

On January 18, 1968, Eartha Kitt entered the White House as an invited celebrity and left as a political enemy.

First Lady Lady Bird Johnson was hosting a luncheon about juvenile crime. The room included successful women who were expected to discuss how troubled young people could be guided toward better behavior. Eartha listened as the conversation treated rebellion largely as a problem inside the young people themselves.

Then Lady Bird Johnson asked her what she thought.

Eartha connected juvenile unrest to the Vietnam War. She argued that the government was sending young men away to be wounded or killed, while children at home watched violence, poverty, and fear reshape their communities. Young people were not simply misbehaving for no reason. They were reacting to what the country was doing to them.

Her comments upset the room. Lady Bird Johnson reportedly became emotional. Newspapers quickly portrayed Eartha as rude, angry, and disrespectful. Entertainment opportunities in the United States began disappearing. The government had already gathered information about her, and a later-revealed CIA file contained gossip, accusations, and degrading descriptions of her personal life.

To understand why Eartha Kitt refused to remain polite, even when silence would have protected her career, we must understand the child who entered that White House with her.

Eartha Mae Keith was born on January 17, 1927, near the small town of North, South Carolina. She was raised in severe poverty and never had a secure understanding of who her biological father was. Her mother was Black and Cherokee. Eartha believed her father was white, but the exact circumstances of her birth remained uncertain and painful throughout her life.

Her light complexion made her a target inside a world already divided by race. Some white people rejected her for being Black. Some Black people treated her as an outsider because her skin was lighter and her background was unclear. The man who lived with her mother reportedly refused to accept her. She was sent to live with relatives and later described suffering hunger, neglect, physical punishment, and emotional abuse.

Colorism became one of the first forces shaping her identity. Colorism is prejudice based on skin tone within a racial group. Eartha's light skin did not protect her from racism, and it did not guarantee acceptance among Black people. Instead, she often felt that she belonged nowhere.

That rejection followed her long after childhood. As an adult, she tried to discover her father's identity through birth and government records. Some records remained hidden

or unclear. She found evidence that the truth of her birth had been treated as something shameful that other people were entitled to conceal from her.

The glamorous woman the world later saw did not emerge from a protected childhood. She constructed herself out of pieces other people had rejected.

At around eight years old, Eartha was sent to New York City to live with an aunt. The city introduced her to possibilities unavailable in rural South Carolina. She attended school, sang, danced, and eventually auditioned for the company of Katherine Dunham.

Dunham was not merely a dancer. She was a choreographer, anthropologist, educator, and one of the most important Black artists of the twentieth century. Her company studied and performed movements connected to African and Caribbean cultures at a time when American institutions routinely treated European traditions as superior.

Eartha joined the Katherine Dunham Company as a teenager. The work demanded strength, flexibility, rhythm, discipline, acting ability, and cultural understanding. She traveled through Europe, Mexico, South America, and other parts of the world. The abandoned child from South Carolina was suddenly encountering languages, music, customs, and audiences far beyond the United States.

Those international experiences shaped her permanently. She learned French and developed the ability to perform songs in numerous languages. She eventually sang in approximately eleven languages, giving her an unusual international identity. While American society remained obsessed with fitting people into rigid racial categories, Eartha was learning how large the world actually was.

Her voice became her signature. It was not traditionally smooth or powerful. It curled around words. She rolled consonants, stretched vowels, whispered, growled, purred, and laughed inside the music. She did not merely sing a lyric; she acted it.

That sound could suggest elegance, humor, danger, seduction, loneliness, or mockery. Eartha understood that performance was not only about vocal range. Timing, pronunciation, posture, facial expression, and silence could be just as important as the note itself.

Orson Welles cast her as Helen of Troy in his production of *Dr. Faustus* and reportedly described her as the most exciting woman in the world. Whether performing in a nightclub, theater, film, or television studio, she developed an identity that audiences could recognize immediately.

Her early recordings included “C’est si bon,” “Monotonous,” “I Want to Be Evil,” “Uska Dara,” “Just an Old Fashioned Girl,” and “Santa Baby.”

“Santa Baby,” released in 1953, became her most famous recording. The song presents a woman playfully requesting expensive gifts from Santa Claus—a fur coat, jewelry, a

convertible, and other luxuries. Eartha's performance makes the song work. She sounds seductive but also amused, as though she understands the ridiculousness of the character's demands.

The recording became a Christmas standard, but it also trapped part of her image. Many people reduced her to the exotic, mischievous woman with the purring voice. They enjoyed the fantasy without asking what intelligence, pain, and discipline existed behind it.

Eartha played with that image instead of allowing it to control her completely. Songs such as "I Want to Be Evil" allowed her to make fun of society's demand that women remain obedient, pleasant, and harmless. She performed the role of the dangerous woman with enough humor to reveal that the role itself was partly an invention.

Her sexuality was never passive. She did not appear to be waiting for male approval. She looked directly at the audience, controlled the pace, and seemed capable of laughing at anyone who believed they possessed her.

That control made her a natural choice for Catwoman.

Eartha joined the television series *Batman* in 1967, replacing Julie Newmar in the role. She became the first Black woman to play Catwoman in a live-action production. Her version did not imitate Newmar's. Eartha brought her own movements, sharpened speech, rolling growl, and commanding presence.

