

THE FLASHPOINT OF FAME

Amy Henderson



Elvis rehearses singing “Hound Dog” to a basset hound for *The Steve Allen Show*, New York City, July 1, 1956

IN 1956, ELVIS HIP-SWUNG POSTWAR 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 gray flannel 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 energized the emerging youth culture and helped create a new consumer market fueled by radio, recordings, and movies. His enormous popularity also helped catalyze 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 “Heartbreak Hotel.”

He appeared on five 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: PTAs 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 July 1st, Elvis appeared on *The Steve Allen Show*. Steve Allen was the 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 elan. 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 unrecognized 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 let him off near his home, he walked away and waved back. Whether he realized 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.



Starburst, Elvis onstage at Russwood Park, Memphis, Tennessee, July 4, 1956

With a cinematic luminosity, photographer Alfred Wertheimer had chronicled a time from when Elvis could sit alone at a drugstore lunch counter to the beginning of the rest of his life, when he could no longer 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 he was onstage, the air exploded, and at one point, as light sprayed around Elvis, Alfred Wertheimer captured a veritable “starburst”—the flashpoint of fame.