

The Early Artistry of Male Impersonation

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Introduction: Key source and research question (368w)

The primary source for this essay is a photograph depicting several male impersonators at a San Francisco gay bar, all posing for the camera and appearing jovial¹. They look remarkably similar; each in tailored black suits, hair mostly slicked back, and with similar expressions of elation as they smile down the lens of the camera. Contextual research, particularly of the vibrant subcultures during this time, pose questions about the nature of these performers – are they passing women, drag butches, drag kings, or male illusionists? What audience lay outside the frame, to whom were they performing? Why were so many similar artists all attending the same event?

Many of these questions have simple answers – gathering for safety and sociability is a common goal even within contemporary LGBTQ+ communities, yet, in the broader context of the time female crossdressing was acceptable in mainstream society (under certain conditions) and had been for decades. Many male impersonators were beloved by the mainstream press² and worked as novelty acts for heterosexual audiences, something that prompted my first research question: “to what degree, and with what caveats, were male impersonators integrated into mainstream society between the 1920s and 1950s?”. In other words, why was some female crossdressing considered criminal, and others considered clever entertainment? This topic is one that holds personal weight with me, the researcher, as a drag king who spends many hours a week surrounded by women in men’s clothing. In comparing these artists to those who cross-dressed out of the spotlight, to pass, to work, or as authentic self-expression, the threshold of acceptability for crossdressing in the mainstream became clearer – putting on a men’s suit was fine, on the condition that it was purely for other’s entertainment and not for personal fulfillment. After feedback from the pilot study, the question was mildly altered to better describe the trajectory of my research.

Research Question: *To what degree were Male Impersonators accepted in mainstream society between the 1920s and 1950s?*

Discussion:

The history of crossdressing women is a complex and unfinished story, one that has been both blessed and burdened by the passage of time. In their book ‘Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive’³, Kumbier validates the mysterious nature of primary sources like this one, particularly because many communities are cautious with material that would have once had them arrested. As one of the few photographs from this era with a date, location, named participants and in good condition, it is a miracle it has stood the test of time whilst mainstream archives were reluctant to include such narratives⁴. Similar photographs – undated, uncaptioned – depicting swaths of women dressed as men exist in smaller, less academically legitimate archives⁵ ⁶, often pixelated without access to expensive digitisation methods. “This is queer history” writes Ryan⁷ in an article celebrating male impersonator Buddy Kent, using the final copy of an interview with the subject on a scratched

¹ PERFORMERS AT MONA'S, CIRCA 1950S, Wide Open Town History Project Records, #2003-05, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco

² 27 Countries Contribute to This Year's Round-the-World Christmas Broadcast, ABC Weekly Vol. 15 No.51, Trove, Canberra

³ Alana Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive* (Litwin Books, 2009).

⁴ Carol Ross Joynt, 'The Smithsonian Is Now Collecting "Will and Grace" Memorabilia as Part of Its Gay History Efforts', *Washingtonian*, 30 September 2014.

⁵ Impact Stories, 'Photo Gallery', *Impact Stories*, (accessed: 06/11/22).

⁶ 'A group of cross-dressing women in 1910', *Beatrice Lillies* [blog post], (04/01/12), (accessed: 6/11/22).

⁷ Hugh Ryan, 'The Three Lives of Malvina Schwartz', *Hazlitt*, 12 October 2016.

CD, “A game of telephone played down the decades, preserved by passionate individuals and community institutions working on the margins”.

In analysing this primary source, understanding the role that these people played in their community is important, and the literature exploring this retrospectively – alongside accounts from the time – indicate four clear subcultures within the male impersonation scene between the 1930s and 1950s. This reality was markedly different from my understanding when I began researching, aware as I was that the vaudevillian, theatrical drag scene and the butch lesbian drag scene were somewhat separate. I mistakenly attributed this to the passage of time; that this was the same, underground community that simply evolved with the sexually liberated 1920s or had to retreat during the socially conservative 1950s. Instead, I discovered during my research that these groups performed concurrently, and it was the audience and mainstream press coverage that differentiated these drag styles from one another. Furthermore, the extremely relevant masses of ‘passing women’ and the nuances between a ‘male illusionist’ and a ‘drag butch’ had escaped my understanding until undertaking this task, which has since enlightened me, to some degree, with regards to the diversity of male impersonation.