The casting carried racial importance even though the program did not directly discuss it. A Black woman was appearing on national television as intelligent, glamorous, desirable, dangerous, and fully in command of herself. She was not playing a maid, servant, or background character—the limited roles Hollywood often assigned Black women.

Catwoman could enter a room and make Batman respond to her.

However, Hollywood was more comfortable with Eartha as a fictional troublemaker than as a real woman criticizing the government. Her Catwoman was entertaining because her danger remained safely inside a costume. At the White House, the costume was gone.

Eartha had not been invited to the 1968 luncheon randomly. She had already worked with young people. She established the Kittsville Youth Foundation in Los Angeles and supported young activists working to improve neglected neighborhoods. She listened to teenagers who lived with poverty, racism, limited recreation, failing institutions, and the constant possibility of being labeled criminals.

When the White House discussed juvenile delinquency, Eartha refused to pretend that young people created their conditions by themselves. She believed adults, political leaders, economic systems, and war policies had responsibilities too.

Her criticism was not carefully packaged. She spoke directly in a setting where celebrities were generally expected to express gratitude and avoid embarrassing the administration. That honesty carried a cost.

After the luncheon, American bookings became difficult to obtain. Public criticism spread. The entertainment industry did not officially announce a blacklist, but the result resembled one. Eartha increasingly performed in Europe and Asia, where audiences continued welcoming her.

The punishment exposed a contradiction in American freedom. The United States claimed to defend freedom abroad during the Vietnam War, yet a Black woman could lose professional opportunities for criticizing that war at home.

Government surveillance deepened the violation. When journalist Seymour Hersh helped expose Eartha's CIA file during the 1970s, the public learned that it contained personal gossip and insulting claims unrelated to national security. Intelligence power had been used to investigate and discredit an entertainer who expressed a political opinion.

Eartha refused to apologize for her position. She had survived abandonment, hunger, abuse, racism, and colorism. Losing Hollywood's approval hurt her career, but approval had never been reliable enough for her to build her identity upon it.

Her return did not happen through begging to be accepted. She continued working until American stages made room for her again.

In 1978, she returned to Broadway in *Timbuktu!* Her performance earned a Tony Award nomination. The production allowed audiences to recognize that Eartha was not a temporary nightclub personality from the 1950s. She was a trained theatrical performer capable of rebuilding her career after a decade of political punishment.

During the 1980s, she found another audience through dance music. "Where Is My Man" became popular in clubs and gave her the first certified gold record of her career. Younger listeners, especially gay audiences, embraced her humor, confidence, theatricality, and refusal to hide who she was.

Eartha returned that loyalty. She supported LGBTQ rights, spoke in favor of same-sex marriage, and participated in benefits connected with HIV and AIDS. At a time when many public figures avoided gay communities out of fear or prejudice, she recognized people who knew what rejection felt like.

Her career transformed again through animation. In Disney's *The Emperor's New Groove*, she voiced Yzma, the thin, dramatic, power-hungry villain determined to seize the throne. Yzma was visually outrageous, but Eartha's voice gave the character her life. Every growl, pause, insult, and sudden change of volume made Yzma unpredictable and hilarious.

Children who had never heard “C’est si bon” or seen the 1960s *Batman* discovered Eartha Kitt through animation. She later voiced Yzma in *The Emperor’s New School* and won Daytime Emmy Awards for the role.

That late-career success reveals the flexibility of her talent. Her voice had once made her an international nightclub star. Decades later, the same instrument turned an animated villain into a favorite character. She understood how to renew herself without becoming unrecognizable.

Away from performance, Eartha was also a mother. She married John William McDonald in 1960, and their daughter, Kitt, was born in 1961. The marriage ended in divorce, but Eartha’s relationship with her daughter became central to her life. The child who had grown up uncertain of parental love worked to create a close family bond of her own.

Eartha continued performing into old age. She did not attempt to pretend she was still the exact woman who had recorded “Santa Baby” in 1953. She allowed age to become part of her presence. Her face, voice, stories, and survival gave the performance greater depth.

She died from colon cancer on December 25, 2008—Christmas Day—at the age of 81. The date permanently connected her death with the holiday song that had followed her for more than half a century.

But “Santa Baby” is far too small to contain Eartha Kitt.

She was a dancer trained by Katherine Dunham, an international cabaret singer, a multilingual performer, a Broadway actress, Catwoman, a voice artist, an activist, a youth advocate, and a woman monitored by her government for speaking against war.

Even her famous purr deserves a second understanding. It sounded playful, but it was also protective. Eartha learned to turn the qualities that made people treat her as different—her voice, complexion, accent, body, and uncertain background—into a style nobody else could own.

The White House incident remains the clearest test of who she was. Eartha entered a room containing some of the most socially powerful women in America. She knew the manners expected of her. She understood that the president’s family was connected to her invitation. She also understood that young people without political power were being discussed by adults who might never experience their conditions.

She chose the young people.

That decision damaged her career, but it preserved something more valuable: the connection between the woman onstage and the woman inside the performance. Eartha Kitt could pretend to be a villain, a seductress, or a spoiled woman asking Santa for

