

Josephine Baker: Barrier Breaker

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Power. Elegance. Strength. Glamour. All of these things were born on June 3, 1906, in St. Louis, when a little girl came into the world. No one guessed that with her fame, she would fight against sexism, racism, body hate, homophobia, Nazis and any additional obstacles that stood in her way. She used her prosperity, gained through her passion for entertainment, to break the mold for important issues; ultimately paving the path for underdogs. One hundred and thirteen years ago, a child who would help shape society as we know it, was born; and her name was Josephine Baker.

Childhood: When Destiny was Born

Carrie McDonald cried out and strained as she squeezed Eddie Carson's hand. Soon, her cries were joined by a small and fragile baby. The little girl soon hushed within her mother's warm embrace. Carrie sang her newborn baby a lullaby, giving the infant her first taste of music, after coming into the world just minutes ago. The newborn was dubbed Freda Josephine McDonald, eventually becoming Josephine Baker. That baby grew into a toddler, and that toddler grew into a child. Soon she was surrounded by a family, including her mother, three sisters, one brother and her kind stepdad, Aurthur Martin. Including herself, it was a family of seven living off of the morsel income of trying musicians. That's when Josephine decided to take matters into her own hands, earning money for herself and her family by babysitting and

cleaning the houses of white people. Soon, she also danced on the street for money, nonstop, for hours upon hours. Even though she earned a lot more money than most kids her age, and worked much harder, she had to put her family before education, and dropped out of school at the young age of thirteen. Waitressing became another one of her many jobs, but she didn't mind. To Josephine, it didn't matter how hard she had to work, because she was doing it for her family.

Her parents would bring her on stage, where she was able to show off her skills. People recognized her talent, and soon she was on a United States tour in the background of The Jones Family and the Dixie Steppers. Eventually, young Freda Josephine wanted to step up and become a chorus girl for the Dixie Steppers, but they would never allow a skinny black girl to represent them and tarnish their image. Lucky for her, a chorus girl happened to get sick, and she stepped in (being the only available option who knew the choreography). She did not meet the expectations. Instead, she exceeded them by a mile! Freda added her own spin on things, adding extra moves, rolling her eyes, and great acting. This made the audience absolutely adore her, even though she was a black woman. She was begged to keep the lead role, due to her box office success. She broke a racial barrier at the age of fourteen so what changes would she be capable of making when she got older?

Success: A Lot of It

Freda started her career with a bang and her prosperity only skyrocketed from there. She married a man named Willie Baker, keeping his name, even though they divorced soon after. She now went by the name that she's known for today; Josephine Baker. Josephine got married again,

this time to Jean Lion. This gave her French citizenship, which was great for her career and well being, due to the fact that France, at the time, was much more advanced than America when it came to racial equality. Her husband told her that she could never be as successful as she hoped for, and without any regrets, she divorced him. No matter who she would date, no matter their race, or gender, she was not afraid to break things off. Not even the famous painter, Freda Kahlo, was safe from the theft of her heart committed by the stunning Ms. Baker, and they dated in secret for a period of time. The heroine of this story would never continue to be in a relationship with someone who didn't believe in her as much as she did. Never would she allow her partner hold her back, and not let her fulfill her potential.

She soon earned her next name, the one after that and so on. She was referred to as Bronze Venus, The Black Pearl, Creole Goddess, Jazz Cleopatra, and the list goes on. Everywhere that this sensation performed, had to desegregate. This boosted desegregation rates because everyone wanted the amazing Josephine Baker to perform for them. She received well over one thousand proposals from her adoring fans, asking her to marry them. In France, she performed in La Folie du Jour at Follies-Bergère Theatre in a now world known skirt. The banana skirt. This was not the fabric skirt with banana designs that may first come to mind. Instead, it was made from sixteen of the genuine fruits, strung around her waist. This led to many imitators, and an avalanche of pictures of the infamous moment. As her popularity grew and grew, she eventually became one of the most photographed women on the planet, in the same category as the notorious Marilyn Monroe. By 1927, she earned more money than any other entertainer. She wanted to share her riches with less fortunate, so she constantly donated to