The first of these subcultures, drag butches, were a specific genre of entertainer, often a singer or dancer who engaged in the butch/femme bar scene⁸ and drew aspects of its complex erotic routines of behaviour to inform their performances⁹. During this era, the artists were subjected to “a social climate of State-sanctioned homosexual intolerance”¹⁰ including police brutality, mass arrests and forced outing by the press. Male illusionists were a subset of these who included accentuating features with makeup, particularly facial hair, and both often performed alongside female impersonators¹¹.

The culture of ‘passing women’ encompassed many outside of the ‘camp’ scene, including those who wanted to join the military service¹², or find work¹³. These women were often viewed with a pitying or curious tone in newspaper publications, who were no doubt aware of the poor financial circumstances that many women found themselves in during this politically and economically contentious period. ‘Passing women’ also included butches, many of whom were ‘stealth’ to stay safe from homophobic violence¹⁴ or to marry other women¹⁵. The tabloids reported these in a far more accusatory manner, particularly with marriage fraud being a criminal act and therefore seen as more morally transgressive. Compare, for example, Frances Orlando’s newspaper spread on working on a boat for four months as a woman pretending to be a man¹⁶, with three large photographs and a supplemental article interviewing Orlando about her future. The same newspaper, the Oakland Tribune, reported on Orlando seven years later when she eloped with another woman, captioning an image of her with anecdotes of a violent and criminal past¹⁷.

‘Drag king’ was a term coined in the mid-1990s and is therefore anachronistic to apply to performers from this period. However, the type of artistry that defines this genre is familiar when observing the mainstream male impersonation industry between the 1930s and 1950s. ‘Male

⁸ Maltz, Robin ‘Real butch: The performance/performativity of male impersonation, drag kings, passing as male, and stone butch realness’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3(1998).

⁹ Joan Fleischmann (1933-2013), Interviewed May 31, 1994, Philadelphia LGBT History Project, OutHistory, New York.

¹⁰ Maltz, ‘Real butch’.

¹¹ The Jewel Box Revue: it’s been a pleasure, Drag Show Programs, JD Doyle Programs.

¹² Maite Escudero-Alias, *Long Live the King : A Genealogy of Performative Genders*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2009).

¹³ MALE IMPERSONATOR GIRL’S STRANGE ACTION, Feilding Star 25 June 1923, Papers Past, Wellington.

¹⁴ Barbara Gittings (1932-2007), Interviewed February 2, 1993, Philadelphia LGBT History Project, OutHistory, New York.

¹⁵ MALE IMPERSONATOR WOMAN MARRIES ANOTHER, FORTY DAYS IN PRISON, New Zealand Herald 23 September 1929, Papers Past, Wellington

¹⁶ Girl ‘Sheik’ Masquerades as Deckhand, Mechanic, and Truck Driver, Oakland Tribune 21 August 1927, Oakland Tribune, Oakland

¹⁷ Girl Masking As Man Flees With Maid, 16, Oakland Tribune 18 September 1935, Oakland Tribune, Oakland.

impersonator' was used by the tabloid press for most instances of crossdressing women, but the career prospect of male impersonation was most similar to the niche filled by drag kings in the present day. This is characterised by comedy, props, spectacle, and the theatrical¹⁸. However, audiences between the 1930s and 1950s were overwhelmingly heterosexual, and the novelty lay in a woman performing a convincing illusion of manhood. Contemporary drag kings, however, usually turn masculinity itself into the spectacle and choose to politicise and undermine the concept of having a gender to transform from or into¹⁹, and broadly operate for lesbian audiences²⁰.

Observing the image participants with this new context, one can assume that this group were of the 'drag butch' subculture, using background information provided in the citation and taking their manner of dress into account. The locale is listed as 'one of Mona Sargent's clubs', which were a string of gay clubs in San Francisco, and the caption describes the crowd as 'male impersonators.' Given the distaste for lesbian and casual cross-dressing women in the mainstream press, these performers would certainly only be welcomed (and feel welcome, in return, observable in their wide smiles) within these gay clubs if they, too, participated in the butch/femme scene. When used in conjunction with other images in this collection, particularly at the same bar, the difference between these dapper, formally dressed performers (described as 'nightclub entertainer[s]' in a separate image) and the more casually dressed butches in T-shirts, unbuttoned shirts, and hair free of gel becomes clearer. These male impersonators were not simply passing, and they were clearly established in the gay club scene at large, thus, it is most likely that they were drag butches.

