

Perspective

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March 2022 | £6.99 | perspectivemag.co.uk



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

It's a woman's world

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ISSN 2634-7628



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Wade Graham's Walden

Singer Katie Lee's extraordinary passion
for Glen Canyon



Photo by Martin Kohler

I can say, and perhaps you do too, that I “love” nature, but it is little more than a figure of speech. It’s an idea of love at one remove from what is known as “true love”, used in the way we describe love for our country, or Italian cinema, or the colour blue. But when the singer and activist Katie Lee said she loved nature, she meant it. For her it was a deeply

passionate longing, as physical, even sensual, as could be imagined, fulfilled only in fleeting embraces with rock and water. The kind of love she felt for nature was conceived in response to the devastating loss of our planet’s life-giving capacity; and if we too can harness that passion, it is possibly the most potent weapon we have for fighting back.

“He rose some eight inches in

the night,” she once wrote of her lover. He had first turned red, after a conversation with another. “No one has to tell me why,” she added.

It turns out her lover wasn’t a man but the Colorado River, which flows 1,100 miles through the desert canyons of the American Southwest, from its Rocky Mountain sources to the sea in Mexico. The “other” wasn’t a rival but

a side creek, into whose headwaters it had rained, carrying down a load of rust-colored silt and mud into the Colorado, thus causing that tumescence. More specifically, her lover was Glen Canyon, the sinuous, 200-mile stretch of Utah desert where the sometimes rapid-lashed Colorado slows to a calm, beguiling pace, through towering red-rock walls.

Katie Lee fell in love with Glen Canyon in the late 1950s and early 1960s, just before it died at the hands of a Cold War-era US government hell-bent on damming, strip-mining, ploughing and paving every potentially profitable inch of its territory. The Glen saved Katie, and her love for the Glen may yet be its salvation.

A petite blonde from Arizona, with a knack for performance and a glint in her eye, Katie had gone to Hollywood after university to pursue dreams of singing and acting. She found moderate early success but was discontented by the snares and compromises of Tinseltown, by the grind of touring nightclubs and the corrosions of the Red Scare, when the FBI went after her folksinger friends, including Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, and Pete Seeger. It was they who helped her hone her singular voice: high and clear, full of mordant humor and mischief, her emotional capacity and vulnerability glimpsed in its cracks.

Looking, mostly unconsciously, for a way out, she was drawn back to the desert of her youth, to the Colorado River, at first by a handsome boatman who invited her on a trip in exchange for serenading his passengers, then increasingly by the river itself. Floating the Glen, she was smitten by its soaring walls and cavernous alcoves, by the blue sky above, and the torturously narrow “slot” side-canyons that led to dripping grottoes filled with ferns and columbines. In her songs, she began to limn its sounds and silences, its shimmering patterns of light reflected off water onto stone: its “Iridescent light-butterflies” that “ripple by my face.”

On multiple, successive trips, she

went as deep as she could, exploring unnamed side-canyons and climbing waterfalls that blocked her way, often stripping naked to swim through dark pools and wade through mud. Her companions photographed her perched among the rocks, her bare skin sensuous against “the soothing, lounging shapes of Navajo sandstone – shapes I could press myself into and feel part of.”

Gradually, the difference between “human” and non-human nature dissolved for her. She saw the river, doing its assiduous work of eroding the rock and carrying it to the sea as *male* and erotic – as a priapic god in fact: “he percolates to a vigorous state of motion and power, surging, rolling, laughing in his vernal orgy, probing the rock’s fissures – fecund, virile, *wild*.” But gender wasn’t the point. When a male writer compared Glen Canyon to a ravishing woman, Katie shrugged, commenting: “He or she...the gender of places we love is personal.” In the rocks, she saw both: “I look back at the shadowed entrance and see that this sensual side canyon’s aperture resembles the intricate, smooth, pinkish folds of a *vulva*.” And she saw both everywhere: “...those fluted, heart-stopping, erotic sinuosities; the sequestered gracilities (anything but a slot!) – the Eros-Apollo, phallic protrusions, and all those lounging beds of tits and bums.”

Tragically, the canyon she loved was even then doomed to be drowned, by the engineers of the US Bureau of Reclamation, when their record-breaking, 710-foot high concrete dam was finished in 1963 and began to fill, smothering the Glen and its hundreds of side canyons under the second-largest reservoir in the country.

Katie Lee reacted as if her man had been killed in cold blood. Watching the river’s “asphyxiation – slowly, inch by inch,” she wrote, “acted like a brand on my soul, burning in my anger, my contempt for those who killed it. Anger – an emotion as powerful as love – can be used as a stimulant, exciting and creative. A force.”

She resolved to “wear my anger like a crown!” She took Burl Ives’ advice to her, to “Get the hell out of Hollywood and take your songs on the road.” She dedicated herself to writing and touring, singing, speaking, and telling stories, becoming the singular voice of vanishing Glen Canyon, and the larger American West, then as now under assault by strip miners, oil drillers, cattlemen, and the worst, the morally and spiritually blind engineers of the “Wreck-the-Nation Bureau”, as she renamed the Bureau of Reclamation.

Like her, these songs and stories are frank, ribald, profane, witty, joyful – and angry. They rarely fail to make audiences weep and curse, because Katie herself knew how to weep and lust in the overwhelming beauty and presence of the river in its canyons, and to curse their despoilers. Most importantly, she knew how to transmit those intense emotions to strangers: to move and inspire them to keep fighting against the wreckers of the nation and the planet.

Though she died in 2017, at the age of 98, Katie Lee’s voice has only grown louder and clearer, and more crucial to the fight to preserve this planet as a place to sustain love and life – even as the odds of success grow worse. What she brought, and continues to bring, is not just anger, but humour, poetry, frank sexuality, and passion that’s unafraid to be sensual. She has an uncanny ability to bring nature – water, rocks and the processes of geologic time itself – into intimate contact with the human frame: to make them shapes we can press ourselves into and feel part of.

Wade Graham is the author of “American Eden, a cultural history of gardens in America”, “Dream Cities: Seven Urban Ideas That Shape the World” and “Braided Waters: Environment and Society in Molokai, Hawaii”. He is a trustee of Glen Canyon Institute in Salt Lake City and lives in Los Angeles. wadegraham.com