charities. Ms. Baker was already generous, but she wanted to take her liberality even further. Although at this point she was single, Josephine decided to adopt, and really took the saying -‘go big or go home’- to heart. She adopted thirteen children from different races and ethnicities making her one of the first people to adopt outside of their race. She called them The Rainbow Tribe, because their skin tones ranged from ivory to ebony, and because she knew that people of different ethnic backgrounds could live and grow up together peacefully; like a family, and like a tribe.

A Coffee Woman: Can’t Get Coffee

In the 1930’s she starred in the movies, *Princesse Tam-Tam*, and *Zou-Zou*. In the year of 1936, she made her way back to the United States to absolutely ace another show, but it did not go quite as planned. America was still polluted with extremely racist ideologies, and didn't appreciate her fine skills. New York Times even had the sickening audacity to call her a “Negro wench”. She returned to France heart broken. Josephine felt that she needed to do something about this, and of course, she did. She decided to talk to her friend, Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior about what she could do to help the movement, and he had a suggestion. He invited her to be one of the very few women to speak at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. On this day, she stated, “You know friends, that I do not lie when I tell you I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents. And much more. But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad.” She continued with her speech, striking sadness and inspiration into the audiences’ hearts. Being a black

bisexual woman may bring baggage on the journey, but once you take off and fly, it only makes the destination more luxurios.

Bronze Venus: Spy of Seduction

Sadly, Josephine Baker also had to deal with the struggles of World War II. At this point, she was already famous and everybody wanted her to perform for them. This included the man we all know as Hitler. He hired her and paid her many times, and she even flirted with him. Little did he know, Josephine was an important correspondent for the French resistance. She was a sub-lieutenant for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. Whenever she had a performance for Hitler, she would flirt with him afterwards, and encourage him to drink some alcohol in order to make him more clumsy. This allowed her to get secrets out of him and go through his things. She would take notes, using invisible ink that would be revealed under a blacklight on her music sheets. Without those important pieces of information, the Germans could have won, or the war could have taken even more innocent lives than it did. After the war had ended, Ms. Baker was awarded with a medal of resistance. She stood for what she believed in, even though she knew it meant putting her life in harm's way.

She Lives in our Hearts

In 1975, Josephine was sixty eight years old. She finally decided to face her fears head on, and perform in America again. On April eighth, she performed at Bobino Theatre, but did not get the results she hoped for. She hoped that this time, she would make the audience like her,

even though she was a black woman, but they didn't. The audience didn't like her, but instead, they loved her. She received the most astounding reviews of her life and got many standing ovations. She cried on stage, so overjoyed, knowing that she had finally been accepted in her own birth country. Four days later, she slipped into a coma, then suffered from a cerebral hemorrhage, passing away. Her death shattered the hearts of many people all over the world. She was buried in the Cimetière de Monaco, in Monaco, France. More than 20,000 people crammed together, lining up in the streets to watch. The French government honored her with a twenty-one gun salute; therefore, making her the first American woman to get French military honours at their funeral. She has been changing the world from the start of her career to the very end, even though she was constantly told that she couldn't. Josephine is still with us. She is still so prominent in our modern society, even though we don't acknowledge it. In 1991, a movie named "The Josephine Baker Story" won five Emmies and one of the three golden globes that it was nominated for. Josephine is still with us. Miley Cyrus, Beyoncé, and many others wore a banana skirt and danced her dance. Josephine is still with us. Speaking of Beyoncé, black female entertainers like her, Nikki Manaj, Cardi B, Lizzo, Alisha Keys, and Rihanna might not be where they are today without her. Josephine is still with us. Women and girls of color all over the world have been inspired to follow the dreams that once seemed impossible because of her. Her power, elegance, strength, and glamour will always be with us.