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Summary Article: **Baker, Josephine**

From *Encyclopedia of African American Actresses in Film and Television*

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, June 3, 1906; died April 12, 1975, Paris, France.

Born Freda Josephine McDonald, the woman who would grow up to become a lasting icon is perhaps still best known to younger generations through the sincere, touching HBO film version of her life, *The Josephine Baker Story*, starring Lynn Whitfield. Never a major star in America, Baker was a megastar throughout much of Europe and, of course, nowhere more so than in her adopted homeland, France. Her impoverished childhood in St. Louis was marked by domestic instability and a constant struggle against poverty and racism, epitomized by the deadly St. Louis race riots of 1917. She was of mixed Native American and African American background, the descendant of Apalachee Indians and black slaves from South Carolina. Her mother was Carrie McDonald and her father was vaudeville drummer Eddie Carson (Arthur Martin was her stepfather). Her siblings were Richard, Margaret and Willie Mae. Josephine's parents had a song and dance act during their brief marriage. Her mother would dance with a glass of water expertly balanced on top of her head. Josephine was only a year old when her parents introduced her into the finale of their act. Josephine dropped out of school at age 12. She became a street performer a busker, in the terminology of the day melding comedic ability with dance talent. She also waited tables and was a babysitter for rich white families.

At age 13 she began her professional career with The Dixie Steppers for the Theater Owners' Booking Association. Her first theatrical appearance was in the chorus line of the Booker T. Washington Theater in St. Louis. It was during this period that she began to slowly define the Josephine Baker that would eventually morph into an iconic international star. She initially performed as the last dancer in the chorus line. It was in this position that the dancer would traditionally perform in a comic manner much like the Jewish *tummler* of yore in the Borscht belt of upstate New York. This comic relief chorus girl would appear to be unable to remember the steps. But in the encore, she would perform the dance correctly, and outshine the other girls.



*Josephine Baker with Jean Galland in Princesse Tam Tam (The Flame of Paris) (1935).*

Eventually Baker was billed as “the highest-paid chorus girl in vaudeville” and began appearing in legendary shows like Sissle and Blake's *Shuffle Along*. Broadway beckoned with other shows like *Bamville* and *The Chocolate Dandies*. When Baker and her fellow performers took their dance skills to Paris in 1925, it began a journey that would transfigure her life. Paris was ready for the gangly, comical sexuality of Baker in a way that America was not. It was the painter Paul Colin who saw her as the ultimate muse, and greatly contributed to the popularity and the burgeoning legend of Josephine Baker. His masterful posters encapsulated Baker's jazz baby essence in *La Revue Nègre* her improbable combination of sex goddess, wild child, and human Slinky. The zeitgeist of the Art Deco anything-goes mentality of the era lives forever in Colin's vibrant work. Baker's fame spread so quickly that she was soon able to open her own nightclub, Chez Josephine (a name revived later by her adopted son Jean-Claude for his popular restaurant in New York, which is full of wonderful Baker memorabilia).

Paul Derville, director of the Folies-Bergère, wanted her to star in his next show. A dramatic addition to the show was Baker's pet cheetah, Chiquita, who wore a diamond collar but refused to obey the politeness dictates of society. The cheetah, part of the “savage” ambience of the show, often escaped into the orchestra pit, giving the musicians fits, and adding a distinct element to the proceedings, which consisted of Baker dancing in a banana skirt and high heels and nothing else (“La Danse Sauvage”). The banana dance was saluted in a contemporary stage appearance by singer Beyoncé. The banana skirt has become a timeless erotic symbol.

Baker's persona remains controversial to this day: the black woman as insatiable sex goddess. Race and

sexuality were the keynotes of her appeal, and she certainly defined perhaps as no woman before or since the “exotic” appeal of women of color. The better part of a century before the emergence of supermodels such as Tyra Banks and Naomi Campbell, and generations before the “dreamgirl” media event created by the appearance of Beyoncé in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, Josephine Baker championed an in-your-face sensuality that remains cutting edge. The other side of the coin, however, is that the “sexy savage” image especially when combined with a “loved-unwisely-and-lost” Madame Butterfly persona seems as racist to many modern viewers as any other black stereotype of its era. Josephine pined for her white lover, and he, in turn, was attracted to her, but he always returned to the safety and comfort of his white girlfriend or fiancée by the end of the film.

As for Baker, she was sadder but wiser, consoled only by her ability to entertain the crowd alone amid the applause, the showgirl with little to show in her love life. This formula persists through *La Sirène des Tropiques* (1927; her first feature), *Zou Zou* (1934) and *Princesse Tam-Tam* (1935). Baker is at her most beautiful and most iconic in the wonderful *Zou Zou* (the presence of Jean Gabin adds considerable stature to what is already a polished production). Baker's languorous swing on the trapeze in the “bird in the gilded cage” sequence has an erotic power equal to that of Louise Brooks in *Pandora's Box* (although one plays the victim of men and the other the victimizer). *Princesse Tam Tam* is clearly her great comedic role, and perhaps her greatest, most “Baker-esque” screen role. If you've never seen Baker and would like to know what all the shouting is about, this film is the one to watch.

