

THEATER

A purr-fect icon

Appreciating the life and times of Eartha Kitt

BY RUPERT KINNARD

With the imminent arrival of Eartha Kitt in a touring production of *Cinderella*, I find myself wondering what it means to be considered a gay icon. That, of course, brings up the need to define the term.

Do we just "know them when we see them"? It's a no-brainer to acknowledge one of our greatest pop cultural icons is Marilyn Monroe, who also manages to hold a special spot as a gay icon—if only acknowledged by the sheer number of drag queens who emulate her.

Kitt is another story. She holds a special place in the hierarchy of icons, in my mind, along with Josephine Baker and Lena Horne. Whereas many elements are involved in considering icon status, the few who are African American are unique because of the personas forged out of fierce talent, raging determination and steadfast perseverance in the face of racism.

Baker practically still was performing when she died at age 69 in 1976. Horne will turn 84 on June 30. According to her newest book, *Rejuvenate! It's Never Too Late*, Kitt still can do somersaults at age 74!

The fact that she might not be commonly known as a gay icon is just an irritating oversight in the eyes of those in the know. Considering some of what goes into that construct—blazing talent, larger-than-life persona, the ability to inspire others by weathering some of life's greatest storms and surviving looking radiantly fabulous—Kitt more than delivers.

An interesting aspect of what it takes to be a gay icon is the presence of sexual subversiveness. During the times of Baker, Horne and Kitt, the only other sexual bad girl who comes to mind is another gay icon, Mae West.

Personally I don't think the lionesslike Kitt has gotten the credit she deserves as the one who pushed the envelope the furthest. Talk about working an image!

To study her career is to find a woman who is consistently in control. Rarely has she ever been portrayed as weak or demure. It's a shame she's still best known for her role as Catwoman in the campy '60s television series *Batman*, while her numerous other accomplishments aren't celebrated as much.

Having been orphaned at an early age, Kitt just recently discovered her actual birth date. Born in

1927, she was raised by her white father, a poor sharecropper, and black mother in South Carolina. In an example of one of the many paradoxes surrounding her, the wildly exotic Kitt describes herself saying, "In essence, I'm a sophisticated cotton picker."

During a tour of Europe she ended up in Paris, where her singing career took off. She learned a half-dozen languages and in May 1953 had her first hit record, the Turkish folk song "Uska Dara."

Kitt went on to record such classics as "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" and "I Want to Be Evil." Another example of her camp appeal is apparent every Christmas season, when amid most of the rancid holiday music on the radio, her 1953 rendition of "Santa Baby" comes through as a blast of naughty fresh air.

Kitt's most memorable acting effort was with Nat King Cole in 1958's *St. Louis Blues*, the story of composer W.C. Handy. She smoldered so much as a temptress in that film, she snagged the lead in her follow-up, *Anna Lucasta*, which boasted the tagline "It's That Red-Hot Picture About That Night-Time Girl!"

Kitt's career stalled after she attended a White House luncheon in 1968. Not only was it considered impolite to speak out against the Vietnam War, she also expressed concerns about social issues to a not-so-amused Lady Bird Johnson. That resulted, according to Kitt, in a presidential boycott.

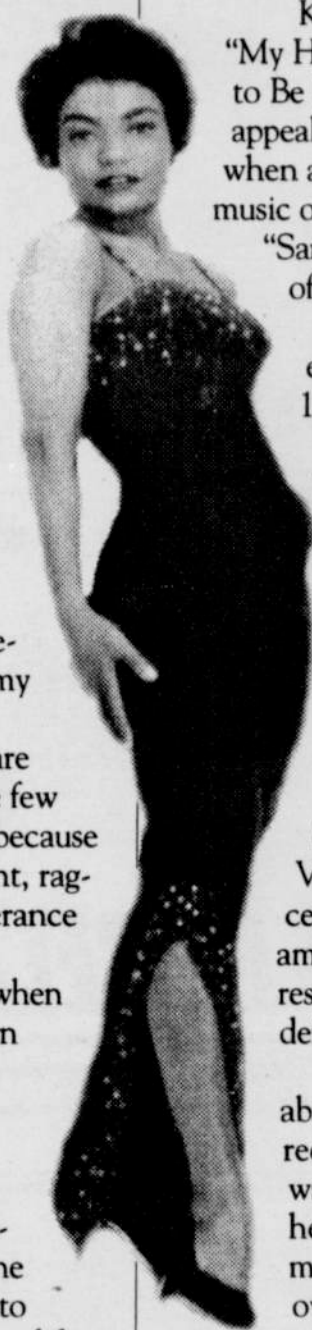
Her major comeback happened about decade later, when she received great acclaim in the Broadway musical *Timbuktu*. She updated her "all men can do for me is give me stuff" record persona and won over the gay disco crowds in the early '80s with her hits "Where Is My Man" and "I Love Men."

Appreciating Kitt's status as a living legend, I jumped at the chance to see her cabaret performance in the Bay Area some years back. My favorite memory is how playful she became with one of the waiters she enticed onto the stage. And I was amazed to see how high she still could kick her leg.

I always have been aware of Kitt's respect for her gay fans. She serves as a model of talent, strength, perseverance and conviction and rightfully should be respected as one of our more colorful and inspirational gay icons. **J**

CINDERELLA plays June 19 to 24 at Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. Tickets start at \$20 from the box office or Ticketmaster, 503-241-1802.

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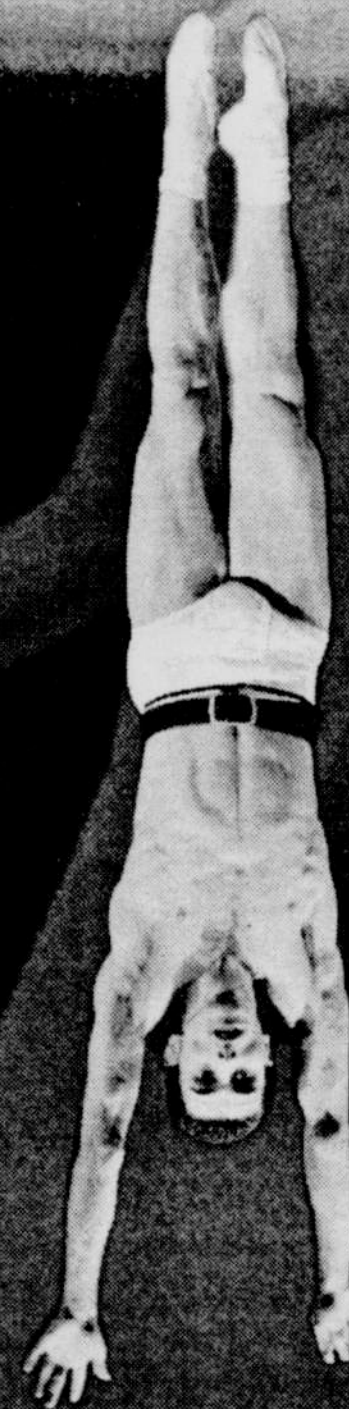
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