

# Austin American-Statesman

## Unforgettably Eartha, as always, on her own terms

By Tommy O'Malley

Thursday, July 27, 2006



### Eartha Kitt

- **Opening act:** Russ Lorenson
- **When:** Friday — 6 p.m. cocktails, 7 p.m. dinner, 8:30 p.m. performance
- **Where:** Mansion at Judges' Hill, 1900 Rio Grande St.
- **Cost:** \$175 (includes dinner); benefits Austin Cabaret Theatre's Educational Outreach Programs
- **Information:** 453-ACTS, [www.austincabaret.org](http://www.austincabaret.org)

A fact you might know: the United States introduced the world to the hydrogen bomb on Nov. 1, 1952 (thank you, Marshall Islands). Now, a fact you don't (because I'm making it up): The H-bomb was only the year's second-most explosive debut. The first? Eartha Kitt's scorching star turn in Leonard Sillman's "New Faces of 1952" (thank you, New York City).

More than a half-century later, the eternally sexy Kitt — who is headlining Austin Cabaret Theatre's second-annual summer gala on July 28 — is still radioactive.

"I never thought about having a career," Kitt said during a recent phone interview. "I had no desire to get into show business." The singer/actress/dancer, whose Southern mother sent her to live with an aunt in Harlem when she was 8, says that an early sense of abandonment forced her to seek alternative sources of approval. She found it as a featured performer with the Katherine Dunham Dance Troupe, where the

would-be seductress encountered the glory of the spotlight and the fast track to celebrity.

Today, Kitt is best known for her iconic work on the 1960s television series "Batman." As Catwoman, a camp-tastic remnant of the sexual revolution, she purred her way into the hearts of a generation of teenage boys. Unlike some actors who are linked indelibly — and reluctantly — to one role, Kitt embraces the association. "(Catwoman) has carried on, and everyone is in love with that character," she said. "You remember me from that character."

To be remembered, it seems, is all Kitt really wants. But she'd like it to happen on her own terms. "I always wanted to be independent. The public adopted me, so I stayed with them. Before my family — my daughter and grandchildren — I had (the audience)," she said. Kitt's self-professed loyalty to fans has not always been reciprocated, however. After a highly publicized clash with the White House in 1968 (she made Lady Bird Johnson cry when she criticized the Vietnam War), Kitt left the country to rehabilitate her image.

Reemerging in the mid-1970s, Kitt reignited her domestic career by headlining a concert at Carnegie Hall ("I never performed with groups, always by myself," the feral beauty quipped with an earned measure of conceit). A few years later, she garnered a Tony Award nomination for the 1978 musical "Timbuktu." She stayed with the show for more than a year and still considers it a highlight of her professional life. "We had a wonderful company," she said. "And the music was great. I don't believe in starting out with a show and not ending with it. You become part of the reason for its popularity."

Kitt belongs to a thinning generation of performers — including last year's gala draw, Carol Channing — who came about during the golden age of Broadway, a time when personalities dominated the marquees and "the show must go on" wasn't just a saying, it was a strict code of conduct. That Kitt, who playfully calls herself "the original material girl," is critical of the current crop of celebuitantes (e.g. Paris Hilton, Brooke "Hulk's Daughter" Hogan) is not surprising. "(They're) damaging to people who have talent, but this won't last long," she said. "Societies change, and if you are a true artist . . . you (will) outlast these people."

If anyone is versed in outlasting competition, it's the 79-year-old Kitt, who has worked with many titans of entertainment and left her own paw print on the industry. Since 2000, the actress has appeared on Broadway in the musicals "The Wild Party" (Tony nomination) and "Nine." She recently completed a monthlong engagement at New York's famed Café Carlyle, which New York Times critic Stephen Holden — who has loved and hated Kitt's work over the years — hailed as her "lightest, swiftest and funniest" show to date. (Lucky us, it's the same one she's bringing to Austin.)

**So strong is Kitt's allure that Russ Lorenson, a cabaret singer who tours a Tony Bennett tribute show around the country, agreed to open Kitt's Austin appearance for free. "I'm flying my band down," Lorenson said. "I said, 'I don't even care if you pay me; I just want to work with her.' " When other established performers are willing to pay to share a stage with you, it's not only a sign that you are loved, but also a good indication that you will — as Kitt has for so long hoped — be remembered.**