Josephine Baker, the first African American international pop star

THE PANTHEON

In March 2021, an online petition, ‘Osez Josephine’, named after a popular song written by Alain Bashung, gathered more than 37,000 signatures. The aim was to transfer Josephine’s ashes to the Panthéon in Paris. President Macron approved this, and the ceremony took place on the 30th of November 2021. Josephine’s remains will stay in Monaco, but a plaque will be placed in the Panthéon. Josephine will be the sixth woman buried there. She will be honoured for being a Résistante first, a famous French woman second, a black African American woman in particular and, finally, a performance artist.

WHO IS JOSEPHINE BAKER?

Freda Josephine McDonald was born in June 1906, in St Louis, Missouri. She had a difficult childhood, was often hungry and faced racial injustice. She had to give up school to start working as a maid. Josephine’s life is extraordinary by any means but when we consider the backdrop of racial segregation and the American Civil Rights movement of the time, it is even more so. Josephine first married aged 13 in what may have been a bid to improve her quality of life, such were the injustices against women, and especially black women at the time. After a year she divorced and started dancing in a street show, aged 14.

She married again, still very young at the age of 15. She did not stay with her second husband, though she kept his name and preferred to focus on her career as a performer. She used comedy and humour in her shows and quickly gained fame.
La Revue Nègre in Paris

Angered by the racism and segregation in the USA, Josephine decided to move to France to join a troupe. She took a boat and settled in Europe, becoming a media darling. She danced, recorded songs and also starred as an actress in films. She released her most famous song, "J’ai deux amours," in 1931, and became an international superstar, praised by writers (Hemingway), painted by Spanish painter Picasso, and admired by crowds. She became very wealthy and purchased a castle called Château des Milandes.

Josephine went from street performer to international icon with her talented performances. In her art, Josephine chose to play with and challenge her white European audiences by performing in a banana skirt; something which evoked racist tropes of ‘uncivilised and savage’ Africans. This was in contrast with what her audience knew of her as a famous and successful Parisian artist, inviting audiences to question racial prejudices.

In 1936 she went back to the United States, but her singing was mocked, and she faced so much racism that she had to return to France, heartbroken.
MORE THAN A POP STAR: AN ALLIED SPY

During the Second World War, Josephine used her status and money to support the efforts of the Allies; she worked as an international spy, sharing information against the Nazis. She still performed to the Allied soldiers to keep their spirits high. She toured a lot despite being sick after repeated miscarriages. She almost died of sepsis and had to undergo a hysterectomy. Throughout this personal and medical turmoil, she still carried precious information on little pieces of paper that she would sew into her clothing. She avoided searches because she was so famous and justified her many trips because of her illnesses.

Josephine Baker in uniform during WWII.

Permission to Speak: Josephine Baker, the first African American international pop star
OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

Josephine Baker received the highest honour, the *Légion d’Honneur*, from the French President, Charles de Gaulle, to thank her for her work with the Resistance. This was the first and only time the honour had been awarded to an African American until it was awarded to Jesse Jackson, the male African American pastor and Civil Rights activist, in 2021. However, Josephine was also making ground-breaking decisions as far as her family life was concerned. She could not have biological children, so she decided to adopt 12 children from different continents, cultures, countries and different ethnicities. She brought them up in her château. She called her family a Rainbow Tribe, aiming for a universal and loving family.

Sadly, she was not very good at keeping her finances in order and slowly lost her status. She ended up bankrupt and had to sell her estate in 1968. She was given a flat in Monaco by her friend, Princess Grace of Monaco.

A FAREWELL TOUR

In an effort to earn enough money to stay afloat, Josephine organised a tour in 1975 to celebrate her career anniversary of 50 years in show business. She died of a brain haemorrhage in her sleep a few days later aged 68.
HOW IS JOSEPHINE BAKER REMEMBERED TODAY?

Josephine is remembered as a talented and successful, bilingual black feminist icon who used her platform to challenge racism. She has inspired performing artists and many women to this day. She was strong-willed and ambitious, breaking down barriers with her achievements. However, she also made extremely bad decisions; for example, she asked her adopted son to leave the family home because he came out as gay aged 15. Like many people in history who are remembered as icons and who achieved great things, she was also capable of extreme cruelty. We should always remember to think critically when somebody is presented as perfect or as an icon, because such perfection rarely exists.

Some feminists have criticised Josephine for using her body and sexuality to enable her to become famous and make a living; some puritans criticised her for dancing almost naked; some American people shunned her because she was black, and some used the pretext of her politics to attack her during the McCarthy years. However, no one can argue that Josephine was a wonderful performer, a brave activist and a devoted mother.

