

Throwback: Josephine Baker- The Banana Dance

Josephine Baker performed the Danse Sauvage wearing a skirt of artificial bananas onstage at Folies Bergère in 1927. Baker had relocated to France in 1925 and opened at the La Revue Nègre at age 19. She had started her career in vaudeville in her original birthplace of St. Louis, Missouri. It would not be long before she moved to New York City during the Harlem Renaissance and worked on Broadway in the famous productions *Shuffle Along* and *The Chocolate Dandies*. Her move to Paris allowed her to achieve the huge breakthrough success that made her one of the most important entertainers of the 20th century. The banana dance was provocative because of her skin-revealing costume and the way she fearlessly presented sensuality. She transcended the racist connotations usually associated with the fruit and made it a symbol of excellence and innovation. Her bold movements of the hips and butt were outside the Western dance norms and they captivated her French audience who already had a fascination with Black cultural expressions.

Dancer Josephine Baker was just one of her achievements that opened the door to many other accomplishments. She starred in three French silent films including *Zouzou*, which made her the first Black woman to star in a major movie. She also released the song "J'ai deux amours" during this time period which did well and she sang in the opera *La créole*.

During World War II Baker worked for the French military as a correspondent and helped find information on the movement of German troops. France and Germany had gone to war because of the invasion of Poland.

Josephine Baker was interested in more than being an artist and she used her fame to champion Civil Rights in the United

States. She worked with the NAACP, spoke at the March On Washington, refused to perform for segregated audiences, wrote articles and gave a speech at HBCU Fisk University. She was threatened by the Ku Klux Klan but made it publicly known she was not afraid of them.Â

The unique approach to her career and style was matched by a personal life just as singular. The singer/dancer/activist adopted 12 children of different ethnicities and called them The Rainbow Tribe. They were purposely raised with various religions to prove that these differences would not stop children from connecting to each other as happy siblings.Â

Baker died in 1975 four days after performing in *Joséphine Â Bobino 1975* at Bobino in Paris to celebrate 50 years in show business. Diana Ross, Mick Jagger, Shirley Bassey, Sophia Loren and Liza Minnelli were in the audience on opening night. She is the only American woman to receive French military honors at her funeral.Â

Her signature dance is seen as the earliest form of “twerking” and the banana skirt is iconic. Lynn Whitfield won an Emmy for her starring role in *The Josephine Baker Story* in 1991. Beyoncé paid tribute to Baker in 2006 by wearing a version of the skirt at the Fashion Rocks show. Â Two of Baker’s sons run the [Chez Josephine](#) restaurant in New York City. Ilana Navaro’s 2018 documentary *Josephine Baker: The Story of an Awakening* featured never-seen archived footage. She was most recently portrayed by actress Carra Patterson in the seventh episode of *Lovecraft Country*.

In 2021, Emmy-nominated choreographer [Laurieann Gibson](#) celebrated the 100th anniversary of Baker’s debut in *Shuffle Along*. Writer Laurent Kupferman started an online petition to have Baker reburied at the Panthéon in Paris or to receive Panthéon honors.Â

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