

An absolute dynamo

Catwoman and cabaret star, Helen of Troy and hell raiser, singer, actress and more, Eartha Mae Kitt was nothing if not an unbridled firecracker.

TEXT VIPASHA ALOUKIK PAI



January 17, 1927 – December 25, 2008

Orson Welles, that polymath who created *Citizen Kane*, once called her 'the most exciting woman on earth'. But for Eartha Kitt—who spoke four languages and sang in seven, played Catwoman with serious panache, had a CIA dossier with her name on it and sang the ever-popular 'Santa Baby' with impossible innocence—Welles' statement was no mere compliment. He was simply stating an obvious fact.

Watch her, in *New Faces* (1954), while she performs 'Uska Dara' (in Turkish, no less) in her cabaret act with equal parts swagger and sensuality, and you can't help but marvel at her chutzpah. Listen to her rendition of 'C'est si bon', and you could be sure you were listening to a voice that was born and raised in France. But Eartha Kitt, of the impeccable rolling R's, shimmering sexuality and legendary 'purrs'—yes, she made many go weak in the knees when she purred—had beginnings more humble than you could possibly have imagined.

She was born in South Carolina, in abject poverty to a poor African American woman, who Eartha later claimed, had been raped by the white son of a cotton plantation owner. Being illegitimate and biracial in the Deep South in 1930s could not have been easy. Relatively pale in comparison to other African American children, she endured her share of ostracism as a child. At eight, rejected by the new husband of the woman who had raised her thus far, she was sent to live with her aunt, Mamie Kitt, in Harlem, New York (she later said she was convinced that Mamie was actually her biological mother). In Harlem, though the struggle for love and life continued, Eartha, with her immense talent, couldn't help but blossom. Here she discovered music and here, she finally knew what she would do with her life.

She joined the famous Katherine Dunham Dance Company and with them, toured around the world, especially Europe. Her lucky

break occurred when she was spotted by Orson Welles in a club in Paris. Her performance that night must have stumped him, for he cast her as Helen of Troy in his play 'Time Runs'. 'The reason I chose you for Helen,' he is rumoured to have said to Eartha, 'is because you represent all women of all times.' Soon after, she released her first music album *RCA Victor Presents Eartha Kitt*, in which she sang in not less than four languages, including Swahili. With memorable hits like 'I want to be evil', 'Uska Dara' and 'C'est si bon', the album introduced the world to planet Eartha, where the music was great, the voice was animalistic, the novelty was unmatched, and Eartha herself was wickedly irresistible. In life too, her ferocity stood out—she was infamous for her temper and outspoken with her beliefs. On one occasion during the Vietnam War, she told the wife of President Lyndon Johnson, "You send the best of the country off to be shot and maimed. No wonder the kids rebel and take pot." Though she had to cancel many a booking because of this anti-war remark (this was also the reason behind the CIA dossier), her popularity in Europe continued to sustain her until her death in 2008.

Though she saw incredible success in life, there was also enough to be sad about. Until she was 71, she never really knew exactly how old she was because she had never seen her birth certificate. And even then, she never found out who her father was. Often, she paid too heavy a price for being outspoken. But here's the thing about Eartha—her spirit never wavered. Watch her interviews and you'll see that she was intelligent, independent, and yet, not willing to miss a chance to laugh with wild abandon. And no matter what anyone said, she never was no sex kitten. Go back and listen to her purr—it is so primal it won't remind you of a kitten, but of a majestic tigress. ■

All By Myself: The Eartha Kitt Story (1982), a documentary that manages to get glimpses of Eartha Kitt's personal life, which also included benefit concerts, charity and activism.

