“Elvis who?”

Elvis Presley prepares to wow the audience during a dress rehearsal for the Dorsey Brothers’ Stage Show at CBS Studio 50 in 1956.

... was photographer Alfred Wertheimer’s response when, in early 1956, an RCA Victor publicist asked him to shoot an up-and-coming crooner from Memphis. Little did Wertheimer know that this would be the job of his life: just 21 years old, Elvis Presley was—as we now know—about to become a legend. Extraordinary in its intimacy and unparalleled in its scope, Wertheimer’s Elvis project—nearly 3,000 photographs—immortalized a young man in the very process of making history.
The making of Elvis, behind the scenes
Recollections by Alfred Wertheimer

The year was 1956, and I was working as a freelance photographer in New York City when RCA Victor publicist Anne Fulchino hired me to shoot a newly signed singer by the name of Elvis Presley. I remarked, “Elvis who?” That was one of the last times anyone had to ask that question again. The 21-year-old singer shot to stardom shortly after I photographed him that Saturday night, March 17, on Stage Show hosted by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. Once I stumbled into that assignment and met Elvis, I felt that this guy had something that was unique, and had an interesting story that had to be told. So I followed him on the road and everywhere else for two weeks, taking nearly 3,000 photographs of the singer who would later be known to the world as the King of Rock and Roll.

Most of the time, Elvis never even knew I was taking his picture. He was laser-focused on whatever he did, so I would wait until he was engaged—and he was always immersed in being Elvis—whether rehearsing, flirting with women, combing his hair, or buying a ring. . . . Elvis gave me complete access to his life—I would even follow him into the bathroom. My feeling was that the closer I could come to being a fly on the wall and still produce high-quality work, I didn’t necessarily have to worry about what photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson called the “decisive moment.” I wanted to be an unobtrusive observer—like a good psychiatrist with a camera. You will find that when people are intensely involved in something that’s important to them, they’re pretty much oblivious of the camera. That’s when you get your best pictures, because your subjects are not hamming it up. If you can get in close and frame it properly with the available light and operate at slow shutter speeds—and manage not to trip over your own feet—you will get, what I find to be, very interesting photographs.

This iconic shot of Elvis kneeling at the Mosque in Richmond, Virginia (June 30, 1956), is one of two prints available with an art edition of the book.
“I wanted to be an unobtrusive observer—like a good psychiatrist with a camera...”
“Alfred Wertheimer got great pictures. Like Elvis, by embracing spontaneity, by prizing feeling over mere technique... the result is work that can stand gloriously on its own, unaffected by the eddying tides of fashion or the shifting sands of time.”!—Peter Guralnick

Above: Elvis in full cowboy regalia working on his trademark sneer during a performance on The Steve Allen Show in New York City.

Left: Wertheimer captured this very heated kiss backstage at the Mosque Theater. The identity of the woman, Barbara Gray, remained unknown until she came forward in 2011, 55 years after the photo was taken. This image is one of two prints available with an art edition of this book.

“Before Elvis there was nothing”

— said John Lennon. My God, yes! What was it like before there was Elvis? It was as dull as a church service on the radio.

— Franz Josef Wagner, chief columnist of the German tabloid BILD

Opposite: The deep eyes and luscious lips that millions of women screamed for.

Below: “May I take your order?” Elvis prepares to turn on the charm with an unsuspecting waitress at the Hotel Jefferson in Richmond, Virginia.
This edition brings together Alfred Wertheimer's most remarkable Elvis shots from 1956, along with a selection from his historic pictures of the star in 1958 as he was being shipped off to an army base in Germany.

For this collector's edition, TASCHEN could think of no better collaborator to join us in celebrating Mr. Wertheimer's photographs than Hatch Show Print, which created many of Elvis's early show posters in the 1950s. Printed on cloth, the cover of this XL edition features a photograph from Elvis's legendary RCA Victor Studio 1 recording session. The book comes in a clamshell box covered in a monoprint designed by Jim Sherraden of Hatch, which also created original poster art used throughout the book.