



Walter
Peters

Josephine Baker

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This page is for the 1920's African-American cultural icon. For the first female director of Public Health, see Sara Josephine Baker.

Josephine Baker (June 3, 1906 - April 12, 1975), born^[1] was an American-born dancer, actress and singer. She was given the nicknames "Black Venus", "Black Pearl", and "Creole Goddess". She became a citizen of France in 1937.

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Josephine Baker, c. 1920

Biography

Early life

Josephine Baker was born on June 3 , in St. Louis, Missouri, the daughter of Carrie McDonald. Her father's identity is debated. It is often said that he was Eddie Carson, who certainly was the lover of Carrie McDonald.^[2] Her father is identified as vaudeville drummer Eddie Carson by the official biography of her estate;^[3] however, there are other sources that state that her father was a travelling Jewish salesman.^[4] She was of mixed ethnic background: Native American/African American. She descended from Apalachee Indians and Black slaves in South Carolina.^[5]

She started her career as a street performer, dancing in the street as a child. She entered vaudeville joining the St. Louis Chorus at 15. She then headed to New York City during the Harlem Renaissance, performing at the Plantation Club and in the chorus of the popular Broadway revues *Shuffle Along* (1921) and *The Chocolate Dandies* (1924). She performed as the last dancer in a chorus line, a position in which the dancer traditionally performed in a comic manner, as if they were unable to remember the dance, until the encore, at which point

they would not only perform it correctly, but with additional complexity. She was then billed as "the highest-paid chorus girl in vaudeville."

On October 2, 1925, she opened in Paris at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, where she became an instant success for her erotic dancing and for appearing practically nude on stage. After a successful tour of Europe, she reneged on her contract and returned to France to star at the Folies Bergère, setting the standard for her future acts. She performed wearing only high heels and a skirt made of bananas; she was often accompanied by her pet cheetah, Chiquita, who was adorned with a diamond collar. The cheetah frequently escaped into the orchestra pit, where it terrorized the musicians, adding yet another element of excitement to the show.

Rise to fame

After a short while she was the most successful American entertainer working in France—whereas in the U.S., she would have suffered from the racial prejudices common to the era. Ernest Hemingway called her "the most sensational woman anyone ever saw." In addition to being a musical star, Baker also starred in several successful films, among them *Zouzou* (1934) and *Princesse Tamtam* (1935).

Upon marrying her manager Giuseppe Pepito Abatino—a Sicilian stonemason who passed himself off successfully as a Sicilian count—Baker transformed her stage and public persona into a sophisticated cultural figure. (The marriage was reportedly a publicity stunt and not legally binding.)

At this time she also scored her greatest song hit "*J'ai deux amours*" (1931) and became a muse for contemporary authors, painters, and sculptors including Langston Hughes, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Pablo Picasso.

She was so well known and popular that even the Nazis, who occupied France during World War II were hesitant to cause her harm. In turn, this allowed Baker to show her loyalty to her adopted country by participating in the Underground. After the war, Baker was awarded the Croix de Guerre for her underground activity.

Yet despite her popularity in France, she never obtained the same reputation at home. Upon a visit to the United States in 1936, she starred in a failed version of the *Ziegfeld Follies* (being replaced by Gypsy Rose Lee later in the run) her personal life similarly suffered, and she went through six marriages, some legal, some not. During this time, when Baker returned to the United States, she was allegedly at a dinner party and began to speak in French as well as English with a French accent. An African-American maid was reputed to tell her, "Honey, you is full of shit. Speak the way yo' mouth was born". She had the woman fired.^[6]

In 1973, Josephine Baker opened at Carnegie Hall to a standing ovation. Josephine's last marriage was to American artist Harry Balzanya.

