

INTERVIEW

Eartha Mother

The great Ms. Kitt purrs about living alone, her gay fans and her beloved daughter

by Daniel Vaillancourt

As she glides through the crowd on her way to the stage—radiant in a simple scarlet evening gown and a glittering pair of ruby high heels—there is something utterly larger-than-life about the legendary Eartha Kitt. We are in Los Angeles at the Cinegrill, the famed cabaret located within the landmark Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. It is early October, and Kitt is nearing the end of a glorious monthlong run here.

For the next 90 minutes, the regal chanteuse will regale her devotees with such Kitt classics as "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," "C'est Si Bon" and "I Want to Be Evil." Midway she'll throw songs like "Mein Herr" and "Usaka Dara" (performed in German and Turkish, respectively) into the mix. She'll choose to close with her poignant version of the Sinatra standard "It Was a Very Good Year." Throughout the spectacle, the star will intimately interact with those beyond the footlights—gay and straight people of all ages—going as far as conversing in Spanish for many minutes with a ringside admirer. Coquettish Material Girl one moment, inflamed femme fatale the next, she'll flirt with one front-row fan before suddenly piercing another with her famous feline gaze an instant later. She'll then give in to heart-shaking laughter, ultimately whispering a genuine "thank you" to her acolytes in the audience. To witness Kitt in such top form is quite simply a hauntingly memorable experience.

For those within commuting distance of New York City, Kitt began an eight-week engagement at Manhattan's glamorous Café Carlyle on Wednesday, Jan. 1. Asked to surrender a preview of that production, Kitt purrs, "I can't, because I haven't put it together yet. But it probably will be on the format of what you saw at the Cinegrill because that is the Eartha Kitt format: humor and drama and teasing the public."

The entertainer—who turned 69 in January—has been teasing the public for more than half a century. Born on a cotton plantation in South Carolina, Kitt was given up by her mother at the age of 8 and raised by an aunt in Harlem. She began her career as a featured dancer and vocalist with the Katherine Dunham Dance Troupe, with which she toured the world before she turned 20. Kitt has since toiled in every facet of show business: theater, film, television, recording, publishing, commercials, and of course, cabaret. Blacklisted by most members of the U.S. entertainment industry during the late '60s and early '70s for speaking out against the Vietnam War during a 1968 White House luncheon hosted by then first lady Lady Bird Johnson, Kitt continued to perform abroad. She rebounded stateside with a celebrated concert at Carnegie Hall in 1974, and has not stopped working since. Recent accomplishments include a cameo in the 1995 Isaac Mizrahi fashion world documentary *Unzipped*; a 1996 Grammy Award nomination for her latest album, *Back in Business*; a guest appearance last season on the hit CBS sitcom *The Nanny*, starring Fran Drescher; and a co-starring role alongside Rosie O'Donnell in last year's children's film *Harriet the Spy*.

From Los Angeles, I spoke via telephone with Kitt shortly after her return to the country home she maintains an hour outside of Manhattan. Gracious, candid and in high spirits, she regularly punctuated our hourlong chat with cackling. Eartha Kitt obviously loves to laugh...

Vaillancourt: Your stage persona is that of the gold-digging vixen in need of a man. Yet in real life, you're fiercely independent. What is the off-stage Eartha like?

Kitt: Well, I'm sitting here at my desk at the moment. I just got through answering some fan mail. I'm looking out at the world of changing trees. My dogs are running around. I just went to pick some vegetables from the garden that are the

last of the season. Thank God there were some left when I came home.... I am alone.

Happily so?

Yes. I was just writing a friend of mine that I didn't realize how happy I was. When I want friends around, I will bring them. They will come and visit me. But I'm away from home so often. I see my friends in Los Angeles, which is marvelous. One of the reasons I'm glad I do go to Los Angeles is that I can see old friends. But when you have friends you don't have to be seeing them every day. You can talk to them on the phone, or write them a letter. I think the art of writing has gone.... I love writing letters. I think we should all get back to writing letters.



Eartha Kitt

Many people who write these days do so via electronic mail. So much of our culture is microwaved.

I hate that! I don't have a microwave in my house because I hate the thought of saying, "I'm hungry, and therefore I don't want to take the time to go through the ritual of cooking or even warming up food properly." I don't have a microwave, and I hate microwaves. When I go to my daughter's house, whose microwave was in the house when she bought it, just the thought of putting food in that thing is aggravating to me because the ritual is lost. I love that ritual of cooking. I can't wait until the holidays come. Christmastime, when my daughter and her children and her in-laws come and we have this marvelous ritual around the dinner table, between the kitchen and the dining room table. The kitchen and the dining room are practically one. I live in a very open house.

You've mentioned how much friendship means to you. How important is romance?