Baker's music hall act provoked acclaim and controversy throughout Europe: Berlin, Vienna, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Denmark, Rumania, and Czechoslovakia. In 1928, Italians, Scandinavians and Central Europeans experienced the Baker phenomenon. An even more potent Josephine emerges in the Casino de Paris show *Paris Qui Remue* (1931-32) more sophisticated and sexier than ever, and every inch the superstar. As she embarked on a world tour, no doubt the uppermost thought in her mind was to replicate her European success in the United States to finally find major stardom in her homeland. She signed on as a star of the 1936 Ziegfeld Follies (although it was telling that she had only three numbers to Fanny Brice's seven). This failed version of the Follies garnered neither outstanding reviews nor financial success. Indeed, Baker was replaced by Gypsy Rose Lee later in the show's run. Perhaps it was no coincidence that Baker became a citizen of France in 1937. There she was always welcome.

World War II saw her emerge as a heroine of the French Resistance very much a Mata Hari of her time. In addition to serving with the French Red Cross and becoming a sub-lieutenant in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, Baker became a secret agent, smuggling information and transporting messages in occupied territory at the risk of her life. This allowed Baker to show her loyalty to France by participating in the Underground. After the war, she was awarded the Croix de Guerre for her bravery. There is a school of thought that Baker was so renowned and beloved that even the Nazis would have been reluctant to cause her harm. But “reluctance” is not a quality one easily attributes to the Third Reich, and Baker was in fact putting her life in danger.

Throughout much of her career, La Baker's signature song was “J'ai deux amours” (“I Have Two Loves”), her homeland, America, and her adopted home, France. If Baker most strikingly showed her love of France by her participation in the Resistance, she showed her love of America by becoming a notable civil rights advocate. Some of her civil rights activity was personal, such as her reaction to racist mistreatment at the famous New York night spot The Stork Club and her very public feud with columnist and kingmaker Walter Winchell (which is detailed in the HBO bio pic of her life).

Some of her civil rights activity was on a much grander, historic scale. In 1963, she spoke at the historic March on Washington at the side of Martin Luther King, Jr. Wearing her Free French uniform and her Legion of Honor decoration, she was the only woman to speak at the rally. No biographical entry on Baker is complete without mention of the Rainbow Tribe. Not unlike the contemporary multiracial brood adopted by Angelina Jolie (who is most definitely channeling Baker in this regard), the “Tribe,” which numbered 12, consisted of children of all nationalities and colors: Akio, Janot, Luis, Jari, Jean-Claude, Moise, Brahim, Marianne, Koffi, Mara, Noel and Stellina. The children were raised at Les Milandes, Baker's chateau in the Dordogne. As she aged, Baker's eccentricity no longer seemed as appealing to the public as it had when combined with the vibrancy of youth. She was no longer in fashion, and her debts began to mount. Thus begins the sad period of her long decline. In February of 1964, Les Milandes was seized to pay debts amounting to 2 million old francs. The sad spectacle of an aging Baker being evicted from her home was pathetic fodder for the tabloid press. The “has-been” was experiencing what many felt was her last gasp of notoriety.

After the debacle of Les Milandes, Baker slowly began a series of comeback attempts that would remind fans old and new what a classic treasure was still in their midst. At age 53, she headlined *Paris Mes Amours* at the Olympia, Paris, in 1959. She returned to the Olympia in 1968. Part of her act involved riding a motorcycle onto the stage. In 1973, she opened at Carnegie Hall to a standing ovation, giving her the popular acceptance in America she had sought for so long. She followed this with the smash Parisienne review *Bobino* in 1975.

She died in Paris after attending a large party in Monaco given in her honor. Josephine Baker was the first American-born woman to receive French military honors at her funeral. Huge throngs surrounded the Arc de Triomphe to see her on her way. Although America never could figure out what to do with her, and never really had a niche for her, “Place Josephine Baker” in the Montparnasse Quarter of Paris was named in her honor. As many around the world celebrated the 100th anniversary of her birth in 2006, it was black women perhaps most of all who had come to realize what a role model she had been. Josephine Baker went through six marriages in her long, peripatetic life some legal, some not. Her first husband was Willie Wells, her second was Billy Baker. Her third husband was financier Jean Lion. She also married her “manager,” Giuseppe “Pepito” Abatino a Sicilian stonemason who passed himself off as a count. Her marriage to band leader Jo Bouillon, predating and up to the era of the Rainbow Tribe, was in some ways her most satisfying union. Her last “marriage” was to American artist Robert Brady (they exchanged vows in an empty church without being legally married).

### **Feature Films:**

*Die Frauen von Folies-Bergères* (1927), *La Revue des Revues* (1927), *La Sirène des Tropiques* (1927), *Le Pompier des Folies-Bergères* (1928), *La Folie du Jour* (1929), *Zou Zou* (1934), *Princesse Tam Tam* (1935), *Moulin-Rouge* (uncredited; 1939), *Fausse Alert (The French Way)*, 1945), *An jedem Finger Zehn* (1954), *Carosello del Varietà* (1955), *Zelig* (archival; 1983).

### **TV:**

*Josephine Baker i København* (1957), *Grüsse aus Zürich* (1963), *Amigos del Martes* (1964), *Sábado 64* (1965), *Aquí el segundo programa* (1966), *The Mike Douglas Show* (197?), *Chasing a Rainbow: The Life of Josephine Baker* (archival; 1986), *The Secret Life of Sergei Eisenstein* (archival; 1987), *The Road to War* (archival; 1989), *Victor Borge's Tivoli* (archival; 1993), *Paris Was a Woman* (archival; 1995), *Intimate Portrait: Josephine Baker* (archival; 1998), *Jazz* (archival; 2001).

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