Civil rights involvement

Though based in France, she supported the American Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s, and protested racism in her own unique way, adopting twelve multi-ethnic orphans, whom she called her "Rainbow Tribe."^[1] (http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/919/Josephine_Baker_international_entertainer) Her



Josephine Baker pictured in her most famous outfit - the legendary 'banana skirt'.

adopted children were: Akio (Korean son), Janot (Japanese son), Luis (Colombian son), Jarry (Finnish son), Jean-Claude (Canadian son), Moise (French son), Brahim (Arab son), Marianne (French daughter), Koffi (Ivory Coast son), Mara (Venezuelan son), Noel (French son), Stellina (Moroccan daughter).[2] (<http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/bake-jos.htm>) [3] (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001927/bio>) Jean-Claude Baker and his brother Jarry run the restaurant 'Chez Josephine' on Theatre Row, 42nd Street, New York, that celebrates Josephine's life and works.[4] (<http://www.chezjosephine.com/jean-claude.html>)

She also refused to perform for segregated audiences in the United States and worked with the NAACP.[5] (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-02/3-02bostock-e.htm>) For some time she lived with all of her children and an enormous staff in a castle, Château de Milandes, in the Dordogne in France. (Baker had only one child of her own, stillborn in 1941, an incident that precipitated an emergency hysterectomy.)

In 1963, she spoke at the March on Washington at the side of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. [6] (<http://www.nbjcoalition.org/news/black-history-profile-5.html>) Wearing her Free French uniform with her Legion of Honor decoration, she was the only woman to speak at the rally. [7] (<http://www.abbeville.com/civilrights/washington.asp>)

As mentioned above on tours of the United States she refused to perform in segregated nightclubs. Her insistence on mixed audiences helped to integrate shows in Las Vegas, Nevada. Nevertheless, her career was on a downturn and she was near bankruptcy until she was bailed out and given an apartment by her close friend, Princess Grace of Monaco, another expatriate American living in Europe.

Death

On April 8, 1975, her fortunes seemed to be turning to the better when she was the star of a retrospective show at Club Bobino in Paris, *Joséphine*, celebrating her 50 years in the theater. The show opened to rave reviews. She died of a cerebral hemorrhage less than a week later at the age of 68. She was found lying peacefully in her bed surrounded by newspapers with glowing reviews of her performance.

She became the first American-born woman to receive French military honors at her funeral, which was held at L'Église de la Madeleine. Paris came to a standstill on the day of her funeral, and 20,000 filled the streets to watch her procession. She was interred at the *Cimetière de Monaco*.

"Place Josephine Baker" in the Montparnasse Quarter of Paris was named in her honor. She has also been inducted into the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Video

- Joséphine Baker performing *Avec*, 1966 (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=3Bes5awrQzc>)
- Joséphine Baker performing *J'ai deux amours*, circa 1930 (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=qC01OpmVBi4>)

Quotes

- "I have two loves: my country and Paris."
- "Since I personified the savage on the stage, I tried to be as civilized as possible in my daily life."
- "You've got to fight every single day. When I see a roach, I step on it."
- "We can make all our dreams come true, but first we have to decide to awaken from them."

Pop culture

- In the French film *Les Uns et les Autres*, an African-American vaudeville performer appears who is clearly based on Josephine Baker.
- The 2004 erotic novel, *Scandalous* by British author Angela Campion uses Josephine Baker as its heroine and is inspired by Baker's sexual exploits and later adventures in the French Resistance. In the novel, Josephine, working with a fictional black Canadian lover named Drummer Thompson, foils a plot by French fascists in 1936 Paris. The novel is said to be the first time an historical figure has been used as the heroine in a modern erotica novel.
- "Josephine Baker ranked in at #8 on "Wayne's Top Ten Babes of All Time" in a Wayne's World skit on *Saturday Night Live*: "*See, Josephine Baker was a babe from the 20's, while though she was a victim of the prevailing racial mores of her native United States, became the toast of Paris known primarily for her exotic banana dance, ok.*" - Wayne "*It's so obvious!*" - Garth
- The animated film *The Triplets of Belleville* featured a half-nude caricature of Baker. Director Sylvain Chomet states in one of the commentary segments that this scene was the reason the film got a PG-13 rating in America.
- There is a track on Al Stewart's album *Last Days of the Century*, "Born too Late to see Josephine Baker". It describes the narrator watching an old documentary on television and fantasizing about "Josephine Baker/dancing in a Paris cabaret"
- The English pop group Sailor in their debut 1974 album of the same name included a track called "Josephine Baker." It describes the passion of a man in Paris who repeatedly visit Les Folies Bergere to see Josephine performing.
- Pop/R&B singer Beyoncé Knowles performed her number one hit, *Deja Vu*, on the Fashion Rocks television show wearing a banana dress. Knowles has said the performance (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBD7PPjmR68>) was a tribute to Josephine Baker.
- In 1995 the band Fossil released an album containing a song titled "Josaphine Baker" about a man living in the 1990s who is in love with the late Josephine Baker.
- In the animated movie *Anastasia*, when the characters visit Paris there is a woman wearing a banana skirt (with a bodysuit underneath for the American audience) walking her pet cheetah that is clearly representative of Josephine Baker.
- In rapper Sir-Mix-A-Lots video *Baby Got Back*, there is a dancer wearing the banana skirt.
- Diana Ross, a long time admirer of Baker also performed and tributed Baker wearing the famous banana skirt.