My whole life is romantic. I don't need one person to say I'm so much in love that my whole life is depending on whether that man is here or there. I don't know whether I'm happy with a man around, or happy when there is no man around. [Laughs] Because when there is a man around, my God, the

trauma! The heartache and all of that! Well, I don't have that anymore. I've gone through that. OK, that's enough. [Laughs] Once I had my daughter and one or two romances [that was sufficient].

You've done it all in show business. What is your favorite medium?

The theater, because you have direct contact with the people. That's the moment of truth....

Barbra Streisand once said she is "an actress who sings." Do you see yourself similarly?

Yes. Well, when you say "an actress who sings," the foundation of my work is the acting. But you've got to feel what you're doing in order to be able to convince yourself that you're on the right track. Then the audience takes over and you know if you are on the right track. To me, the audience is always your best director.... I'm very sensitive to the audience. I'm very much in contact with the audience. It might take a couple of seconds, depending on the public. As I'm walking through the audience, I can feel the vibrations of that public as to whether they are there to really enjoy and share, or whether they're going to give me a hard time. I would say that half-way through a song, I can tell whether they are going to help me or hinder me. [Laughs]

I'm sure most often they help you.

Well, I would say 99 and nine-tenths of the time, my audiences are fantastically

wonderful in helping me execute what it is they came for.

There is a generation of gay men who discovered Eartha Kitt in 1984, when your album *I Love Men* spawned the hit "Where Is My Man?" But gay men have loved you since the very beginning of a career that now spans more than five decades. Why do you think gay men find you so appealing?

I have no idea. I can say that the contact probably is because they know that I know what rejection is.... A lot of boys have said to me that they like my vampiness, although I never think of myself as a vamp. [Laughs] But, what the hell! If that's what they think I am—a vamp—then fine! I love it.

What is special about performing for a gay crowd?

A gay crowd, to me, is very uninhibited. They let you know immediately that they like you. I did a party for a gay group here just before I went to Los Angeles, a few months ago. It was the birthday of one of the boys, and it was absolutely marvelous. I mean, the lighting wasn't good, the sound was OK, and it was a very small place. But the boys just had a marvelous time. It was as though I was turning them on. I hope that that is the case. Sometimes I wish the hell that they would switch. [Laughs] Some of these guys are so

goddamned good-looking, us girls feel it's a shame that they're wasted!

Looking up at you, maybe some of them wish they could switch too!

They give me a very good feeling. Audiences usually do. But I can say in all honesty that the gay boys really give me a tremendous lift.

I know there have been many gay men in your life, and that you've lost several of them to AIDS.

Yes. I've lost quite a number of my friends. That's why I'm always telling the boys, "Have safe sex! Love is love, as long as it's clean love."

Many female entertainers desperately try to conceal their age. You proudly announce yours on stage. Do you see yourself as an example for other women in the business?

Not for people in the business. I think of people in general. People my age. That's one of the reasons I announce my age. Sometimes I hear people say, "I wish you were my mother!" "I wish you were my grandma," they yell to me. No, I'm not thinking about people in the business. People in the business can afford to take care of themselves. I'm talking about people who are looking at me. I've always felt that whether we want to be or not, we are examples. We are role models. Women my age see that I have not gotten out of shape. Things may have shifted a little bit, but.... [Laughs] You really have to think in terms of taking care of yourself. You keep your man longer, you keep your sanity longer, you are desired longer, you're wanted longer and you are needed longer. People want to be around you more. They want to take you out. I have letters from very young boys—boys who are 20, 30 years younger than I am—who want to date me. I love men in general, but I think going out with very young boys as a date—as a romantic date—is a bit much if they're 20, 30 years younger than I am. [Laughs] I wouldn't mind being seen with them, though. I tell you the truth, because some of these guys are so great.

Do you ever give thought to retirement?

I don't think so, because I think retirement kills you. Or it can kill you.... I'm very lucky, anyway, because I can work in all the areas of the medium. I'm very happy about that.

Looking back on your life and career, what about Eartha Kitt makes you proudest?

Bearing my child. A man coming into my life would never interfere between me and my daughter. Nobody was ever more important. Between my work and my daughter, that's it. Everything else is secondary.

Is there anything you'd like to talk about? Are you gay?

Yes.

How do you guys feel about Eartha Kitt?

We love Eartha Kitt! I think many gay men love strong-willed women. We love women who are survivors because we're survivors too. We're born into this heterosexual world, feeling out of place, yet we strive to endure and become whole. People like you, Barbra Streisand and Madonna—whom I know you're not quite fond of—are some of our idols.

I'm glad you told me that because I felt that, but how do I put it into words? And if what I felt is really the way you guys feel, now that you've told me, then I appreciate it.... As a matter of fact, I'm constantly thinking in terms of thanking you guys because when I got into trouble with [the U.S.] government, and the heterosexuals didn't know what the hell happened to me, you guys always knew. No matter where I was, you supported me. I don't forget that.

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