

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.

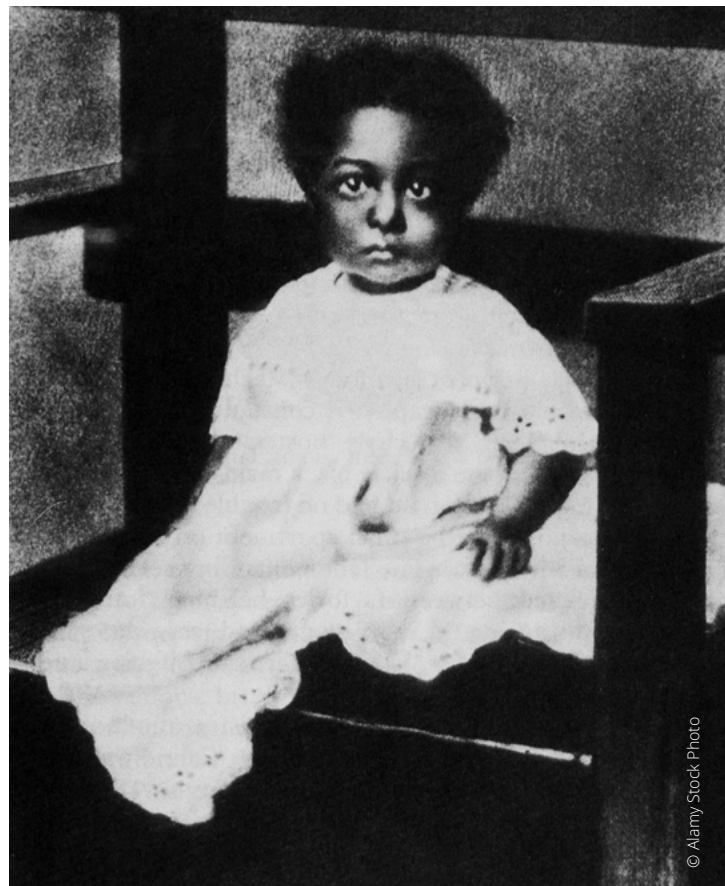
WHO IS JOSEPHINE BAKER?

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.



Panthéon in Paris, France.



Josephine Baker, circa 1936.

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*.



Chateau des Milandes, in Dordogne Perigord, France.



Poster for Josephine Baker, circa 1925 in Paris, France.



Josephine Baker in a banana skirt from the Folies Bergere production "Un Vent de Folie".

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.



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Josephine Baker in uniform during WWII.

Josephine Baker singing to British Factory Workers for ENSA (The Entertainments National Service Association) in July 1951, her first visit to England since the end of WWII.



© Alamy Stock Photo



1949, Josephine Baker at age 42. After World War II, Baker was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honor for her participation in the Resistance.

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.



1949, Josephine Baker at age 42. After World War II, Baker was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honor for her participation in the Resistance.



Circa 1965.

September 1968. Austelitz Station, Paris, France. Josephine Baker with her children.



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.

Josephine Baker and her cheetah, Chiquita. Circa 1920s.



ART TASK

Design your own poster to advertise Josephine Baker's *Danse sauvage* show.

LANGUAGE TASK

The following terms are useful for having conversations about Josephine Baker. Translate the French terms into English.

Challenge:
Find an
illustration for
each term.

FRENCH TERM	ENGLISH TERM	FRENCH DEFINITION
la Légion d'honneur	Legion of Honour	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.
la ségrégation raciale		Le fait de faire appliquer ou d'accepter l'usage de normes discriminatoires réduisant l'égalité entre les citoyens d'un même état en raison de leurs origines raciales
la Résistance		Un mouvement qui s'oppose à l'occupation d'un pays par des forces étrangères, à partir de la Seconde Guerre mondiale
les Alliés		Les Alliés sont l'ensemble des pays qui s'opposèrent formellement aux forces de l'Axe pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale
le maccarthysme		Le maccarthysme est une période de l'histoire américaine, connue également sous le nom de 'Peur rouge' ou 'chasse aux sorcières'. Le maccarthysme trouve ses origines dans le fort sentiment anticomuniste qui s'était développé aux États-Unis dans le contexte de la guerre froide.
le répertoire		Liste des œuvres formant le fonds habituel d'un artiste susceptibles d'être jouées, chantées, reprises par d'autres artistes ou troupes
le Panthéon		Un mausolée ou monument funéraire où sont enterrées des personnalités françaises illustres
Bobino		Bobino (du nom d'un clown et marionnettiste du XIXème siècle) est une célèbre salle de music-hall située dans le quartier du Montparnasse, au 20, rue de la Gaîté, dans le 14e arrondissement de Paris. Construite dans les années 1870, cette salle est devenue un music-hall au lendemain de la Première Guerre mondiale.
les années folles		Cela fait référence à la décennie des années 1920 en France. Le terme a été inventé pour décrire les riches collaborations sociales, artistiques et culturelles de la période. Aussi appelé les années folles ou l'âge du jazz aux États-Unis.

