



Rene Marie channels Eartha Kitt in sensational fashion at 2014 New Orleans Jazz Fest

By Andrew Adler - April 26, 2014



Oh Rene Marie, you wicked woman! You wicked, wild, wonderful woman! Dangerous woman! Singer of sly, sultry songs! I'm in your spell! Hopelessly besotted!

So, I'd venture to say, were most of the listeners who filled the **Jazz Tent** on the first Saturday of the **New Orleans Jazz Fest**. Presenting a program in tribute to the late Eartha Kitt, Marie pretty much reduced her audience to stunned, delighted silence. That is, when people weren't cheering her, leaping up, or clamoring for yet another delectable

morsel.

The happily explosive opening told the tale of the entire set. "They say I'm a witch; I use my songs to entice you," Marie sang, in the Kitt-favorite "I'd Rather Be Burned as a Witch (Than Never to Burn at All)." Smashingly fine, this. So were the efforts from her sidemen, who sounded in complete sync and sympathy with their headliner.

"I hope you are holding on to something tight, because you're in for a wild ride," she promised. Yet the journey wasn't all 300 miles an hour. "C'est si bon" purred lusciously along, as did a sinewy account of Cole Porter's "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," where each entendre became reason to celebrate the miracle of double and triple meanings.

Turning to Dave Frishberg's "Peel Me a Grape," Marie offered a portrait of "a woman who knows exactly what she wants, when she wants it, and the way she wants it." Explaining that too many interpreters "sing it too cutesy," Marie struck a blow for lip-smacking frankness. "I never had such fun being naughty in all my life," she confessed. Her, and us.

Along the way, she remarked that "I'm singing (a) song because Eartha Kitt sang it. That's the only reason." A comment like that might lead observers to believe that such a concert, fundamentally, was merely an act of dutiful obeisance. Nothing could be further from what unfolded here.

The most sensational results emerged from a relatively unexpected source: "Angelitos Negros" ("Paint Me Black Angels"), with texts by Venezuelan poet Andres Eloy Blanco. This ballad, which chides artists who paint only white angels and depictions of the Virgin Mary, became, under Marie's attentions, a monodrama of soaring, astonishing impact.

"It's a lot of fun singing these songs," she acknowledged, adding that "it's a lot cheaper than therapy." Then it was on to her finale, the title track from her CD, "I Wanna Be Evil." Yes, sometimes badness is its own best reward.