Beyoncé Knowles performing *Deja Vu*, on Fashion Rocks wearing a banana dress, a tribute to Baker.

Filmography

- *La Sirène des tropiques* (1927) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0135652/>) at the Internet Movie Database ... aka *Siren of the Tropics*
- *Zouzou* (1934) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0026023/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- *Princesse Tam Tam* (1935) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0026891/>) at the Internet Movie Database ... aka *Princess Tam-Tam*
- *Moulin Rouge* (1941) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0151636/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- *Fausse alerte* (1945) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032459/>) at the Internet Movie Database ... aka *The French Way*
- *An jedem Finger zehn* (1954) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044352/>) at the Internet Movie Database ... aka *Ten on Every Finger*
- *Carosello del varietà* (1955) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0161380/>) at the Internet Movie Database

- *Grüsse aus Zürich (1963)* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0444157/>) at the Internet Movie Database (TV)

Notes

- ↑ Biography (<http://www.cmgww.com/stars/baker/about/biography.html>) . *official site of Josephine Baker*. © Josephine Baker Estate c/o CMG Worldwide, Inc.. Retrieved on 2006 September 28.
- ↑ Jean-Claude Baker & Ben Dovrho, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart*. Random House, New York, 1933
- ↑ Biography (<http://www.cmgww.com/stars/baker/about/biography.html>) . *official site of Josephine Baker*. © Josephine Baker Estate c/o CMG Worldwide, Inc.. Retrieved on 2006 September 11.
- ↑ Symons, Alan. *The Jewish Contribution to the 20th Century*. London: Polo Publishing, 1997.
- ↑ Josephine Baker (<http://www.africanamericans.com/JosephineBaker.htm>) . *africanamericans.com*. AfricanAmericans.com. Retrieved on 2006 September 11.
- ↑ Haney, Lynn (1981). *Naked at the Feast: A Biography of Josephine Baker*. Robson Books. ASIN: B000KVDYXO.

References

- Kraut, Anthea, *Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham*, **Theatre Journal** **55** (2003): 433–50.

External links

- The Official Site of Josephine Baker (<http://www.cmgww.com/stars/baker/>)
- A Josephine Baker photo gallery (<http://silent-movies.com/Ladies/PBaker.html>)
- Josephine Baker Gallery (<http://www.doctormacro.com/Movie%20Star%20Pages/Baker,%20Josephine.htm>) and Annex (<http://www.doctormacro.com/Movie%20Star%20Pages/Baker,%20Josephine-Annex.htm>) at Dr. Macro's (<http://www.doctormacro.com/index.html>)
- Josephine Baker Photographs in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (http://tjrhino1.umsl.edu/whmc/view.php?description_get=Josephine+Baker)
- Josephine Baker (<http://www.ibdb.com/person.asp?ID=30698>) at the Internet Broadway Database
- Josephine Baker (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001927/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- Discography at SonyBMG Masterworks (<http://sonybmgmasterworks.com/artists/josephinebaker/>)

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