FRENCH TERM	ENGLISH DEFINITION	FRENCH DEFINITION
la Légion d'honneur	The order of the Legion of Honour is the highest national distinction, both military and civil. Established in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte, the Legion of Honour has been retained (and slightly altered) by all later French governments and régimes. - The order's motto is <i>Honneur et Patrie</i> (Honour and Fatherland), and its seat is the Palais de la Légion d'Honneur next to the Musée d'Orsay, on the left bank of the Seine in Paris. - The order is divided into five degrees of increasing distinction: <i>Chevalier</i> (Knight), <i>Officier</i> (Officer), <i>Commandeur</i> (Commander), <i>Grand officier</i> (Grand Officer), and <i>Grand-croix</i> (Grand Cross).	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.
la ségrégation raciale	Enforcing or accepting the use of discriminatory standards that reduce equality between citizens of the same state because of their racial origins	Le fait de faire appliquer ou d'accepter l'usage de normes discriminatoires réduisant l'égalité entre les citoyens d'un même état en raison de leurs origines raciales
la Résistance	A movement which opposes the occupation of a country by armed forces from another country, in particular during the Second World War	Un mouvement qui s'oppose à l'occupation d'un pays par des forces étrangères, à partir de la Seconde Guerre mondiale
les Alliés	The Allies are the collection of countries that formally opposed the Axis forces during the Second World War.	Les Alliés sont l'ensemble des pays qui s'opposèrent formellement aux forces de l'Axe pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale
le maccarthysme	McCarthyism is a period in American history, also known as the 'Red Scare' or 'witch hunt'. McCarthyism has its origins in the strong anti-communist sentiment that developed in the US in the context of the Cold War.	Le maccarthysme est une période de l'histoire américaine, connue également sous le nom de 'Peur rouge' ou 'chasse aux sorcières'. Le maccarthysme trouve ses origines dans le fort sentiment anticommuniste qui s'était développé aux États-Unis dans le contexte de la guerre froide.
le répertoire	List of works that form the usual collection of an artist, likely to be performed, sung, taken up by other artists or companies	Liste des œuvres formant le fonds habituel d'un artiste susceptibles d'être jouées, chantées, reprises par d'autres artistes ou troupes

FRENCH TERM	ENGLISH DEFINITION	FRENCH DEFINITION
le Panthéon	A mausoleum or building for the remains of distinguished French personalities	Un mausolée ou monument funéraire où sont enterrées des personnalités françaises illustres
Bobino	Bobino (named after a 19th-century clown and puppeteer) is a famous music hall located in the Montparnasse district, at 20, rue de la Gaîté, in the 14th arrondissement of Paris. Built in the 1870's, this auditorium became a music hall after the First World War.	Bobino (du nom d'un clown et marionnettiste du XIXème siècle) est une célèbre salle de music-hall située dans le quartier du Montparnasse, au 20, rue de la Gaîté, dans le 14e arrondissement de Paris. Construite dans les années 1870, cette salle est devenue un music-hall au lendemain de la Première Guerre mondiale.
les années folles	This refers to the decade of the 1920s in France. The term was coined to describe the rich social, artistic, and cultural collaborations of the period. Also called the 'Roaring Twenties' or the 'Jazz Age' in the US.	Cela fait référence à la décennie des années 1920 en France. Le terme a été inventé pour décrire les riches collaborations sociales, artistiques et culturelles de la période. Aussi appelé les années folles ou l'âge du jazz aux États-Unis.

LISTENING TASK

Listen to [Josephine Baker's international hit](#) and fill in the gaps. You can use the word bank if needed. This 1930 piece was written by Géo Koger and Henri Varna, with music by Vincent Scotto.

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

BANQUE DE MOTS:

va ma est joli mon ai soir bon Paris et mers clair cité noirs bras
cœur je tout voir deux ma un et

RUNNING DICTATION	ENGLISH DEFINITION
Group 1	1. Joséphine Baker est née aux États-Unis dans l'État du Missouri. Elle quitte le Missouri car elle ne supporte pas le racisme et la ségrégation raciale. Elle arrive à New York. Elle est danseuse.
Group 2	2. 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 <i>J'ai deux amours</i> .
Group 3	3. Elle devient actrice et fait des films. Elle porte un costume avec des bananes. Elle a la peau noire car elle est africaine-américaine. Elle devient le symbole de l'Afrique et de la liberté.
Group 4	4. Pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale avec l'Allemagne nazie, Joséphine participe à la Résistance. Elle aide les Alliés. Elle devient riche et achète un château. Joséphine se marie deux fois et elle adopte douze enfants. Elle a bon cœur.
Group 5	5. Mais elle fait faillite et se réfugie à Monaco. En novembre 2021, elle sera la première femme noire à faire son entrée au Panthéon.

COGNATE RACE With a highlighter, find as many cognates as possible and list them.

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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](#)

[Jean-Claude Baker, 2001, Josephine Baker: The Hungry Heart](#)

[Eilidh McGinness, 2019, Josephine: Singer, Dancer, Soldier, Spy](#)

[Bennetta Jules-Rosette, 2007, Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image](#)

[Matthew Pratt Guterl, 2014, Josephine Baker and the Rainbow Tribe](#)

[Peggy Caravantes, 2018, The Many Faces of Josephine Baker: Dancer, Singer, Activist, Spy \(Women of Action\)](#)



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.

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