



Eartha Kitt playing with her toy poodles, Matti and Numi, in front of her 1773 house in New Milford.

# Catching up with Eartha Kitt

By Frank Merklung  
News-Times arts critic

"I don't believe in wasting time or in overheating rooms. How do I keep fit? I keep moving."

The speaker is entertainer Eartha Kitt, who will project rather a different image when, backed up by piano, bass and drums, she performs for the benefit of Music Mountain Saturday at 8:30 p.m. in the auditorium of the Hotchkiss School, Lakeville.

That evening her hair will be elaborately done up, her lithe frame set off by a Chanel dress and lots of jewelry, her persona that of a sex kitten.

But now, at home in the Upper Merryall section of New Milford, Ms. Kitt is wearing a turquoise jump suit with a cinnamon-colored scarf wrapped like a turban around her head.

She has just returned from her fourth visit to Helsinki, where she sang with a 16-piece orchestra, and is preparing to sing at a private party in the New York City restaurant Le Cirque.

"When I'm digging in the dirt I don't want to stop."

She reveals she has been doing exactly that all day, helping Ted Hammer and his



The entertainer in her kitchen, where "I don't have to be 'on.'"

son to clear out underbrush on the secluded 80-acre property Ms. Kitt bought three years ago.

Hammer, her yard-maintenance man, is the burn victim for whom she helped raise nearly \$20,000 by performing last

June at New Milford's Merryall Center for the Arts.

In addition to this and the forthcoming Music Mountain benefit, her largesse has included supporting Learn, an organization that builds schools for blacks in South Africa, and Kittsville, a similar enterprise she started in 1963 in the Los Angeles ghetto of Watts.

That year was the midway point in Ms. Kitt's four-year marriage to a Korean War veteran named William McDonald.

"Bill felt the world owed him a living," she says in her precise, quick speech. "Yes, he was the kind of man I sing about" — charming, pleasure-loving but greedy.

The unhappy union resulted, however, in the person who means more to Ms. Kitt than anyone else in the world.

It is her daughter, Kitt McDonald, a beautiful New York fashion model with green-gold eyes and pale skin, who turns 25 this Wednesday and who will be married next June.

Pictures of mother and daughter are everywhere in the shiplapped converted white barn Ms. Kitt has called home since last summer, where the temperature is kept close to 50 degrees ("to keep the

Photography by Carol Kaliff



pipes from freezing") and there are no curtains of any kind.

Her portrait by Moses Soyer hangs on the stairs, as does the original caricature of her by Al Hirschfeld, and elsewhere is a photograph of her with Prince Philip after a command performance.

She is renovating the main house, a pristine 1773 structure whose previous owners tried to do the electrical wiring themselves, almost causing Ms. Kitt to lose it in a fire.

The barn downstairs is an elegant mix of antique furniture, primitive art, an alabaster demitasse service and the needlepoint with which the entertainer fills whatever idle moments she has.

Upstairs, essentially one big room, are the furnishings that remain from her house on 2½ acres in Beverly Hills — now rented out, like the two apartment houses she owns in New York.

"Real estate you can trust," Ms. Kitt says tersely, the wide-set eyes luminous as coals above cheekbones that are a heritage from her maternal grandmother, a Cherokee Indian.

"Where people are concerned, I've never relied on anybody completely except the public."

It shows in her manner. She can be wary, even peremptory, until you have won her confidence.

She describes herself as having "been on tour since 1945" and having grown up "everywhere. People have to learn to do things themselves."

Born to a South Carolina sharecropper and his wife in 1926, 1928 or 1934 — the sources vary and she has no birth certificate — she never knew her father, was given away at an early age by her mother and brought to Harlem by an aunt.

Eartha Kitt is her real name.

"I sang in church," she recalls, lighting the first of several cigarettes, "but I didn't talk."

"I didn't know what I was doing when, in my teens, I got a scholarship with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company."

By the end of the '40s she had not only toured much of the world but appeared on Broadway for \$45 a week in something called "Blue Holiday," starring Ethel Waters and Avon Long.

