

near greatness

MISS KITT TO YOU

I couldn't imagine why Eartha Kitt—"the most exciting woman in the world"—would want to hang out with someone as 'unsophisticated' as me

by John Stark | Friday, January 16, 2015

“You want my autograph? Tell me you’re joking.”

With that, Eartha Kitt summoned her manager to come into the room where I had just interviewed her. “He wants my autograph,” she said to him, laughing. “Have you ever heard of anything so unsophisticated from a reporter? Especially one from a major newspaper?”

I was young, in my twenties, and in awe of celebrities. Kitt was in San Francisco, performing at a glitzy, newly opened nightclub. Her 1979 engagement was a newsworthy event that even Time magazine covered: It marked the chanteuse’s comeback in America, where she had been ostracized for more than a decade.

Kitt made headlines in 1968 after she criticized the Vietnam War at a White House luncheon, making Lady Bird Johnson cry. The price for those tears nearly killed her career.

Avoiding Kitt’s eyes, I put my notebook in my coat pocket and slunk out of the room. I felt like a jerk.

I was blown away a few months later when I got a call from Kitt’s secretary in Los Angeles. “Eartha’s going to be in San Francisco this weekend and would like to know if you could have coffee with her at the Café Trieste on Sunday morning.”

I couldn’t imagine why Kitt—who Orson Welles once dubbed “the most exciting woman in the world”—would want to hang out with someone as “unsophisticated” as me. Her lovers, after all, had included cosmetics magnate Charles Revson, banking heir John Barry Ryan III and Dominican diplomat and international playboy Porfirio Rubirosa.

Maybe Kitt, who died on Christmas Day in 2008, felt bad about insulting me? Maybe she wanted to thank me for the article I wrote about her in the San Francisco Examiner?

Of course I said I’d be there. You don’t say no to a woman who recorded an LP entitled, “Miss Kitt to You.”

I didn’t have to ask where the Café Trieste was. The espresso bar was just down the hill from my North Beach flat. It had once been a famous gathering spot for the beat poets and writers.



Kitt was already there when I arrived. She was holding court, interacting with the customers, all neighborhood locals. If they didn't know her from her sultry recordings of "Santa, Baby," "C'est Si Bon" and "I Want to Be Evil," they knew her from TV. Breaking color barriers, she was Catwoman on Season Three of "Batman."

As I walked in, Kitt waved me over to her table. I don't recall much about our conversation, just that it was lighthearted. I remember her throwing her head back when she laughed, the way that glamorous women do.

I dined out on our rendezvous for many months.

Then, to my happy surprise, history repeated itself. I was sitting at my desk at the Examiner when I got a call from Kitt's secretary. "Eartha's coming to San Francisco this weekend, and would like to have coffee with you at the Café Trieste."

I was about to say, "Of course I'll be there!" when I realized I couldn't be. I had planned a weekend trip that I couldn't back out of.

Damn, I thought. What rotten luck. How could I refuse? But I had to. "I'm so sorry," I said, "There's no way I can make it. But any other time ..."

"Oh," Kitt's secretary said, disappointedly. Then she asked me: "Do you know another reporter she could have coffee with?"

"Another reporter? Why?" I asked, feeling jilted.

"Because Eartha needs to meet with someone from the press in order to write off her trip."

My heart sank. So that's what I was to Miss Kitt: an IRS deduction.

Unlike Lady Bird, I didn't shed any tears. But nor did I ever look at celebrities in the same way again.

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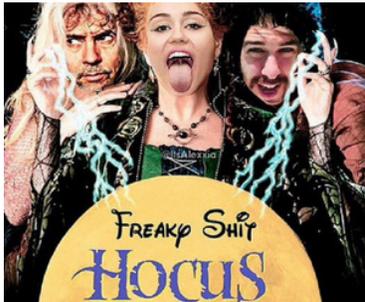
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