

# "THE FOXIEST GIRL IN THE WEST 2"



BORN IN 1919 AND RAISED ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF TUCSON, THE LEGENDARY KATIE LEE HAS SEEN THE SUPERFICIALITY OF HOLLYWOOD AS A FOLK SINGER, THE SANCTITY OF THE NATURAL WORLD AS A RIVER RUNNER, AND THE INSINGIERITY OF BUREAUCRACY AS AN ACTIVIST FOR GLEN CANYON. HER WRITINGS AND MUSIC HAVE INSPIRED A GENERATION OF NATURALISTS WHO "WON'T TAKE NO BULL." MS. LEE'S INTERVIEW IS CONTINUED FROM LAST MONTH ...



## INTERVIEW WITH KATIE LEE BY KYLE BOGGS

**C**onnection to the natural world is something that can move one to tears, as you describe on your album, *Glen Canyon River Journeys*, and elsewhere. You mentioned looking out at a canyon with your friend Frank and you both started crying because the landscape was so overwhelming.

I can tell you the canyon — it was Bowns Canyon, which had three forks to it. It was also called Long Canyon as well. But it was just a startlingly beautiful Eden-esque scene. It made us wonder, "How come we have the privilege to look at it?" And it just left us speechless and we looked at each other and we were both crying. That place had the power to do that and there are many places on this good Earth that have that same power. If you are receptive enough to see and to feel and to understand that there is something incredible there. It's a combination of so many things. It's a mystery that you can't solve. It's all your senses engaged at once. It kind of blows the top of your head off.

Why does it seem to hit some people and not others?

Well, I suppose they're just scared, and not open to that kind of emotional impact. And again, I feel sorry for them. That's what my friend Dick meant when he told me, "Katie, you won't really understand the canyon until you go there alone." And I didn't understand that at all because I'd always gone with some-

body, you know, Tad or Frank. I just couldn't understand what he meant by going alone until I did it. And it was a totally different experience.

How so?

When you're alone, you really get down to the nitty gritty — where you get to talkin' to the rocks and they get to talkin' back to you. You don't want to step here because it's obvious that it might give way. You learn things like that when you start to get in step with the stone. But you have to spend a day or two after you come out of civilization in order to get the rhythm of walking on sandstone. It's not the same as walking on sand. It's not the same as walking on cement, definitely not cement.

Over the years, I developed a relationship with that river. And I wrote a lot of it down. It had something to say to me and I had something to say to it.

What does the sandstone have to say?

They have to say where they were born and how they were born and you don't have to be a geologist to figure that out. They have to say how big they are and how dinky you are in comparison. They humble you. And they have to teach you patience, if you're capable of being taught that at all. That's something I had a hard time with; I wanted to see it all, all at once. But the more I went back, the

more I learned.

You can't know a place if you only see it once or twice. You have to be entwined in that place. You have to really want to know what's going on. It's a never-ending curiosity in figuring out how this or that curve or dip in the rock was formed or why the river does this or turns that way. You might want to know why this rock fell down, but this other piece didn't.

Pretty soon, you just get so involved in trying to figure these things out. That's what I mean about the rocks talking back to you. You know, if you look long enough, you will see what happened and why it's that way and why it will be that way again. That's how I developed a relationship with that place. I got to know it.

Why is all this so important?

To most humans, it's not important at all and that's what's wrong. If more of 'em knew what was going on out there, they wouldn't be out to destroy so much of it, either for money or anything else. But that does not seem to be the way our civilization is set up.

But it is important. It's important because these places have a lot to teach us, not just about them, but as I mentioned, about ourselves. They teach us what we're capable of; they remind us of how fragile the real world is, and the scope of our actions. They help us find our place in this world, as a member, not a master.

Regarding the mindset of those of us who grew up among the Rocky Mountains, in your book about cowboy songs, *Ten Thousand Goddamn Cattle*, you wrote, "The Rockies:

The one physical feature that more than any other makes Westerners different from Easterners. Not better, or wiser, or more sensitive, just different." Can you explain?

It means what it says. They're different. On our side of the Rockies, we've got space. Most of our national parks, the big ones are all out here. And if you want to call space a 500-mile stretch of nothing but corn fields or alfalfa fields, that's okay with me, but that's not the kind of space for me. I need the kind of space that has mountains and rivers in it, and no people, a place where you can look clear across the horizon and not see a house, or a cornfield.

There ain't no way I'd live in the city — no way. I don't know how to quite explain it, but I know if you're born in a tight little spot and you don't experience the natural world and you don't see the sun much, that's a different upbringing than out here where it is wide open and you can roam around under the sun, never fixed within a certain space.

What do these big spaces do to us?

They give you time and space to think, they give you an expanse in your blood. Most places I've lived were always at the edge of town. And that gave me a view of mountains all around, desert, and dry riverbeds, places like that, to go hunting and places like that to get lost. Though if you know that place, you've already been lost and you'll never be lost again. I could get lost in Kansas really easy, but flatlanders and flat land just ain't my thing. I need a bump now and then.