In 1951 she let herself be talked into going to Turkey for no money at all to help celebrate the 34th birthday of the Istanbul Hilton.

Characteristically, Ms. Kitt is glad she went: "I learned something about that part of the world."

Her big break came in 1951 in Paris, where she had stayed on after the Dunham troupe left.

Orson Welles heard her sing in a nightclub there, is said to have pronounced her "the most exciting woman in the world" and promptly signed her to appear with him in a stage production of "Dr. Faust."

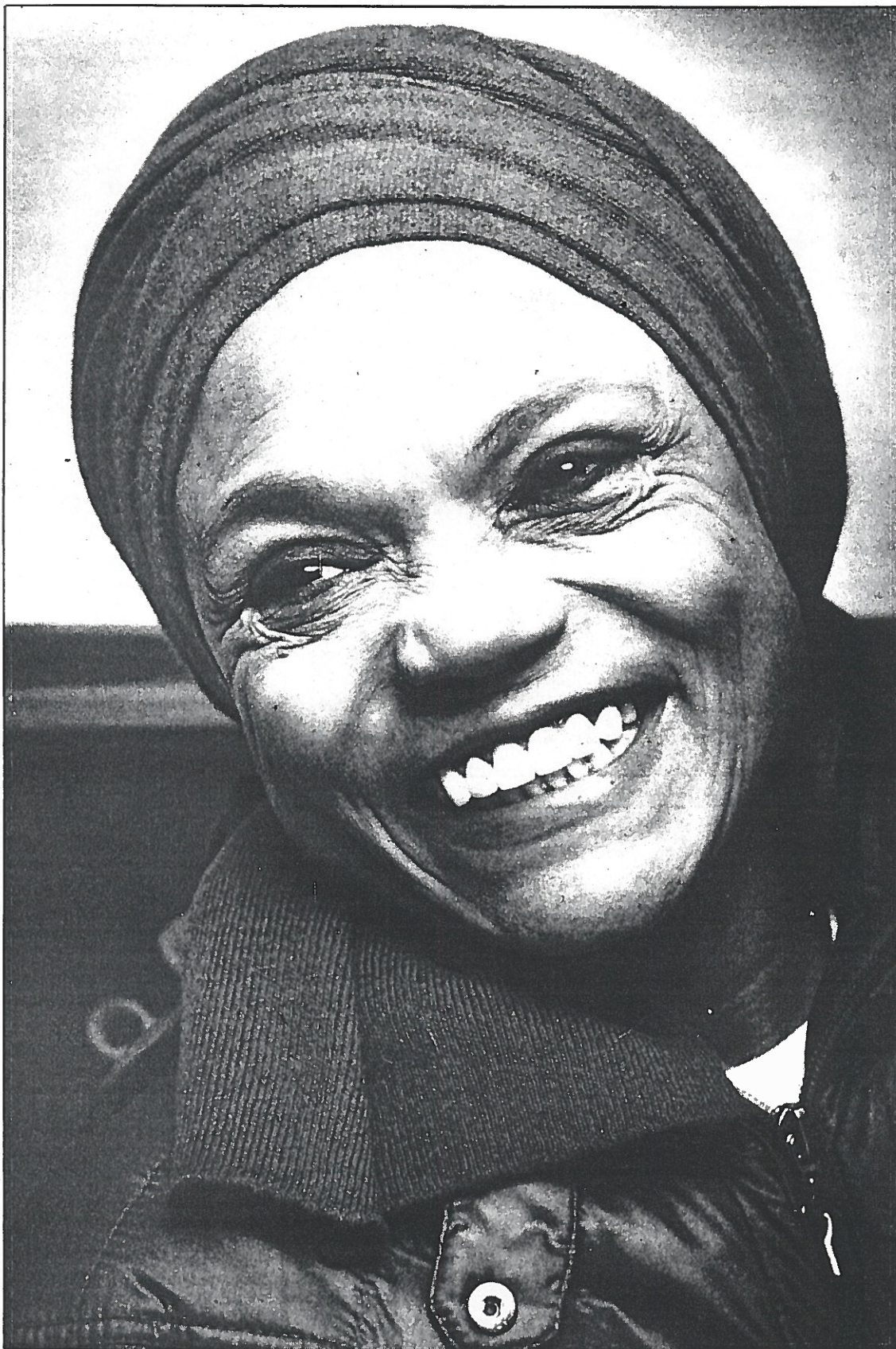
Her first solo on Broadway was in the revue "New Faces of 1952," growling and glowering her way through a worldly-wise number called "Monotonous."

