order. A big container for pies sat on the counter. In the background was a slightly worn Coca Cola machine. With the Coke and apple pie, the tableau had a feeling of Americana to it.
Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*

While waiting for a train to take him from Chattanooga to Memphis, a trip of some 400 miles, Elvis sits at the lunch counter to have some breakfast. The woman standing had ordered a sandwich for which she was waiting, but was not able to sit at the counter by law. Chattanooga, TN Railroad Station, July 4, 1956.



With former high school sweetheart, July 4, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

What do you think this photograph conveys about the subjects relationship? Consider where each person's gaze is directed. What does this reveal about what they are thinking? Compare each subject's clothing, facial expression and pose. What do they express?

Elvis came out of the room shirtless, just wearing his pants and a pair of socks. In the corner, underneath a painted copy of an Elvis photograph that his mother liked so much was a console with a record player. He walked up to it, put on one of the acetate disks and flopped down in a stuffed chair near the door. Barbara sat close to the wall, next to the record player. He wanted her to hear it, but he also was listening just as intently as he had on the train coming down. They sat there quietly, focusing on the music. When all the discs had been played, Elvis looked up and she told him how nice the songs were. Then he tried to kiss her, but he had his shirt off and she seemed quite prim. Perhaps she didn't think kissing like that was proper. Besides, Grandma was in the room.
Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*



On motorcycle, July 4, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

Consider the composition. Why do you think Alfred Wertheimer chose to shoot this photograph from this angle? What is the focal point? How is Elvis presented to us as viewers? What attitude is he projecting and how?

Elvis was changing into what I called his Marlon Brando outfit. He wanted to go out for a ride on his motorcycle while there was still daylight...girls dressed in their Sunday best were gathered in the carport area, watching as Elvis went down to a shed where he stored his Harley...Elvis got on the motorcycle but it wouldn't turn over...while the bike was being looked at, Elvis signed a few autographs on the gas tank for the girls. Then it occurred to him. He unscrewed the cap and found that there was no gas in the tank. 'Hey, fellas. Somebody get me some gas.'

Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*



Starburst, July 4, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

Imagine this photograph was in colour. How would this change the effect? Alfred Wertheimer said of this concert, 'I wanted to capture the feeling of this place' What do you feel looking at this photograph? How do you imagine it would feel to be a member of the audience at this concert?

Although flashbulbs were going off constantly during the performance, I knew they wouldn't affect my still shots. Except for one. Someone in the audience directly in line with Elvis was taking pictures, probably using a Kodak Brownie Box camera with a flash gun attached. When I developed the film I discovered a shot of Elvis with a magnificent spray of light in front of him. Not strong enough to reach the stage, the flash in the audience highlighted the backs of about thirty rows of heads as well. That random flash was in perfect sync with my shutter openings as I took the picture of Elvis performing. When I saw that photograph, it represented for me this entire experience and was better than anything I had done previously or would do later. Instead of ruining the frame, this unexpected lucky moment gave me 'Starburst.'
Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*



The Kiss, June 30, 1956
Alfred Wertheimer, digital pigment print

What does Alfred Wertheimer mean when he calls himself a voyeur in taking this photograph?

What effect does the lighting have in this photograph?

There was a very intimate feeling about the situation, as if they were about to kiss each other. How could I get in close without offending him? There was still much more of the day left and I didn't want him to get angry and say, 'Beat it!' I was a voyeur in a very dimly lit scene of two lovers almost in silhouette. In order to capture it on film, I had to bring the exposures down to one-half, maybe one-fifth of a second and click a few shots with both my wide-angle lens and my medium telephoto lens from about twenty feet away. I had to get a bit closer...with my maintenance man voice, I grumbled, 'Excuse me, please - coming through.' Squeezing past them, I positioned myself on the other side with the window behind me at a slightly lower landing. At last, I had a much better view and front lighting. They were so involved with each other that they didn't even notice all this movement.

Alfred Wertheimer, *Elvis a King in the Making*

Before the visit

History

- Research other photographs by Alfred Wertheimer of Elvis by visiting the National Portrait Gallery's website (portrait.gov.au/elvis). Choose 5 works and place them in chronological order. What evidence do you see for what society was like in the 1950s?
- Research and analyse one of the concepts of human rights, popular culture, national identity, conservatism and consumerism as it relates to 1950s in America.
- Interview someone about their experiences of living in Australia in 1956 with a focus on the impacts of technology and music.

English

- Imagine you are a reporter interviewing Elvis in 1956 on television. List ten questions you would ask him. Try to create the answers you think Elvis might give.
- Select a photograph from the exhibition and write a creative response. It may be a poem, newspaper article, short story, screen play or advertisement in a magazine.
- Choose two photographs to illustrate a magazine article titled 'Elvis is a disciple of the devil' or 'Elvis, the King forever'. Write captions for the photographs, considering emotive language to persuade audiences to agree with your views.

Visual Arts

- Research other photographers of musicians like William 'Popsie' Randolph, Robert William Dye, Loomis Dean, Angus McBean, Jerry Yulsman and Philippe Halsman working in America during this time. Compare and contrast their approaches to Alfred Wertheimer's images
- Visit the websites of the Portrait Gallery and Wertheimer's (alfredwertheimer.com). Conduct a visual analysis of two works.
- What do you think makes an effective black and white photograph?

