

Josephine Baker

Performing Artist and Hero of France

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Born Freda Josephine McDonald on June 3, 1906, in St. Louis Missouri, she began her performing career at the age of 13 on the streets. Taking the last name of her second husband, she moved to New York in 1921, performing in chorus lines, where she became known for her introduction of physical comedy.



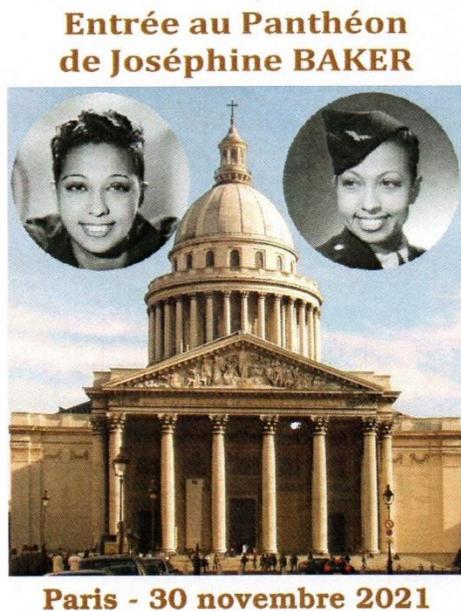
In 1925, Baker left New York for Paris, where performing opportunities were many more than in the racially segregated United States. There, one of her most memorable performances at the Folies Bergère was the seductive “Danse Sauvage,” where she wore little more than a skirt of artificial bananas, shown in the maximum card (reduced, far left) and as a design element at upper left on the French stamp, the first to honor her, in 1994 (left). Baker’s talents on stage took her to many European countries and to the big screen, where she starred in four French films, including “Princesse Tam Tam” (1935), included as part of the United States recognition of Black Cinema in 2008 (right).



She renounced her United States citizenship in 1937, becoming a citizen of France. During World War II, Baker notably continued to perform, but also played an important role in the French Resistance, gathering strategic information from unsuspecting Germans who attended her performances and met with her. Who would suspect? After the war, she received numerous recognitions, including the Resistance Medal, Croix de Guerre, and named as a Chevalier of the Légion d’Honneur. She was supportive of the civil rights movement in the United States and was the sole woman speaker at the March on Washington (1963). Baker’s later life was one of economic struggle, and she settled in Monaco, becoming close friends with Princess Grace and Prince Rainier, who became her patrons. Four days after a performance in Paris celebrating her 50 years in show business, Josephine Baker died on April 12, 1975. She was honored with the 2006 stamp of Monaco (right) celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Princess Grace Theatre.



Josephine Baker received a funeral with full military honors in Paris, followed by interment in Monaco, where she had made her home. In May 2021, a petition drive was launched to have her remains buried in the Panthéon, the burial place in Paris of many French heroes and luminaries. In August, it was announced that her remains would be reburied in November.



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After objections from her son, a symbolic casket with soil from places where she had lived, was interred in the Panthéon on November 30, 2021. A block of four French stamps was issued, and cachets (at left) marked the event and the ultimate recognition of her contributions to society as an artist and military hero.