

Home

Therapy

Find a Therapist

Therapy Center

Diagnosis Dictionary

Topic Centers

Addiction

Anxiety

Depression

Food & Diet

Parenting

Personality

Relationships

Sex

Stress

Work

Complementary Health

Find a Practitioner

Alternative Health Center

Acupuncture

Aromatherapy

Chiropractic

Homeopathy

Massage Therapy

Naturopathy

Nutrition/Diet

Physical Therapy

Osteopathy

Self Tests

Career

Health

IQ

Personality

Relationships

Magazine

Current Issue

Subscribe

Subscriber Services

Professional Login

Log Into Your Account

Not Listed?

Special Offers

Free Brochures

Books

Education

Health & Lifestyle

## Eartha Kitt: She Growls, She Purrs

Interview with legendary Eartha Kitt, the original material girl.

By: [Carlin Flora](#)

**P**rofession Chanteuse

P. 1 of 2

### *Claim to Eccentricity:* Double-Edged Multilingual Mesmerizer

Eartha Mae Kitt—the original material girl, known for seductive renditions of characters (Catwoman) and pop hits ("Santa Baby")—can slay a man with a single look. She currently performs a sweet and salty cabaret act with charming jazz numbers in Japanese, French and even Tagalog. But while she's reached legendary status, she still harbors an orphan's insecurity. Born on a cotton farm in South Carolina, where she was stigmatized for being an illegitimate child of mixed race, Kitt shuttled between relatives before settling in Harlem as a teenager. There she joined a dance company, became a singer and was "discovered" by Orson Welles, who called her "the most exciting woman in the world."

### *How did you learn to dance, growing up on a farm?*

I never knew anything about show business. It happened by accident. One of my girlfriends dared me to audition for the Katherine Dunham dance troupe. I was a street dancer. It was rumba and cha-cha-cha; you just followed the leader.

### *As a child, did you identify more with blacks or whites?*

I never identified with anybody. I have always been very sensitive about my color, because everybody called me "yellow gal." I was caught in between both sides—nobody wanted me. I love that my audience is there, but I always feel as though I have to fend for myself.

### *What was it like to move to New York City as a teenager?*

Scary. I didn't know a thing about electricity, indoor plumbing, telephone, radio. In South Carolina, I used to pull the water from a spring that was half a mile away.

### *What has been your favorite role to play?*

Catwoman. It was fun, because I didn't have to think about her, I just did it. I didn't try to be sexy or anything. And I really needed a job at the time—it was after the incident at the White House. [Kitt was blacklisted at U.S. nightclubs for years after speaking against the Vietnam War while lunching with Ladybird Johnson.]

### *Do you regret those remarks?*

No. I was asked. I don't wear my political feelings on my sleeve. However, if I'm asked, I will answer honestly.

### *What is it like to be a legend?*

It's wonderfully funny. Whenever I walk out on a stage, I'm begging for affection. My best directors have always been my fans, sitting in that audience. I'm doing everything I possibly can to communicate with them.

Home

Therapy

Find a Therapist

Therapy Center

Diagnosis Dictionary

Topic Centers

Addiction

Anxiety

Depression

Food & Diet

Parenting

Personality

Relationships

Sex

Stress

Work

Complementary Health

Find a Practitioner

Alternative Health Center

Acupuncture

Aromatherapy

Chiropractic

Homeopathy

Massage Therapy

Naturopathy

Nutrition/Diet

Physical Therapy

Osteopathy

Self Tests

Career

Health

IQ

Personality

Relationships

Magazine

Current Issue

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Professional Login

Log Into Your Account

Not Listed?

Special Offers

Free Brochures

Books

Education

Health & Lifestyle

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*P. 2 of 2*

*Do you have different personalities onstage and off?*

Both of them touch each other. But they are very different. My husband [to whom she was married for five years] expected me to wake up with my makeup and eyelashes on! He was marrying Eartha Kitt, not Eartha Mae.

*How would you describe them?*

Eartha Mae is very shy. She's scared to be seen, scared of rejection and even afraid of affection. Relationships can be rather uncomfortable for her. But, as Eartha Kitt, it's fine. I can accept and reject any time I want to. Do I ever reject? Not really. Although people think I do!

*Hasn't your long-term success brought Eartha Mae some security?*

I think so. She still hides, but with the comfortable feeling that Eartha Kitt makes a very good living for her.

*Did having your own child help?*

I feel great about having a daughter. We're very close. She and her husband live a few miles down the road, with her children, who are 10 and 15.

*When you're talking to me, are you Eartha Mae or Eartha Kitt?*

I feel more like Eartha Mae, because she's very grateful that you are talking to Eartha Kitt on her behalf! Both of us think it's a lot of fun, that this urchin child that nobody wanted is doing this. They told me, "You're nothing," and so I made nothing into something.

*Where did your sultry-yet-scrappy gold digger persona come from?*

Oh, I think it's fun to look at people with big diamonds. I see them in my audience all the time, with the fur coat, a woman whose hand is always out front, or the two fingers are on the cheek to show her diamond. I don't have anything against that. [Material wealth] brings me happiness, but I don't need a lot of it in order to be happy. I just want what is necessary.

*What do you enjoy doing when you're not working?*

Playing in the woods. I have four acres here [in Connecticut]. Every time I come into New York on my days off, I have to get my nails done, because they have been ruined from digging in the dirt. I trust the dirt. I don't trust diamonds.