"I was scared to death," she confesses with a grin.

"I was never a city person. I attended the High School of Performing Arts, but they teach you how NOT to act. It was Orson Welles who taught me the importance of acting, of becoming the person you're acting."

She got her chance at a straight dramatic role in 1954 with "Mrs. Patterson," which earned her a Tony Award nomination, and a few years later in the comedy "The Owl and the Pussycat."

At the end of the '50s she starred in



Ms. Kitt is the granddaughter of a Cherokee Indian. The ancestry is apparent in her cheekbones and wide-set eyes.

"The Mark of the Hawk" opposite Sidney Poitier and the film version of "Anna Lucasta" opposite Sammy Davis Jr.

Ms. Kitt made records during the '60s — "I was the first woman in 27 years who sold records for RCA" — and appeared in supper clubs such as the Persian Room of

the Plaza Hotel and the Empire Room at the Waldorf.

She remembers spending her first royalty check not on diamonds and furs but on a dozen pairs of shoes and a bicycle.

Then two things happened.

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On the cover

Eartha Kitt has made a specialty of playing bad girls but in private has done any number of good deeds. Cover photograph by Carol Kaliff.





Above: Eartha Kitt sprawled amid the furnishings from her house in Beverly Hills. Below: Ms. Kitt doing needlepoint under the watchful eye of her dogs.

with me — if you're an individual and don't fit in, you fit out."

The white teeth flash against the flawless taupe skin.

"I have three or four scripts upstairs, most of them dull. Broadway has become so pensive they have to play it safe. And look at television: Not one mulatto woman has the lead on TV."

Ms. Kitt has written two books about her experiences, "Thursday's Child" and "Lone With Me."

She's working on a third, tentatively titled "The Men in My Life," and is collaborating with Dr. Robert J. Schultz on a book about "how to exercise without killing yourself."

She herself takes aerobic classes and aches dancing privately. She also takes public, "for everything."

But her recipe for staying lithe and youthful-looking is chiefly to keep active — walking in the woods with her two toy poodles ("I rescued them from the pound"), jogging on her dirt road ("I'm not going to let them pave it over") and growing vegetables in her big garden ("I feed half of New York from that garden").

"(Henry) Perlowsky, who looks after my place when I'm away, told me you couldn't plant sweet potatoes in Connecticut," she says, "but look at this one! He didn't plant enough of them."

Nearby stands a basketful of apples from Rose Crohn, who lives not far away and who suggested that she do the Music Mountain benefit.

Suddenly, two white and two gray doves start acting up in cages in the kitchen, where Ms. Kitt is making coffee. It is precisely 4 p.m.

"When I visited Dr. Einstein at Princeton in 1954," she recalls, watching their performance, "he said, 'Birds exercise at 11 a.m. and at 4 p.m. Too bad humans aren't so disciplined.'"

"What was I doing there?" she echoes, adding in mock indignation, "I wanted to meet him!"

Eartha Kitt has gone the birds one better. She exercises all the time.

Why, The Hollywood Reporter even called her "an acrobat with lyrics" — the truth of which you can verify for yourself Saturday evening.

Music Mountain in Falls Village will benefit from "An Evening with Eartha Kitt" Saturday at 8:30 p.m. in the auditorium of the Hotchkiss School, Route 41 at Route 112 in Lakeville.

Tickets are \$25, or \$50 including a champagne reception afterward with Ms. Kitt.

For reservations call 927-4125.

