

Josephine baker: racial refugee comes home



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One hundred years ago a star was born, but its light, like that of real stars, took many years to reach us. Josephine Baker, dancer, actress and singer, shone on the stages of France long before she was accepted here in her native country. Having escaped from the poverty of her early childhood, Baker became a legendary performer in France only to be dismissed by American audiences of the 30s. Her story, fortunately, does not end there, as the changing social climate led to Baker's eventual return and her efforts in the civil rights movement.

Though it took decades, the "Black Venus" finally claimed her place in the history of American entertainers. Baker's early family life was a world away from the life of glamour she was to later lead in France. Born Freda Josephine McDonald in St. Louis, Missouri in 1906, Baker was subjected to the racial prejudices of the times as a result of her mixed Native American and African-American origin. Sources vary on the identity of Baker's father, but the official version lists Eddie Carson, a vaudeville drummer, and Carrie McDonald, a "washerwoman," as Baker's parents.

As an infant, Josephine was taken by her mother to winery rooms and vaudeville houses where her father performed (Haney 1981, p. 6). St. Louis had an important music scene at the time, and this certainly had quite an impact on the young Freda. Carson soon abandoned mother and child, and Baker's mother married another man, Arthur Martin, with whom she bore a son and two more daughters. Martin, often unemployed, could not support the household, and so Baker's childhood was spent cleaning, babysitting and waitressing.

Baker describes working for the “Mistress,” a wealthy white woman, in her autobiography, where she was required to get up at five in the morning (Baker and Bouillon 1977, p. 3): “There was coal to fetch, the stove to stoke, chamber pots and spittoons to empty, bed to make wood to cut, the kitchen clean.” She did manage to go to school, but then worked after school as well, sleeping in the Mistress’s cellar at night. Baker was only seven years old. Haney (1981, p.

10) suggests that Josephine’s mother harbored resentment against her daughter, blaming her for the loss of Carson; perhaps this, along with the family’s poverty, explains why Carrie McDonald sent her daughter to the Mistress. Josephine finally returned home after the Mistress was arrested for physically abusing her, but Josephine wound up living much of the time with her grandmother and aunt as her relationship with her mother deteriorated even further. Baker’s feelings for the country of her birth were always to be influenced by the experiences of her youth in Missouri.

In her autobiography, she recounts the story of seeing her neighborhood go up in flames and seeing a black man beaten when whites decided to avenge the alleged rape of a white woman in July of 1917. Upon leaving her house to find the conflagration, Baker said she thought she was looking at the Apocalypse (1977, p. 2). Jean-Claude Baker and Chase (1993, p. 30) reject Baker’s claim to have witnessed the St. Louis race riots, arguing that she only learned the story later from others. In any case, such an event was to leave a lasting impression on Josephine.

Not surprisingly, she was to leave St. Louis at a young age in search of a more promising future. In Josephine’s youth, a brighter future was not

available to her through education- she could only escape through marriage. At the age of only 13, Josephine married Willie Wells, a man more than twice her age (Baker and Chase 1993, p. 36). The marriage was illegal and short-lived (to be followed by five more marriages over the years), and Josephine was destined to return to her mother's house. Her true escape came when she joined the St. Louis Chorus line, where she was an instant hit.

Baker was soon touring with vaudeville troops, performing skits. Though audiences loved Josephine, she faced racism in town after town, where she faced the Ku Klux Klan and segregation (Haney 1981, p. 29). Baker continued her rise to stardom, though, when in 1921 she landed a role in the Broadway production of *Shuffle Along*, despite original concerns that she was too dark for the part. As the show became a hit, Josephine made an enormous salary for the time. When the production came to St. Louis, Josephine performed before a mixed audience, but the blacks were restricted to the balcony seating.

Josephine's biological father, Eddie Carson, reportedly showed up to ask to be hired for the show, only to be rejected (Haney (1981, p. 39). Baker followed up her success with a role in *The Chocolate Dandies* in 1924 and became a legend in connection with the Harlem Renaissance in 1925 at The Plantation Club. The real turning point came later in 1925, though, when Baker made her debut in Paris with Joe Alex and the *Danse Sauvage* in *La Revue Negre* at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees. The audience loved Baker, who danced wearing only a feather skirt.

From there, she went on to tour Europe and eventually star in *La Follie du Jour* at the Follies-Begere, often appearing with her pet leopard and dancing

in a skirt made of bananas. She was to star in two movies, *ZouZou* and *Princess Tam-Tam* in the mid-thirties, by which time she was one of the highest paid entertainers in Europe (Official Site). In 1936, though, Baker was to be forcefully reminded of the barriers African-Americans were facing in her native country when she returned to the United States to star in the *Ziegfeld Follies*.

Unpopular with American audiences and critics, Baker was eventually replaced by Gypsy Rose Lee. In fact, Josephine met the realities of American racism as soon as she got off the boat from France, as she was refused a room in several New York hotels because of her color. Miki Sawada, Baker's maid at the time, was with her and described what happened (Baker and Chase 1993, p. 191): " I could not believe this could be the same woman I had seen in Europe, standing triumphant on the stage, showered with flowers.

Here she was huddled before me on the floor, weeping. " In publicity photos for the production, Baker was lit so that she would appear lighter. She wrote to a friend, "...be assured, if I want to make a telephone call in the street, I'm still a negresse" (Baker and Chase 1993, p. 196). After the newspaper critics panned her performances, the show closed and Baker returned to France. Despite her experience in the thirties, Baker returned to America in the fifties and sixties to work to advance civil rights for people of color.

The most famous instance occurred when Baker worked with the NAACP to protest segregation at The Stork Club. Animosity brewed as a result between Baker and gossip columnist Walter Winchell, which led to Baker's name being tainted in the Red Scare of the McCarthy era. Baker found other ways

to combat racism as well, adopting twelve multiethnic children who came to be known as the “ Rainbow Tribe. ” The first of her children, a son, was an “ occupation” baby, a baby of mixed Japanese and Western race from Tokyo.

Other adoptees hailed from Finland, Columbia, Canada and Israel (Baker and Bouillon 1977, p. 192-196). By the time of her death in 1975, Josephine Baker had accomplished more in her lifetime than anyone could possibly have imagined was possible for an African-American woman born at the beginning of the century. Not only did Baker manage to overcome the poverty and social limitations of her youth, she emerged as legendary entertainer, a champion of civil rights and a mother to so many who came from homes and situations as bleak as her own had been.

Despite the many occasions on which her fellow Americans rejected her, Baker never gave up on her homeland and used her experiences as motivation to work toward a better society. The spate of biographies and the documentary of her life that have sprung up in the last two decades are a sign of the changing social climate and racial relations in America, as well as a sign of the longevity of Baker’s legacy. Bibliography Baker, J.

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