



Josephine Baker.

Baker, Josephine (1906-1975)

by Lester Q. Strong

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Ambitious, beautiful, and talented, the toast of Europe and South America at the height of her fame, Josephine Baker was born in poverty in a slum area of St. Louis, Missouri. By the mid-1920s she was captivating audiences in Paris as a dancer, singer, and actress, and by the mid-1930s she had achieved acclaim as the twentieth century's first international black female sex symbol.

Famous for her glamorous, extravagant lifestyle, when it came to pursuing her goals Baker could be devious, manipulative, and relentless. She was also always willing to break the rules, especially those relating to sex.

Because her mother Carrie McDonald was unmarried at the time of Baker's birth in St. Louis on June 3, 1906, she was given the name Freda J. McDonald. It is not known what the "J" stood for, but she began to be called Josephine sometime in her childhood, possibly because her godmother was Josephine Cooper, the owner of a laundry where her mother worked.

As the oldest child of a poor black family, Baker was put to work by age seven to bring in money, mostly as a domestic in the homes of white families. The sexual abuse she suffered in at least one of those homes, along with her family's poverty and the racism endemic to America, meant that early on she was looking for a way to escape the circumstances of her early life.

A marriage in 1919 to a black St. Louis steelworker named Willie Wells did not last; there was no divorce, but since Baker was only thirteen years old at the time, under Missouri state law the marriage was not legal anyway. Then in November 1920 the young woman's fortunes changed when under the name Josephine Wells she was hired as a chorus girl for a black vaudeville touring company.

Baker proved so charismatic onstage that her career quickly blossomed, and by September 1924 she was starring as one of the leads in the all-black Broadway musical *The Chocolate Dandies*, music and lyrics by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle. Along the way, she married Billy Baker, son of a prominent black Philadelphia restaurateur. She shed this second marriage almost as soon as she had the first--again without obtaining a divorce--but kept the surname. For the rest of her life, she would be known as Josephine Baker.

In autumn 1925, Baker sailed for Europe, where she took Paris by storm in the musical extravaganza *La Revue Nègre*, the brainchild of Caroline Dudley Reagan, a white American obsessed with the idea of introducing the African-American "black soul" to Parisian audiences in the form of a black musical revue.

Quick to take advantage of her European success, Baker broke her contract with Reagan three months after her arrival in Paris to headline a show at the Folies-Bergère, and from then to the end of her life was a regular fixture on Paris stages, with side engagements in other parts of Europe, the U.S., and Latin America.

She also starred in three movies made in France: the silent *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), and the talkies *Zou*

Zou (1934) and *Princess Tam Tam* (1935).

Baker's most famous song hit, "J'ai deux amours," was recorded in 1931. Proclaiming "I have two loves: my country and Paris," the ballad, written by Vincent Scotto, not only became her signature song, but also captured the divided loyalties of the "lost generation," particularly since Baker became a kind of muse for such American expatriate writers as Langston Hughes, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

In 1937 Baker married white French businessman Jean Lion. This marriage, like the others, also did not last long--they formally divorced in 1941--but it achieved one all-important goal: Under French law, the marriage qualified her for French citizenship, which she obtained immediately after the wedding.

During World War II Baker worked for the Resistance, first in France, then in North Africa after the Nazis occupied her new homeland. After the war, the French government rewarded her service with three distinguished honors: the Medal of Resistance, the Cross of War, and the Legion of Honor.

Her work for the Resistance led to the emergence of a more "serious" Baker after the war. In particular, she became an outspoken critic of racism and a vocal supporter of the American civil rights movement.

In 1947 Baker wed white gay French jazz bandleader Jo Bouillon, a marriage that at least on paper lasted until her death.

As part of her crusade against racism--and because she was unable to conceive children herself--Baker and Bouillon adopted what she called her "Rainbow Tribe" of twelve children from different parts of the world.

Ever vigilant on behalf of her own self-interest, Baker expected the children to play their part in the evolving image of selfless advocate for international peace and harmony she wanted to project, so she put them on display for the world to see at her and Bouillon's home in southern France, a château named Les Milandes. The children were also the glue that held the marriage contract with Bouillon in place long after all emotional intimacy had departed the relationship.

Baker's early success owed much to the intense sexuality she projected in her performances--her most famous costume being a belt of bananas and little else. Known as "The Black Venus," she reveled in her seductiveness onstage and off, and her sexual conquests among men were legendary.

What she kept carefully hidden from her adoring public were her many sexual liaisons with women, which continued from adolescence to the end of her life. Among the better known of her lesbian lovers were Clara Smith, a black blues singer who secured Baker her first job as a chorus girl, and in Europe fellow black American expatriate performer Bricktop (Ada Smith), French novelist Colette, and (if Julie Taymor's 2002 movie *Frida* is to be believed) Mexican artist Frida Kahlo.

As she grew older and her sex appeal waned, Baker perfected a campy "drag queen" style of performance, complete with heavy makeup, glitter, extravagant gowns, and a unique way of moving onstage that would later be called "voguing."

She may have kept her lesbian affairs secret from her public, but onstage she radiated such a queer energy that by the end of her career most of her faithful audience consisted of gay men.

Following her death on April 10, 1975, in Paris from a cerebral hemorrhage, three funerals were held, one in Paris and two in Monaco, attended by much of the French government and entertainment elite. At the behest of long-time benefactor Princess Grace, she was buried in Monaco.

Although Josephine Baker lived well into the post-Stonewall era of gay liberation, she never acknowledged publicly being lesbian or bisexual, nor did she openly support glbtq civil rights. Indeed, according to her biographer Jean-Claude Baker, who knew her well over many years, she could on occasion display a real streak of homophobia.

Nevertheless, throughout her career Baker challenged restrictive sexual mores, helping to rewrite the rules of acceptable public sexual behavior. And along with a few other entertainers in the early twentieth century whose behavior onstage and sometimes off many found scandalous--Mae West especially comes to mind--she was a forerunner of the sexual liberation movement that emerged in the mid-twentieth century and that led directly to the glbtq movement as we know it today.

Bibliography

Baker, Jean-Claude, and Chris Chase. *Josephine: The Hungry Heart*. New York: Random House, 1993.

Strong, Lester. "Josephine Baker's Hungry Heart." *The Gay and Lesbian Review* 13.5 (September-October 2006): 16-19.

About the Author

Lester Q. Strong is Special Projects Editor for *A&U* magazine, a monthly publication whose focus is all aspects of the AIDS crisis. He is a regular contributor to *Out* magazine and *The Gay and Lesbian Review*. His longer scholarly and literary articles have appeared in publications as diverse as *The International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, *The New Mexico Historical Review*, and *South Dakota Review*.