Returning to Ryan's earlier statement regarding 'queer history', the integration of proto drag king-adjacent male impersonation into the mainstream has provided swaths of archival content from this era. Extrapolating from this, the mainstream genre of male impersonation was one that was able to effectively dodge the 'queer' label (in this context, 'queer' meaning sexually deviant or transgressing gender roles) and thereby leave a wealth of images and articles documenting their movements. Artists like Vesta Tilley, Nellie Kolle, Ella Shields, and Nellie Small all had their livelihoods heavily publicised, particularly their home lives and domestic duties which cemented their womanhood in the public eye. The New York Public Library Digital Collection contains no less than 28 individual images of Vesta Tilley²¹, who worked the vaudeville circuit as a mainstream male impersonator (in Britain and abroad) between 1869 (age 5) and 1920 (age 56)²², when photography was an expensive artform. According to a tabloid newspaper, she had accrued £84,000²³ at the time of her death in 1952. Ella Shields was described as 'the idol of the English-speaking vaudeville stage'²⁴, 'one of the best known of male impersonators'²⁵ and 'probably most expensive artist ever brought to Australia'²⁶ as reported in newspaper clippings between 1926 and 1933, and Nellie Kolle had a 3-page magazine spread alongside singer Queenie Paul, detailing their domestic and private routines for fans to absorb²⁷. This is to say that these performers, though retrospectively icons of gender nonconforming fashion, did not interrupt the normative gender roles within their own context, and experienced celebrity-like coverage during their lives despite publicly cross-dressing for entertainment.

Independent from Trove and other mainstream archival sources, small collections like the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA) and Queer Music Heritage hold many smaller, physical artifacts, articles from small publications, and captions that span paragraphs with detailed contextual backgrounds for places, people, and events. Using an identical entry of my primary source logged in

¹⁸ Escudero- Alías, *Long Live the King*.

¹⁹ Escudero- Alías, *Long Live the King*.

²⁰ Escudero- Alías, *Long Live the King*.

²¹ Topic: Vesta Tilley, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, New York.

²² VESTA TILLEY "FAREWELL", *The Telegraph* 7 August 1920, Trove, Canberra

²³ VESTA TILLEY'S WILL, *The Sun* 12 December 1952, Trove, Canberra

²⁴ ELLA SHIELDS, *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* 26 May 1933, Trove, Canberra

²⁵ ELLA SHIELDS, *Call* 9 July 1926, Trove, Canberra

²⁶ ELLA SHIELDS, *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* 25 May 1933, Trove, Canberra

²⁷ Vaudeville veterans stage comeback, *Pix*, Trove, Canberra

the DTA, I was able to find each performer named in a longer caption. One of them, Beverly Shaw, was a singer who was idolised by the Los Angeles camp scene as a performer and later as the owner of 'Club Laurel', an extremely popular gay club²⁸. Other notable faces in this image are Butch Minton and Jimmy Renard, performers who are listed alongside Gladys Bentley in a promotional flyer²⁹. Kay Scott appears in another image in the collection, smiling alongside two friends as described by the caption. In the absence of mainstream advertising like their peers, drag butches and male illusionists relied on word of mouth to market their events, clubs, and acts³⁰, as well as using these clubs to socialise in the clothing they felt most authentic in.

In conclusion, though the divide between mainstream, acceptable, and criminalised male impersonation was harsh during this era, the underground drag artists from diverse subcultures and backgrounds managed to find some places to dress in the manner they chose, relax in front of the camera, and in some cases, leave to build more of those places for others. Though records of this time can be difficult to find, the rare treasures that have been maintained outside of broader archival institutions now have access to proper storage. Aside from these underground groups, the mainstream entertainment genre of male impersonation was embraced by the public and heavily reported on, allowing a great deal of historical insight into certain avenues of acceptable cross-dressing.

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²⁸ 50s STYLE WOMEN'S MUSIC, Beverly Shaw, JD Doyle Archives.

²⁹ Gladys Bentley and Miss Jimmy Reynard, Newspaper and Periodical Clippings (1900-1949), Digital Transgender Archive, Boston.

³⁰ Oral History Interview with Josie Carter and Jaime Gays, May 6 2011, Oral History Interviews of the Milwaukee Transgender Oral History Project, Box 1 Folder 2, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

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Hugh Ryan, 'The Three Lives of Malvina Schwartz', *Hazlitt*, 12 October 2016. [<https://bit.ly/3DEtU5K>]

Appendix:

Primary source:



'PERFORMERS AT MONA'S, CIRCA 1950S'

Other noteworthy sources:



BUTCHES AT MONA'S CANDLE LIGHT, CIRCA 1950S



Left: Nellie Kelle, mainstream male impersonator accompanying singer Queenie Paul.

Above: Stormé Delarive, drag butch who allegedly threw the first punch during the Stonewall uprising.