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New Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Shows Elvis before He Was “The King of Rock ’n’ Roll”

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 instincts to “tag along” with the artist after the assignment and the resulting images provide us today with a look at Elvis before he exploded onto the scene and became one of the most exciting performers of his time. “Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer,” a new Smithsonian traveling exhibition, presents 56 of these striking images and will debut at The Grammy Museum in Los Angeles Jan. 8, 2009, Elvis’s 75th birthday.

Developed collaboratively by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery and the Govinda Gallery, “Elvis at 21” will be on view at The Grammy Museum through March 28, 2010. Following its showing in Los Angeles, the exhibition will travel to museums around the country through 2013. “Elvis at 21” is sponsored nationally by the History channel.

Wertheimer had unparalleled access and documented Elvis on the road, backstage, in concert, in the recording studio and at home in Memphis, Tenn. “Colonel” Tom Parker, Elvis’ manager, restricted contact just a short time later. The photographs document a remarkable time when Elvis could sit alone at a drugstore lunch counter.

“Henri Cartier-Bresson was known for photographing what he called the ‘decisive moment,’ that moment when everything falls into place,” said Wertheimer. “But I was more interested in the moments before or after the decisive moment.”

Wertheimer was up close to capture a flirtatious encounter with a young woman backstage in Richmond, Va. He was in the New York City recording studio on the historic day Elvis recorded “Don’t Be Cruel” and “Hound Dog.” Both songs hit No. 1 on the charts, the first and only time a single record would achieve this distinction.

Wertheimer also joined Elvis after the recording session as he traveled home to Memphis by train. One image shows Elvis as just part of the crowd surrounding a lunch vendor on a train platform during a brief stop on the 27-hour trip. The anonymity he had during this stop was short-lived; the trip followed a busy few months when Elvis appeared on the television shows “Stage Show,” “The Milton Berle Show” and “The Steve Allen Show.” The photographs of a concert in Russwood Park on his return to Memphis show a young man who now had to have a police escort to get through the crowd of fans between his car and the stadium.

“Elvis at 21” is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalog, titled “Elvis 1956,” available through Welcome Books. For more information, visit <http://welcomebooks.com/elvis1956>.

SITES has been sharing the wealth of Smithsonian collections and research programs with millions of people outside Washington, D.C., for more than 55 years. SITES connects Americans to their shared cultural heritage through a wide range of exhibitions about art, science and history, which are shown wherever people live, work and play. For exhibition description and tour schedules, visit www.sites.si.edu.

The History channel is a leading destination for revealing, award-winning, original non-fiction series and event-driven specials that connect history with viewers. Programming covers a diverse variety of historical genres ranging from military history to contemporary history, technology to natural history, as well as science, archaeology and pop culture.

Located in Washington, D.C., the Govinda Gallery exhibits one of the largest collections of music photography in the world. Over 30 years, the gallery has organized more than 200 exhibitions of many of the nation’s leading artists. It has featured Wertheimer’s work in several exhibitions, including his first major one-person exhibition in 1997. Visit online at www.govindagallery.com.

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery tells the stories of America through the individuals who have shaped its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the Portrait Gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists who speak American history. The museum’s collection of nearly 20,000 works ranges from paintings and sculpture to photographs and drawings. Visit online at www.npg.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

Paying tribute to music’s rich cultural history, The Grammy Museum explores and celebrates the enduring legacies of all forms of music, the creative process, the art and technology of the recording process and the history of the premier recognition of excellence in recorded music—the Grammy Award. Located in downtown Los Angeles, the museum features 30,000 square feet of interactive and multimedia exhibits. Visit online at www.grammymuseum.org.

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