

# JOSEPHINE BAKER

b. June 3, 1906

d. April 12, 1975

## SINGER AND ACTRESS

*“People ... can learn to live together in peace if they are not brought up in prejudice.”*

**Josephine Baker was an American entertainer who found fame in Paris and fought segregation at home.**

Josephine Baker was an American-born entertainer who found fame as a dancer, singer and actress in Paris. Sometimes called the “Jazz Cleopatra,” Baker was born Freda Josephine McDonald in a poor neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri. After facing abuse and racial discrimination in America, she moved to France in the 1920s where she became a celebrated performer and the first black woman to star in a major motion picture. Her exotic beauty inspired Ernest Hemingway to describe her as “the most sensational woman anyone ever saw.”

Baker’s landmark cabaret show, “La Revue Nègre,” became the toast of Paris thanks to her on-stage antics. She exuded sexuality, wearing next to nothing and performing tribal-inspired dances with comic touches and cultural commentary.

When she returned to the United States as a major star a decade later, the reception was quite different. American audiences rejected her, and The New York Times called her a “negro wench.” She went back to Europe brokenhearted.

During World War II, Baker earned recognition performing for troops and smuggling secret messages on music sheets for the French Resistance. She also served as a sub-lieutenant in the Women’s Auxiliary Army. She was honored with the Croix de Guerre and named Chevalier of the Legion of Honor by the French government.

In the 1950s and ’60s, Baker again faced racial discrimination in America, where the most popular clubs prohibited her from performing. She publicly criticized the Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation and refused to perform in segregated clubs. In 1951 Baker was honored for her activism by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which declared May 20th Josephine Baker Day.

Baker talked publicly about racial equality in France and segregation at home. She spoke at the March on Washington in 1963 alongside Dr. Martin Luther King.

Baker married and divorced four times and adopted 12 children of varying ethnic backgrounds, which she called “The Rainbow Tribe.” One son later described his mother as a bisexual, noting a relationship she had with the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo.

Baker also has been linked romantically to the novelist Colette, fellow expatriate performer Bricktop and other women.

Baker became a citizen of France, where she remains an icon. In 1991 HBO released “The Josephine Baker Story,” which earned five Emmys and a Golden Globe.



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