



The day Eartha stood still

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I THOUGHT SHE might collapse into my arms. It was June 1978 and Eartha Kitt had just strode into the wings of D.C.'s Warner Theatre, her erect elegance folding like a fan the moment she was out of the spotlight. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Months before, I had reviewed *Timbuktu*, the all-black version of *Kismet* then at the Kennedy Center on its way to Broadway, for the now defunct local *OUT* magazine. Among acres of gold lame, shiploads of chiffon, semi trucks of seashells, and mountains of beefcake, disco darling Melba Moore was ostensibly the show's star, but she was forgotten the moment a certain legend, absent from theater for decades, entered.

And what an entrance it was. Someone shouted, "Where is Sahleem-La-Lume? Where is Sahleem-La-Lume?" and, to thundering drums, a near-naked man with bulging bodybuilder muscles appeared, a beautiful woman sitting on his shoulder, one lovely leg pointing forward. Another near-nude man got on all fours before them, and she, lifted up by her outstretched arms, then stepped onto his back, then onto the stage itself, declaring triumphantly, "I'm HERE!" and the audience exploded.

For all the talent behind it, I wrote that *Timbuktu's* whirling colors and sounds never merged into anything whole—while giving Kitt the praise she'd earned. So when I arrived later for an interview, she was extremely appreciative, and we became friends of sorts, something I'd never dreamed of when first mesmerized by her years before on the classic Ed Sullivan TV show. I went back to her dressing room several times just to talk. Behind the femme fatale, "Kitty" was funny, mystical, and, I think, a little lonely given that the four leads had apparently not bonded—Ms. Moore allegedly refused to speak to her offstage—and she was away from the greatest love of her life, her daughter Kitt.

One afternoon, we went to the bar in the Watergate Hotel where she was staying; she in mink and I in Woodies-on-sale. When the bill came for her glass of Champagne and my Coke, I felt her nudge me under the table. Looking down, I discovered her discretely extending a \$50 bill. She wanted to give me the dignity of paying.

ONE NIGHT AFTER the show, my roommate Leonard Matlovich accompanied her to a black private club. She had recently been given a copy of her FBI/CIA file that had been opened within hours of her having dared publicly tell First Lady Lady Bird Johnson at a White House luncheon gathering 10 years before that the greatest problem facing America's youth was her husband's war. Everyone burst out laughing when I read aloud the passage that declared her a "sadistic nymphomaniac." But what seemed ludicrous in retrospect had suffocated her career stateside for a number of years.

From there, we went to a D.C. drag emporium where a queen got the thrill of her life lip synching Eartha songs in front of La Kitt herself. Then it was on to the Capital's then most popular bar, Lost & Found. Its door twink unknowingly nearly created a diva disaster when he asked the unknown-to-him black woman with us for multiple IDs. Before she realized what was happening, the mortified manager whisked us in and to the surprise 50th birthday cake he had waiting for her. If racism and sexism persisted in the gay community, homophobia seemed never to have existed in Eartha, even before she and James Dean were pre-Hollywood pals in New York.

Sometime after seeing her off on the NYC-bound charter bus that she preferred to ride with *Timbuktu's* gypsies over a limo, Douglas Moore, candidate for D.C. City Council chair, began campaigning on a platform Anita Bryant could have written. "We don't let blind pilots fly planes, why should we let gays teach children," he asked.

Exactly a year after our overwhelming defeat in Florida, some feared that gay progress in D.C. might be halted or reversed, and adequate money to fight bigotry was an even greater challenge then. A member of the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club, I suggested asking Eartha to do a fundraiser for us.

TAKING THE TRAIN north, I saw the show again, and went to her dressing room at the Mark Hellinger Theatre. Despite our fears of a kind of Miami redux, I'm still amazed that I asked her not just to return to D.C. to give a concert on her one night off from eight *Timbuktu* performances a week, but added that we couldn't pay her. More amazing was that she said

yes.

And that's how I found myself watching her, sizzling in a revealing fishnet gown, from the Warner Theatre's wings that summer evening. I'd asked her to close with two songs she wasn't used to doing, and she'd said she would decide depending upon how she felt after finishing her usual hour-plus set.

The first was the "disco version" of *If My Friends Could See Me Now*, then a huge hit. Eartha came into the wings after multiple bows to rapturous applause, and I couldn't believe the difference the moment she was out of their view. It was as if a power switch had been flipped and she didn't just go limp, she appeared in physical pain. Still, she agreed to do the song, and then I witnessed a miracle.

Half staggering back toward the stage, the split second before the spotlight hit her she was suddenly ramrod straight, her famous smile beaming like the proverbial sun, her charisma at full blast, and the audience's ecstasy washed over her as Eartha stood still, rising higher as they recognized the opening beat of the surprise song.

Young and old went nuts, but Eartha again went limp once out of their view. At the same time I was ashamed of pushing for an even more memorable finish, I begged her to do the second, last encore as she kept gasping, "It's too much. It's too much!" As the applause and calls for more continued, she finally agreed, and the sorceress rejuvenated herself again as we both walked to center stage. She hadn't had time to learn the lyrics, so I'd hand printed them before the show on the back of some other sheet music, and stood beside her holding it as she sang the song I thought summarized why we were all there that night, her passionate intonation, her perfect cheekbones, and panther eyes punctuating each word.

***"If we only have love
We can reach those in pain
We can heal all our wounds
We can use our own names...
If we only have love
We will never bow down
We'll be tall as the pines
Neither heroes nor clowns
If we only have love..."***

The audience was as moved as I'd hoped, and their even louder applause and shouts of bravo were not just for Eartha the performer but for Eartha their friend and ally.

Sadly, for reasons I never fully understood, we hadn't sold many tickets, and even as Richard Maultsby, Stein's then president, ran up to me overwhelmed by her performance, saying we could sell out a second concert on word-of-mouth alone, we both knew it was too late. But we gave those who attended memories I doubt any ever forgot.

Months later, I moved to San Francisco, as did *Timbuktu* briefly, and we repeated our dressing room ritual. The next year she was back by the Bay performing in a cabaret, and several friends and I surprised her by holding up Eartha masks. After the show, she comforted in Spanish my Cuban friend still dealing with coming out.

I followed her from afar over the next several years; reading of other triumphs she had, other gay benefits she'd done; learning she'd sold her Beverly Hills house to move closer to Kitt and a glamorous grandmother's grandchildren in Connecticut. Even though Leonard, Tom Conley, Mayo Lee, Jim Zais, David Aiken, Ron Balin and Jerry Heil, and so many others who were there that magical night in 1978 are gone, silly me, somehow I never thought Eartha was mortal, too. Particularly after having seen her concert in 2007, ironically at the Warner and from a seat near the one from which I'd directed light cues 30 years before.

At 80, she was, in some ways, better than ever, singing to a packed house, "When I was a young girl, the world was my oyster. I danced till dawn underneath the Paris skies. ... One time in Montmartre, I drank gin with Sartre. We made love in daylight; we had nothing to hide." And, she was booked for another San Francisco cabaret run next May.

Perhaps I would have brought our photo on which she wrote, "To Michael who understands." Perhaps we would have raised a glass to distant friends. Perhaps I could have said one last "thank you!" But I must do it here instead.

As lesbian author Lillian Smith once wrote: "In my heart I kneel down."