Tribute to Josephine Baker, the First Afro-American International Star and a French-American Icon

A Bridge Between Cultures, an Inspiring Artist and a Powerful Woman

As a dancer, singer and actress, Josephine Baker challenged conventions and broke down boundaries, making progress and emancipation possible for all.

A living legend

Did she think, they asked her, that she would become a legend in her own time?
Josephine Baker looked baffled, even dismayed. “A legend?” she said.

There are few facts about Josephine Baker’s early life. She gives her birthdate as June 3, 1906, but it also appears as 1905 and 1901 in biographies. She was born in St. Louis but moved to New Orleans when she was 10 and was working as a maid at the age of 15.

She made it to New York, taking a $20-a-week job as a ten girl in the chorus of Shuffle Along, then appeared in The Plantation Revue with Ethel Waters, where she was spotted and offered a job in a new Revue Negre opening in Paris. She made her appearance upside-down and doing the splits on the back of a male dancer, wearing a few flamingo feathers.

Then she danced the Charleston and sang Yes Sir, That’s My Baby, the songs and dances she had learned in New Orleans and Paris went wild. So she stayed in France and as the star of the Folies Bergere, her fame was assured. “I have two loves,” she sang, (“J’ai Deux Amours”) meaning, Paris and America.

She danced in every European capital, had 1,192 proposals of marriage, was married five times to several Frenchmen and an Italian count, and (she is now divorced), knew virtually all the celebrities, including Picasso and Hemingway. Her nightclub, Chez Josephine, was a landmark of the ’20s and ’30s.

I have loved and believed in art and the idea of universal brotherhood so much, that I have put everything I have into them.

A symbol of the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance which she brought to Europe, Josephine was an iconic figure of the Roaring Twenties that enflamed imaginations and forever impacted the French music hall and world nightlife in Latin America, the Caribbean and beyond.
Her Fights for Civil Rights

By refusing to perform in racially segregated theaters, staying in the finest hotels and eating in the best restaurants, Josephine wanted to show that skin color did not imply differential treatment and was no obstacle to wealth and fame.

In 1951, in Los Angeles, she had a man arrested because he did not want to “be in the same room as a negro woman”. The same year, the NAACP declared May 20th as “Josephine Baker Day”.

On August 28, 1963, Josephine Baker took part in the Civil Rights March in Washington D.C. where she proudly wore her French Forces uniform. A French citizen since 1937, she was the only woman to be officially invited to address the audience that had gathered at the National Mall, just before Martin Luther King, Jr’s “I have a dream”. Baker spoke of the freedom enjoyed in France where public places were not segregated.

At the Heart of the French Resistance

During World War II, Josephine Baker joined the French Resistance hiding underground fighters and Jews in the Château des Milandes in the Périgord region. She became a pilot for the French Forces Libres in Morocco and concealed information in her musical scores that she passed on to the Allies. She was awarded the Legion of Honor and the Médaille de la Résistance, upon the Liberation.

Keep Inspiring by Celebrating

Josephine Baker should be recognized as the positive change maker that she was. Although her achievements and convictions are well known, authorities and officials have taken time to acknowledge how significant her impact has been. For instance, not a lot of public places bear
her name, unlike some other famous figures, except for the Josephine Baker Boulevard in Saint Louis, Missouri, and a few other places in France.

But it seems that things are changing: her unique destiny, courage and talent keep inspiring younger generations of artists and activists.

France has recently decided that she will enter the Panthéon in Paris on Nov. 30, 2021. The monument is a true symbol of the French Republic and welcomes illustrious figures who made their mark in the country’s history such as inventors, writers and Human Rights activists. She will be the first black woman to rest in this prestigious French Memorial alongside five other distinguished women.

Turning the Bridge Tender House, which is one of two stainless-steel structures that were initially placed at either end of the NW 27th Avenue Bridge, into a Josephine Baker Pavillon is a great project as it would resonate with the bridge that she was between the United States and Europe.

Moreover, displaying a memorial plaque in front of the Wolfsonian Museum in Miami Beach, and inaugurating this significant event with Miami Dade’s County representatives, will hopefully impel other cities to pay her the tribute that she deserves too.

**Miami, a Symbol of Art and Change**

**Baker in a Fight for Justice, Shattering Ceilings in Miami**

Josephine Baker belongs to all countries and all communities, but Miami should be particularly proud as it is the place where she succeeded for the first time in her native country to perform for a non-segregated audience.
In 1951, the Copa City Club booked her for a major appearance after a tour in Latin America. Yet, Josephine refused to sign contracts with venues that were segregated. She even turned down a 10-thousand-dollars-a-week deal. After long and difficult negotiations, and thanks to her strength of character, she convinced the then jewel of Miami Beach’s roaring nightlife to open its premises to all. Baker’s shows in Miami were a great success and the start of a new social life for the communities of the city.

A Personality that Resonates with the Art Deco Movement

Josephine Baker’s fashion style was revolutionary – accompanied by a cheetah on a leash or sitting high up a giant birdcage covered with peacock feathers. Everything about her was disruptive and fascinating. In 1926, her show at the Folies Bergère made a lasting impression when she performed wearing nothing but a banana belt. She played with stereotypes and used them with humour.

She fascinated Cubists, Fauvists, and Surrealists, and posed for Picasso, Man Ray, Kees Van Donné, or Jean Cocteau, as well as renowned fashion designers like Christian Dior or Pierre Balmain.

Her boldness and sense of glamour resonated with the new Art Deco movement with its equally revolutionary architecture inspired by bold and colorful geometric shapes. Art Deco was a perfect representation of the modern urban life and is now part of the heritage of Miami Beach.
Articles

Photo 1:
Black Venus of the '20s returns home to the U.S. by Meryle Secrest, The Washington Post
Published in the Edmonton Journal, Friday, August 10, 1973

Photo 2:
A tribute to Josephine Baker (1906-1975), by Bonnita Jones, Southtown Star, 26 March 2006

Photo 3: