

Eartha Kitt, 1927-2008: Singer, Actress and 'Catwoman'

One movie director called her "the most exciting woman in the world." *Transcript of radio broadcast:*

04 June 2009

VOICE ONE:

I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Barbara Klein with People in America in VOA Special English. Today we tell about the unforgettable entertainer Eartha Kitt. The life of this singer and actress was as rich and interesting as her career.

(Music: "C'est Si Bon")



Eartha Kitt

VOICE ONE:

"C'est Si Bon," or "It's So Good" in French, was one of Eartha Kitt's first hit songs. She recorded it in the early nineteen fifties after performing it in a Broadway show. But Eartha Kitt's life was not always so good. She had a very difficult childhood although information about her early history is limited.

Eartha Mae Keith was born into a poor, rural family in South Carolina in nineteen twenty-seven. Some reports say she was the child of rape. Her mother was of African and Cherokee Indian ancestry. Her father was a white farmer.

When Eartha was eight, her mother married. The husband did not want Eartha to live with them because of her mixed race. Eartha Kitt said he called her "yellow gal."

Eartha was sent to New York City to live with an aunt in the African- American neighborhood of Harlem. The relationship was difficult. The aunt helped pay for piano and dance lessons for Eartha. But she also beat the girl. Eartha would run away after beatings.

(Music: "God Bless The Child")

VOICE TWO:

Eartha Kitt lived on the streets and worked in a factory as a young teenager. But she kept up her dance lessons. One day she decided to try out for a famous

African-American dance company. Soon, Eartha was performing in shows around the world with the Katherine Dunham Dance Troupe.

In Paris, Eartha left the dance company to sing in a nightclub. Her voice was unusual – but very appealing. She learned French quickly and gained French fans.

(Music: "Je Cherche Un Homme")

VOICE ONE:

The film director Orson Welles discovered Eartha Kitt singing in Paris. He called her "the most exciting woman in the world." Welles asked her to play a lead part in a play he was directing and starring in.

Eartha Kitt returned to New York and appeared in the Broadway show "New Faces of Nineteen Fifty-Two." A humorous song she sang about a bored, spoiled woman became famous. Here is "Monotonous."

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

She soon signed a recording agreement with a record company. Eartha Kitt's songs were all daring, especially for the nineteen fifties. She even made a sexy Christmas song. "Santa Baby," became Kitt's biggest hit.

(MUSIC)

Eartha Kitt's first role in a film was in the nineteen fifty-seven movie "Mark of the Hawk" with Nat King Cole. Kitt was very careful about choosing her roles in films. She rejected parts that were not respectful to people of color. She said if her choices were bad it would not help the black actors who came after her.

CATWOMAN: "Hello Pierre. This is Catwoman. C-A-T-W-O-M-A-N."

PIERRE: "Quelle est la problem, Femme Chat?"

CATWOMAN: "Batman just caught Joker and me in the middle of a robbery."

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen sixty-seven, Eartha Kitt got the part of Catwoman on the popular television series "Batman." Fans loved the special way she rolled her "r"s to create a sound like a cat. She appeared on just three shows but was an unforgettable Catwoman.

CATWOMAN: "What now?"

BATMAN: "You're on your way to prison, Catwoman. Will you never learn that you cannot outwit the law?"



Eartha Kitt as Catwoman

CATWOMAN: "Maybe one day I will, Batman. Purr-haps."

VOICE TWO:

In nineteen sixty-eight Eartha Kitt was invited to the White House. President Lyndon Johnson was in office and the Vietnam War was an issue of national dispute.

The president's wife, Lady Bird Johnson, invited several women to a luncheon to discuss the problem of crimes committed by young people. Eartha Kitt said the First Lady asked her why she thought there was so much youth crime in America.

Eartha Kitt said: "You send the best of this country off to be shot and maimed. They rebel in the streets. They will take pot and they will get high. They don't want to go to school because they will be snatched off from their mothers to be shot in Vietnam."

VOICE ONE:

Those comments destroyed Kitt's career in America for a long time. Later, it was discovered that President Johnson had immediately ordered government agents to investigate the performer. Kitt said she was "blacklisted." No one in the American entertainment industry would employ her. For about ten years, she could only find work in other countries.



In the mid nineteen seventies Eartha Kitt slowly began to rebuild her career in America. She won critical praise for a concert in nineteen seventy-four at Carnegie Hall in New York. In nineteen seventy-eight, President Jimmy Carter asked Eartha Kitt back to the White House. That same year, she was nominated for a Tony award as best actress in the musical "Timbuktu!"

Eartha Kitt in "Timbuktu"

of her life.

(Music: "Let's Do It")

VOICE TWO:

Eartha Kitt was also a mother and grandmother. She married businessman William O'Donald in nineteen sixty and gave birth to their daughter, Kitt, the same year. Eartha Kitt said her daughter was her greatest joy in life. She said she took her everywhere her career went.

Eartha Kitt said her own experiences as a child left her a divided person. Her real self was not Eartha Kitt but Eartha Mae, a child given away by her mother.

EARTHA KITT: "Rejection has always made me into a person that does not want to be seen anywhere, except when I'm all made up and go out as Eartha Kitt. Then I feel okay."

And where was Eartha Mae most herself?

EARTHA KITT: "I'm at home, digging in the dirt, or doing something that is very close to the Earth, because that's where I know how to survive."

(MUSIC: "Here's To Life")

VOICE ONE:

Eartha Mae Kitt was at home when she died on December twenty fifth, two thousand eight. The cause was colon cancer. She was eighty-one.

VOICE TWO:



Eartha Kitt

This program was written and produced by Caty Weaver. For transcripts, mp3s and podcasts of our shows go to voapsecialenglish.com. I'm Barbara Klein.

VOICE ONE:

And I'm Steve Ember. Join us again next week for People in America in VOA Special English.