

Nero Impersonators and Elvis Impersonators

Within a year of Nero's death in 68 CE, the first Nero impersonator appeared. He resembled Nero somewhat in his facial features, but especially in his singing and cithara-playing. He began to amass followers on the Greek island of Cythnus. Eventually, he gathered enough followers that a Roman provincial governor became alarmed and had the impostor captured and killed; his body was sent to Rome to be displayed (Tac. *Hist.* 2.8-9). After this Nero impersonator, there were at least two others: one sometime between 79-81 CE, and another one between 88-89 CE, both supported by the Parthians (Dio 66.19.3b-c, Suet. *Nero* 57; Champlin 2003, Griffin 2000, Gallivan 1973). These Nero impersonators were part of a larger phenomenon of political impersonation in the ancient world; compare the false Agrippa Postumus (Tac. *Ann.* II.38) or the false Drusus Caesar (Tac. *Ann.* V.8), both during the reign of Tiberius. But this paper will argue that these Nero impersonators also arose as a result of something more unusual: desire, namely desire for a dead celebrity to somehow go on living. It is the same process that has led to the rise of thousands of Elvis impersonators. This paper will examine the phenomenon of Nero impersonators alongside that of Elvis impersonators, as a way to gain insight into the motives that led people to accept these impersonators as "the real thing," or at least as an acceptable substitute.

Elvis impersonators must look the part, but they also must sing, and they must move; the first professional Elvis impersonator (who looked nothing like Elvis) only saw his career take off when he stopped sitting at the piano and began to gyrate his hips onstage (Graves 2010). It is no accident that the first Nero impersonator we hear of was able to pass himself off as Nero in part by musical impersonation. It is Nero the Artist, as well as Nero the Ruler, who is missed by his loyal subjects. Another clue that Nero impersonators were not simply (or not only) attempting to

gain political power through fraudulent means is the undercurrent of longing in the accounts of Nero impersonators; Suetonius says that right after Nero's death, a few subjects laid flowers on Nero's grave, had statues of him made and put on the Rostra, and circulated his edicts, "pretending he was still alive and would soon return to confound his enemies" (*Nero* 57). There were rumors that Nero had faked his own death (like Elvis); there were prophecies, like the Sibylline Oracles, predicting that Nero would rise again in the East and return to rule (Champlin 2003). The return of the King is desired most intensely by those who feel disenfranchised under the current regime: the urban poor of Rome and the Greek East, in the case of Nero (Champlin 2003, Griffin 2000); the white working class, in the case of Elvis (Lott 1997). Both Nero and Elvis owed their success as icons to their ability to appropriate despised-yet-desirable subcultures in their transgressive performances: Nero's musical and artistic performances were read as "Greek" and "effeminate," while Elvis co-opted African-American musical culture and feminine modes of display to make himself a star (Graves 2010, Lott 1997, Garber 1992). Their impersonators attempted to tap into this brilliance in order to bring back the vanished golden era of their icons' reigns. As Dio Chrysostom (21.10) said of Nero, which could also easily be said of Elvis: "Even now his subjects wish he were still alive, and most men believe that he is."

Bibliography

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