FIVE THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT JOSEPHINE BAKER

- She had a full menagerie of exotic animals. She often brought her cheetah during her shows and the animal would run off stage and jump amongst the musicians in the orchestra.
- Josephine had affairs with famous French women such as the writer Colette and allegedly Frida Kahlo, the Mexican painter.
- Josephine Baker loved fashion and design. In her Château des Milandes, visitors can see her beautiful bathroom made of black ceramic and gold.
- Josephine was friends with many famous people, including royals. She said she felt at ease in their company as equals.
- The FBI kept a file on Josephine Baker because she was so influential.
ART TASK
Design your own poster to advertise Josephine Baker’s Danse sauvage show.
The following terms are useful for having conversations about Josephine Baker. Translate the French terms into English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FRENCH TERM</th>
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<td>L'ordre de la Légion d'honneur est la plus élevée des distinctions nationales, tant militaires que civiles. Créée en 1802 par Napoléon Bonaparte, la Légion d'honneur a été conservée (et légèrement modifiée) par tous les gouvernements et régimes français ultérieurs. La devise de l'ordre est 'Honneur et Patrie', et son siège est le Palais de la Légion d'Honneur à côté du Musée d'Orsay, sur la rive gauche de la Seine à Paris. L'ordre est divisé en cinq degrés de distinction croissante : Chevalier, Officier, Commandeur, Grand officier et Grand-croix.</td>
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On dit qu’au delà des 1 _______
Là-bas sous le ciel 2 _______
Il existe une 3 _______
Au séjour enchanté
Et sous les grands arbres 4 _______
Chaque 5 _______
Vers elle s’en va tout 6 _______ espoir

J’7 _______ deux amours
Mon pays et 9 _______
Par eux toujours
Mon cœur 10 _______ ravi

11 _______ savane est belle
Mais à quoi 12 _______ le nier
Ce qui m’ensorcelle
C’est Paris, Paris 13 _______ entier

Le 14 _______ un jour
C’est mon rêve 15 _______
J’ai deux amours
Mon pays et Paris
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**COGNATE RACE**  
With a highlighter, find as many cognates as possible and list them.


Elle part pour la France en bateau. Elle arrive à Paris, la capitale française, en 1925.

Joséphine est chanteuse et travaille très dur. Elle a beaucoup de succès avec sa chanson *J’ai deux amours*. Elle devient actrice et fait des films.


Joséphine se marie deux fois et elle adopte douze enfants. Elle a bon cœur. Mais elle fait faillite et se réfugie à Monaco. En novembre 2021, elle sera la première femme noire à faire son entrée au Panthéon.
DISCUSSION POINTS

• What have you learned at school about Josephine Baker? Why do you think it is important to talk about her a century after she first moved to France?

• What do you think about the people who did not appreciate her dance routines? Do you think she was too suggestive?

• Some feminists have expressed mixed feelings about Josephine Baker: they argue that she is not a great feminist role model because she used her body and sexuality to make money. What do you think?

• Some anti-racist campaigners rejected Josephine’s use of racist and colonial stereotypes about African culture, such as the banana skirt. Do you think it is acceptable to play on racist tropes?

VOCABULARY TO SUPPORT THE DISCUSSION

• l’intersectionnalité – intersectionality
• des préjugés – prejudice
• la monétarisation – monetisation
• la morale – morals
• la sexualité – sexuality
• le féminisme – feminism
• l’indépendance financière – financial independence
• la partialité inconsciente – unconscious bias
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Visit Josephine’s castle
Explore the Panthéon
Explore the Bobino Theatre
Listen to her international music hit
Watch a documentary about Josephine Baker

Eilidh McGinness, 2019, Josephine: Singer, Dancer, Soldier, Spy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maud Waret. Born in Paris and brought up in rural France, Maud went to study eighteenth-century literature and modern European history at the Sorbonne. Fascinated by linguistics and languages, she then travelled to South America and India before settling down in the UK where she recorded two EPs as a singer-songwriter. Maud is a mother of two children and a part-time MFL teacher with French specialism, as well as a history teacher in a secondary state school. A committed member of the Colliers writing group, she regularly edits other writers’ fiction novels, and she writes fantasy world-building fiction in her spare time. Her latest interests to date are how to decolonise the curriculum, and issues of race and identity in education.

Explore the rest of our resources on diversity and inclusion.