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# "Elvis at 21" Photo Exhibit at Boca Museum Shows the King Still Has the Power

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By **Michael Mills** Thursday, May 6 2010

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When I first heard that the [Boca Raton Museum of Art](#) was bringing in an exhibition of photographs of [Elvis Presley](#), my heart sank a little. Like the [Grand Canyon](#) or [Niagara Falls](#), hadn't Elvis been looked at and photographed until there was nothing left to see?

But as "Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer" makes clear, Elvis — like the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls — remains a force of nature. More than three decades after he was found comatose on his bathroom floor, the King still has the power to hold the popular imagination in ways few have before or after.

Consider a few tidbits about the posthumous Presley. An estimated 80,000 people lined the funeral route to the cemetery where he was buried on August 17, 1977. During the next four years, he had half a dozen singles released that made it into the top 10, with later reissues of some of his songs regularly climbing the charts. In 2002, an extended remix of his "A Little Less Conversation" was used in a [Nike](#) ad campaign and went on to top the charts all over the world. His famous Memphis estate, [Graceland](#), is both a National Historic Landmark and, with more than half a million annual visitors, the second-most-visited home in the country, surpassed only by the [White House](#). As recently as last year, the late singer was fourth among the top moneymaking deceased celebrities. He has an active official website.

As we know all too well, though, there was a dark side to this all-American success story. Elvis' life followed a now-too-familiar storyline: childhood trauma (stillborn twin brother, family poverty, briefly incarcerated father), marital discord, increasing health problems, and ultimately the drug addiction that contributed to his sordid demise. Seems America has gotten used to placing stars on pedestals, only to watch with twisted fascination as they take a tumble.



Intimate photos solidify Elvis' rep as a hunk o' burnin' love.



## Details

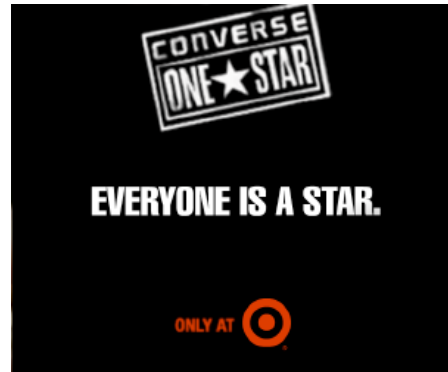
"Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer," on display through June 13 at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, 501 Plaza Real, Mizner Park, Boca Raton; call 561-392-2500, or [click here](#).

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It is all the more amazing, then, that "Elvis at 21" wipes clean the slate and takes us back to a brief period in 1956 when Elvis, just two years into his career, was poised to take both the country and the world by storm. [Alfred Wertheimer](#) was a young New York-based freelance photographer who had never even heard of Elvis when he was hired by RCA Victor to photograph the singer, and he was given the kind of access photographers only dream of today.

Wertheimer was with Elvis on two occasions — in March 1956, during a trip to New York to appear on TV on the Dorsey Brothers' *Stage Show*, and in late June and early July of the same year, before, during, and after another New York jaunt, this time to go on *The Steve Allen Show*. But the 56 black-and-white shots in the exhibition (there are more in the catalog) suggest that his camera was always at the ready.

Onstage, offstage, backstage... he seemed always to be there to capture the moment. One panel of the abundant, but welcome, wall text quotes Wertheimer: "[Henri Cartier-Bresson](#) was known for photographing the decisive moment, that moment when everything falls into place. But I wanted to be known for the moments before or after the decisive moment."

The photographer is being modest. He was sometimes able to catch not only the moments before and after the decisive moment, but the moment itself as well. Take the justly famous image of Elvis kissing a young woman he apparently hooked up with in a [Richmond](#) hotel's diner.

There are four shots, from three different angles, of the moments before and/or after the kiss. Then there is [The Kiss](#): Elvis embraces the woman, who leans against a railing, and their extended tongues graze each other ever so lightly. The moment is so shockingly tender and intimate you *almost* want to look away, embarrassed at having intruded upon it.

The show brims with such privileged moments. Elvis sits alone at an upright piano in an empty rehearsal hall. Elvis commands a New York studio full of musicians gathered to record "Hound Dog" and "Don't Be Cruel," which went on to make history as the first "A" and "B" sides of the same record to go to number one. Elvis rides in a train car with a little record player on his lap, lost in thought. Back home in Memphis, a shirtless and shoeless Elvis lounges across the room from his distracted-looking girlfriend.

There are portraits of Elvis with family, including his beloved mother, Gladys, and portraits of Elvis with fans. A few shots show him performing. One highly theatrical picture presents him posed on a [Harley-Davidson](#) à la [Marlon Brando](#) in *The Wild One*, one of the singer's acknowledged influences (although his movie career later might belie that).

Like all photographs of tragic figures early in their lives, these supercharged images have an eerie poignancy, because we know how the story ends. These are stark evocations of the charmed youthful beauty and innocence of someone who grew old too quickly and ended, badly and sadly, well before his time.

Inevitably, these photographs remind us of our icons' mortality as well as our own. "Elvis at 21" invites us to rejoice in a life even as we lament its loss.

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

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