

# Josephine Baker

Remembering the first international superstar of African origin

On 3 June 2006, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Josephine Baker's birth will be marked in Europe and the United States. The singer, dancer and entertainer was the first artist of African origin to attain fame in Europe and the world. She wasn't just an entertainer but also a political artist who fought for peace, and against racism and anti-Semitism. During the historic Black march on Washington in 1963, she stood side by side with the Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr Anette von Wagenheim, the Cologne-based filmmaker and journalist who directed the TV documentary *Josephine Baker: Black Diva in a White World*, writes exclusively for *The African Courier* on the life and times of Josephine Baker - a woman she aptly describes as the world's first Black superstar.

Josephine Baker ranks among the most famous and popular artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her 'banana girdle' made history and her chanson 'J'ai deux amours' became a hit and is seen as the 'Baker hymn'. The queen of Charleston and diva of the 'Folies Bergères' and the 'Casino du Paris' during the roaring twenties, Josephine Baker was the first Black woman to achieve international superstardom in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1925, the Afro-American artist from St Louis had her breakthrough in Paris. Scantly clad and provocatively sensual, she performed the 'Danse Sauvage' (wild dance) with the African dancer Joe Alex. Newly arrived from the United States, Josephine was 19 years old and did not speak a word of French; her partner did not speak a word of English. And yet on 2 October 1905, Black Africa and Black America met and connected in an ecstatic dance at the 'Théâtre des Champs Élysées'.

The more conventionally inclined members of the audience left the theatre in shock, feeling threatened from jazz music and Black



Josephine Baker, diva, icon, superstar. She was one of the best dressed and most elegant women in the world. Photo: © WDR/dpa

culture and seeing their worst fear - the extinction of White civilization, confirmed. For the remaining audience, including many artists and intellectuals like Picasso, Gertrude Stein and Cocteau, Josephine Baker became last century's first sex symbol.

She hit the right place at the right moment; her extraordinary energy striking a chord with the general mood in Europe at the time. She was perceived as an exotic Black beauty who could satisfy the spectators' fantasies of 'Africa' and at the same time there was enough 'white' in her to allow these same people to somehow identify with her. In other words, she was exactly the sort of star the Parisians wanted. "In those days there was no other Black woman who was a star. She achieved stardom because she was of mixed race having a White father and a Black mother. I believe that the fact she was mixed was the only reason for her success" (wrote her son Brian Bouillon-Baker, 2005).

The young dancer from the racist South of the United States did not know enough about European colonial history to be able to foresee the stereotypes underlying the roles she would be expected to play on stage as well as in the four French movies she starred in. Her childhood had been marked by poverty, violence and sexual abuse and as a result, she now wanted success and ack-

nowledgement. And so she complied with the European rules but she also knew how to manipulate them. Moreover, thanks to her talents and professionalism, not only did she manage to avoid dumbness and subservience in all her songs, dances and film scenes but also added a note of self-irony, rebelliousness and even subversiveness.

In the 1920s and early '30s, she appealed to the sexual and colonial fantasies of the bourgeoisie from Paris to Budapest when she danced wearing next to nothing and in a provocative style yet unheard of even in revue theatres. She introduced the bottom as the central body part in dance to European stages and drove men as well as women into frenzy. Her physical naturalness and charisma as well as her sense of humour and sensuality hit Europe like a force of nature. Known as "the Black Venus", she rose to stardom, becoming the first Black 20<sup>th</sup> century artist of international fame.

"As our mother, she didn't want to look at her photographs from the '20s and '30s in which she would appear half-naked; she refused to look at them. I think this was because she no longer identified with the provocative woman she was then although she still saw herself as a performer. Also, she had moved on to be a mother and a politically active woman. Those old pictures reflected an artist who impressed her audience with over-

provocative, idiotic shows. She was certainly not proud of it. In any case, it was water under the bridge but she didn't want us children to see" (Brian Bouillon-Baker, 2005).

Behind the mask of the exotic temptress there was another personality who, once fame had been achieved, came to life: during World War II, Josephine joined de Gaulles' *résistance* in their fight against Hitler and worked for the French secret service. She provided de Gaulle with useful information and, more importantly, with money raised by her performances.

In the 1950s, Josephine, who could not have children of her own, adopted 12 orphans of different parentage and national and religious backgrounds and founded 'Les Milandes', the first children's village ever, in France. She became an anti-racism and anti-violence activist and a member of LICRA ('Ligue Contre le Racisme et l'Antisémitisme') in Paris. She championed enlightenment and human rights at numerous conferences, lectures and press campaigns, wrote articles for the 'France Soir' newspaper about the devastating racism in the US South and took every opportunity during her concerts around the globe to appeal for love and peace.

