



# America's Mistress: The Life and Times of Miss Eartha Kitt

*John L. Williams*

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Strait-laced, pre-civil rights America wasn't ready for Eartha Kitt. Waiting for others to be ready was never her style. In *America's Mistress* John L. Williams captures the person behind the myth in this engaging biography but also race relations in Twentieth-century America.

From humble roots on a South Carolina cotton plantation, the multilingual, possibly multi-racial chanteuse emerged seemingly from nowhere to seduce the nation and redefine cosmopolitan glamour. Blending intellect, self-awareness and unprecedented sex appeal, she was a Technicolor presence in a black-and-white world.

But the key to her allure was always her mystery, and her three not-entirely-consistent autobiographies raise more questions than they answer about who she really was--whether singing, dancing, acting or drawing headlines for her romantic dalliances and political activism.

Drawing on extensive original research and interviews with the people who knew her best, Williams--whose previous biographical subjects include Shirley Bassey and English civil rights activist Michael X--delivers a comprehensive, compassionate and thought-provoking record of a life that defied stereotypes, shattered boundaries, yet seemed to fall short of its potential in the end.

Beginning with Eartha's tumultuous childhood, Williams makes a bold claim about the identity of her true father--a question that has never been answered. From there Williams traces her escape to Harlem, where she came into contact with leading black entertainers and found quick success as a company dancer--which, in turn, enabled her to travel the world and segue into film, television and music stardom.

Williams details her time at the top of the entertainment business--when Orson Welles famously called her "the most exciting woman in the world"--with candor and striking revelations. *America's Mistress* focuses on how, as Eartha's social consciousness developed, she found herself awkwardly torn between the realities of Jim Crow oppression and her lucrative role as white America's ultimate sex kitten.

Whether or not her decline began with her 1968 infamous public confrontation with Lady Bird Johnson (that left the First Lady in tears), the later decades of Eartha's life were marked by America's growing indifference to the woman who once captured its attention like no one before or since.

But *America's Mistress* is ultimately a celebration of a remarkable American life that paved the way for black entertainers from Belafonte to Beyoncé. With objectivity and thoroughness, John L. Williams provides sought-after answers to tantalizing and elusive questions.

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