Music

- Select three songs Elvis released in 1956. To what extent are the song lyrics still relevant for society today?
- Search online for videos of Elvis performing live. What elements of his performance have an impact on the audience? Consider his lyrics, stylistic devices and stage presence.
- Research the effect Elvis had on musicians from 1956 onwards. Find ten quotes from musicians talking about Elvis and the impact he had on music and society.

In the Gallery

History

- Select a portrait in the exhibition. What questions would you ask the subject?
- Use the photographs as resources to examine the different attitudes towards Elvis. Describe the audience and their different perspectives.
- How reliable and useful are these photographs in gaining an accurate understanding of society in the 1950s? What questions should you be considering when viewing them?

English

- Select a photograph that you find compelling and interpret what you think is happening. Write your interpretation in 100 – 150 words for a wall label in the exhibition.
- As a group move around to different photographs in the exhibition and one by one share your initial response with the group.
- Select two or more works that you identify as having connections between them. Write a narrative inspired by the sequence of photographs including what you imagine happened before and after the photographs were taken.

Visual Arts

- What do you consider to be the most successful portrait of Elvis in the exhibition and why? How do you measure this? With your peers devise a set of criteria to judge a 'successful' black and white photographic portrait.
- Compare and contrast two portraits of Elvis, one posed and one candid. Where have you seen other photographs of Elvis? Is he shown in a different way? How?
- Analyse one of the photographs focusing on compositional elements.

Music

- Look at all the photographs in the exhibition. What roles and responsibilities did performers like Elvis have to their audience during this time period?
- Imagine yourself within one of the photographs. How does it feel to be Elvis? What do you think he is thinking and feeling?
- Are there any photographs you believe project a sense of sound and music? If so, how has this been captured and conveyed?

After the visit

History

- Research the Civil Rights Movement in America. Create a timeline of significant events in relation to this issue in 1956.
- Design a poster on the computer using a combination of graphics and text protesting against racial segregation, utilizing a 1950s design style.
- Put together a timeline, tracking the development of TV broadcasting in America and Australia. What impacts did TV have on society in the 1950s?

English

- Write Elvis a letter from the perspective of a teenager obsessed with Elvis or a concerned parent who thinks Elvis's music is a bad influence on their children.
- View one of Elvis's movies from the 1950s. What impact does the moving image have in representing Elvis compared to the photographs you viewed?
- Write an alternative life story for Elvis beyond 1956 and deliver as a digital presentation using text and images.

Visual Arts

- Create a self-portrait as a musician in the 1950s in response to the photographs you have viewed.
- Write a review of the exhibition for your school newsletter or online blog.
- Choose a contemporary celebrity music photographer and compare their style, approach and process with Alfred Wertheimer's photographs.

Music

- Make a short documentary (e.g. a PowerPoint presentation slideshow) on Elvis's music and the impact it had on society in a global context.
- Research how Elvis's music influenced other musicians of the time and in the future. Who took inspiration from him? Is it evident in their music? Attitude? Performance?
- Select a work and write a story about what you think is occurring in the photograph. Use this story on which to base a musical composition.

More about Elvis

Elvis 1956: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer, Welcome Books, 2009. Exhibition catalogue.

Echoes of Elvis: The Cultural Legacy of Elvis Presley, Warren Perry, Smithsonian Scholarly Press Washington, 2012.

Examines how Elvis's life, widespread fame, and legend fit into the greater framework of American culture and beyond.

The Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s, Pete Daniel, The University of North Carolina Press for Smithsonian National Museum of American History, 2000.

Written by National Museum of American History curator emeritus Pete Daniel, the sections pertaining to Elvis were important in providing regional and popular art context to the exhibition's story.

Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley, Peter Guralnick. Little Brown, 1994. Unrivaled account of Elvis as he walks the path between heaven and nature in an America that was wide open, when anything was possible, not the white washed golden calf but the incendiary musical firebrand loner who conquered the western world, he steps from the pages, you can feel him breathe, this book cancels out all others. – Bob Dylan

Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley, Peter Guralnick. Little Brown, 1999. Peter Guralnick's two-volume life of Elvis Aron Presley, of which *Careless Love* is the second instalment...must be ranked among the most ambitious and crucial undertakings yet devoted to a major American figure of the second half of the twentieth century. – *New York Times* Book Review

National Portrait Gallery exhibition website:
www.portrait.gov.au/elvis
Alfred Wertheimer's website:
www.alfredwertheimer.com/

Youtube videos

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yiu2dR-fBQc>

Warren Perry, co-curator of *Elvis at 21, Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer*, interviews Alfred Wertheimer.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqX3p_Dz2ro

Chris Murray, co-curator of *Elvis at 21, Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer* talks about the 'real' Elvis Presley and why he's still remembered today.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2MuH6nhZMA>

Elvis performs to a basset hound dog on *The Steve Allen Show*, July 1, 1956. Described by Elvis as 'the most ridiculous performance of my entire career.'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJnVQDAgrHA>

Elvis sings Hound Dog on the *Milton Berle Show*, June 5, 1956, driving audience wild, and had the press and some viewers appalled. It is one of his most controversial performances.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Xyh38-RtKg>

Elvis interview by Ray Green, May 16, 1956 in Little Rock, Arkansas at the Robinson Memorial Auditorium.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owM5coQD5Vo&list=RD8Xyh38-RtKg>

Interview with Elvis Presley, August 6 1956, conducted by Paul Wilder in Lakeland Florida. At the Pol theatre where Elvis did three shows.