What if they never built the dam, never flooded the Glen Canyon? Do you think it

would remain the beautiful, mysterious, love affair you write about?

If the Glen were like it was then today, it would be trampled to death. I'm afraid it would. Unless according to the way I put it in my afterward to Glen Canyon Betrayed, it was made into a special place. It should be a sanctuary. Because it is very important for what happens downstream. There are only a few places along the river where the nurseries happen. And Glen was one of those. It fed the whole rest of the river until the next nursery. The nurseries are gone and it's killing the Grand Canyon.

I read some of John Wesley Powell's journals from his expedition in 1869. As a surveyor, his initial impression of Glen Canyon caught my attention because he described that place so eloquently.

It was different than any other writing in all of his journals wasn't it?

Yes it was. From his detailed descriptions of the carved walls, royal arches, glens, alcove gulches, mounds, and monuments, it was obvious that it wasn't just a bunch of rocks to him. How do you think he would react to knowing that reservoir was named after him?

(Laughing) He would roll over in his grave. He would absolutely be snot-flying mad. That would just destroy him. That was the first thing I thought about when I heard they were gonna name it "Res Foul," I mean "Res Powell." Oh God, there are so many more appropriate names, like "Utah's Piss Urinal," "Foul the Fjord" and umm, never mind.

At last summer's Coconino County Fair, up at Fort Tuthill in Flagstaff, the Department of Natural Resources tent gave me a temporary tattoo that said, "Save the Humpback Chub" and contained an image of the fish. I asked them what the number one threat is to the survival of the humpback chub? They replied immediately, "Glen Canyon Dam," to which I responded, "Well, this seems like a pretty open and shut case, doesn't it? When is the dam coming down?" They explained to me that they were seeking "realistic options."

There isn't a compromise about a fish. You can't catch all the fish and bring them to the warm water [on the other side of the dam]. You can't do that. The only way you can do that is to let the river flow. And you don't have to get rid of the dam to do that. I don't care if it stays there for 25 thousand centuries, as a monument to Dominy's [Floyd Dominy, the Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner who oversaw the Glen Canyon Dam project] stupidity and the "Wreck-the-Nation-Bureau." That would be fine with me. But the river's gonna work its way around that. I mean, the sandstone is so terribly porous. The river will make its way through one of these days.

I've heard that the dam is pretty weak.

It's terribly weak. They pushed caulk and steel rods into the sandstone to hold it on the right side of the dam. They were told never to build it there; the sandstone is too porous. They didn't care. Do what they want to do. And I don't think there is going to be too many more big dams built, period.

In your film, Love Song to Glen Canyon, you said that the Glen "diluted your ego to its proper consistency." What does this mean?

Well that means exactly what I said. I came from Hollywood and in Hollywood, there's nothing but egos floating around in the air, underground, through the ether, morning,

noon and night. It's an ego town. And if you don't have a certain amount of that, you just get trampled under foot, that's all. So when I hit Glen Canyon and did my first two or three trips down there and especially when the three of us started going, all that just fell off.

I was still working at coffee houses and clubs for ten years; the years I spent in the Glen were the years I worked, and a few more after that. But you don't need that kind of a pushy ego in the canyon. I was not the pushy type, never have been, but at least I knew how to stand my ground. After the Glen Canyon, I just didn't need that. It's like a brick wall or ...

...Or a dam?·

Yes. A barrier that you put up to keep yourself safe – all kinds of influences, all kinds of personal influences, influences from other people, influences from things like booze, drugs, and other stuff like that. You just put up a wall to keep yourself safe. That wall can be a detriment to you if you're going to go into a canyon, like the Glen. You don't want that wall there. You want everything knocked down so that everything can get to you so that you can respond to it.

I wanted to ask you more about this "double life" that you recall constantly in your work: "Tinsel Town" and the natural world. Is there something about longing for a place that intensifies your affinity toward it?

Oh, absolutely! As a matter of fact, between Frank and a few other river people, we would exchange tapes. I would give anything to see those tapes again. Frank had most of them and he destroyed them, the good Mormon that he is. And I guess all mine got taped over or whatever, but I don't have them anymore.

I had this old Concertone that I carried around with me everywhere in the back of my T-bird. It went everywhere with me. I recorded stuff that I was trying to work on. I recorded new songs and stuff that other people were singing at the time. Those tapes would transform me back home. It was so imprinted on my brain, on my eyes, it never got wiped out, but the correspondence did intensify it and it did make it more real, leaving me more anxious to get back out there. 🎧

**KYLE BOGGS' INTERVIEW WITH KATIE LEE IS CONTINUED NEXT MONTH, WHEN SHE REVEALS THE DOUBLE LIFE SHE LEAD AS A HOLLYWOOD STARLET, THE SECRETS OF THE COWBOY SONG, AND THE TRUE MEANING OF "HOOTENANNY."**

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