

Eartha Kitt Overcame Poverty

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South Carolina's Story

The making of a state

When South Carolina-born Eartha Kitt made a \$10,000 contribution to the North Side Center Home for Orphans in New York in the 1950s, she confessed to one of the organization's officials that her dream was to meet Albert Einstein.

The official arranged a meeting at the 75-year-old scientist's Princeton, N.J., home. During tea they talked. Later, Eartha Kitt described her meeting with Einstein: "He was warm and affectionate. I didn't feel like an idiot as I thought I would."

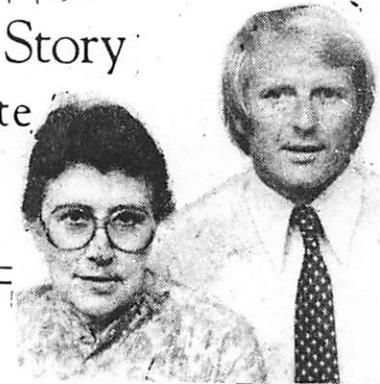
Eartha Kitt had come a long way from the abject poverty of her childhood. In fact, her story reads like Cinderella. From a life without parents, Eartha rose to become the charismatic star of stage, screen, television and the night club circuit.

Eartha Kitt was born on Jan. 26, 1928, in North, S.C. Her father, William Kitt, was a sharecropper who had his first good harvest in years when his daughter was born. In gratitude, he named her "Eartha."

Two years later, William Kitt died. Her mother tried to carry on the best she could, but died soon after, leaving 6-year-old Eartha and her little sister to drift about the neighborhood.

They survived by picking cotton in exchange for food and shelter. Two years later, young Eartha's aunt, who lived in Harlem, sent for her. Eartha arrived wearing the only clothes she owned. As she grew, Eartha demonstrated her amazing ability to sing and dance, winning many prizes at school.

At age 14, however, Eartha had to leave school and go out to work in a factory sewing army uniforms. She sacrificed and saved her money to pay for piano lessons.



A friend recognized her talent and arranged for an audition with a noted dance instructor, Katherine Durham. This led to a dance training scholarship.

Miss Durham selected Eartha for a troupe which toured the United States, Mexico and Europe. In one of her engagements, Eartha appeared with the group at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London before an audience that included members of the royal family.

When the troupe returned to the U.S., Eartha decided to stay in Europe. She made her nightclub debut at Carroll's in Paris and soon became the hit star in Paris and many other European cities.

Eartha caught the attention of famed director Orson Welles who asked her to play Helen of Troy in Faust. Although she had only two nights to learn the part, her performance drew the critics' praise. In 1951, the Parisian newspaper France-Soi gave her second place in its annual award for "the greatest acting achievement of the year."

During a two-year tour of the revue "New Faces," Eartha's fame continued to spread. Next she found time to become a movie actress. She starred in two French movies before being enticed to return to New York

to sing in nightclubs and appear on stage.

Her first dramatic stage role came in 1954 when she starred in Mrs. Patterson. William Hawkins of the New York World Telegram and Sun wrote that "nobody who goes to see Mrs. Patterson will doubt that Eartha Kitt is destined to be one of the major figures of our theatre."

RCA Victor recognized her talent and signed her to a record contract. "C'est Si Bon," "Santa Baby" and other cuts from her "Eartha Kitt Album" became juke box favorites.

When 20th Century Fox decided to make a movie of New Faces, Eartha sang several new songs composed especially for her.

Not satisfied with being successful in movies, on stage and on the night club circuit, the ambitious young woman began appearing on such television programs as "Toast of the Town" and the "Colgate Comedy Hour."

From \$350 a week in 1952, Eartha's earnings jumped to \$10,000 weekly in 1954. Each of her records sold about 600,000 copies.

Yes, Eartha Kitt did indeed come a long way — from the grinding poverty of rural South Carolina to the top of the entertainment business.