In 1951, in an unprecedented move in the history of the United States, she used her contract to force a White night club to admit a Black audience to her legendary concert at the 'Copa City' in Miami. At the march on Washington in 1963, she was the only woman to speak at the rally where all other speakers were men, including Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

For more than fifty years, from 1925 to 1975, Josephine Baker performed on stage, something no other artist had ever achieved. To many of those close to her, these performances, especially the ones in her later years, seemed miraculous. As fragile and tired to the point of exhaustion she might have appeared backstage, as soon as she came on stage, she transformed into a much younger woman as full of energy and charisma as ever. Like no other, she treated her audience to the glamour of her former revue girl personality as well as the serenity of the mature artist.

She was never one to fear change and appealed to people of all ages and backgrounds: 'The thing about Josephine was that she was an experience. You didn't just go to see a show, hear a song or enjoy her jokes, you got all that but most of all she was

an experience...'. (Maurice Hines, 2005)

For America's Blacks, Josephine Baker, as an artist and as a person, became the epitome of elegance, dignity and magnanimity. She was well ahead of her time and the first Black superstar whose thoughts and actions were set in a global context. A star in Europe, she turned into a symbolic figure for peace and understanding among nations and different cultures. "She was, and will always be a role model for us", says Arthur Mitchell, founder of the Harlem Dance Theatre. Or as Carmen de Lavallade of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre puts it: "She was our queen". ■

#### TV/Film Tips:

"Josephine Baker. Schwarze Diva in einer weißen Welt" (45 Minutes)

Directed by Annette von Wangenheim

1st broadcast on 3sat, Friday, 2 June 2006, 20.15 hours

Repeat broadcast on WDR in August

"Baker-Film-Fest des Deutschen Tanzarchivs Köln"

Preview of the documentation "Josephine Baker. Schwarze Diva in einer weißen Welt" and five historic film materials about Josephine Baker Komedisaal, in Mediapark 7, Cologne Saturday, 27 May 2006, 19 hours  
Film pianist: Joachim Bärenz

## Overview of a fascinating career

**1925, 2 October:** Première of 'La Revue Nègre' at the 'Champs Elysees' theatre also marking Josephine Baker's break-through debut in Paris. Her performance of the 'Danse sauvage' with partner Joe Alex in which she appears half-naked shocks and enralls the audience

**1925:** Guest performance of *The Chocolate Kiddies* in Berlin to the music of Duke Ellington

**1939, 3 September:** Outbreak of WW II

**1939:** Josephine Baker joins the French 'Service du Contre Espionnage' and serves as a sub-lieutenant in the air force from 1940 to 1945

**1940, 10 May:** Nazis attack France  
1940, August: Nazis ban 'Negroes and Jews' from French theatres.

**1946:** Josephine Baker is awarded the Medal of the Résistance with Rosette (*Rosette de la Résistance*)

**1947, 8 June:** Josephine Baker acquires the estate of 'Les Milandes', where she sets up her 'Village du Monde' - the first of its kind

**1948:** Josephine Baker gives her first speech on racism in the US at Fisk University, Nashville/Tennessee. She also writes sever-

al articles on US racism for the French newspaper 'France Soir'

**1951:** Josephine Baker performs at the 'Copa City' in Miami. It is the first concert in the history of the US with a mixed audience of Blacks and Whites.

**1951, 20 May:** the NACCP declares this day as Baker Day in Harlem, New York

**1955:** Murder of Emmett Till and acquittal of his murderers. In Europe, Josephine Baker voices her protest and in the US, the civil rights movement gains momentum

**1958, 28 December:** Josephine Baker gives a lecture on anti-racism for the 'Ligue Contre le Racisme et L'Antisémitisme' (LICRA) at the 'Mutualité Paris'

**1958:** Speeches against nationalism and racial fanaticism at the Frankfurt 'Paulskirche' and the 'Kongresshalle', Berlin

**1961, 18 August:** Josephine Baker is named a 'Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur' (Chevalier of the Legion of Honour) and awarded the 'Croix de Guerre avec Palme' (Cross of the Legion of Honour) in a public ceremony

**1963:** March on Washington. Josephine Baker, wearing her French uniform and medals, is the only female speaker at the march

1963: Josephine Baker gives four charity concerts at the 'Carnegie Hall'

**1975:** Last concerts at the 'Bobino Theatre', Josephine Baker takes Paris by storm for the second time in 50 years

24 March: first performance for subscribers of the 'France Soir' newspaper

8 April: gala for the public. Actor Jean-Claude Brialy reads a telegram sent by President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to congratulate Josephine Baker on her 50<sup>th</sup> stage anniversary and to thank her in the name of France

12 April (5.30 am): Josephine Baker dies from a cerebral haemorrhage

15 April: national day of mourning, the first-ever state funeral for a person of African origin in the history of France

#### Books/New Publications

Charles Onana:

'Josephine Baker contre Hitler. La Star Noire de France Libre'

Édition Duboiris Paris, April 2006

Brian Bouillon-Baker / Gilles Trichard:

'Le regard d'un fils'

Édition Patrik Robin, April 2006

Josephine Baker: Image and Icon

Publishers: The Sheldon Art Gallery and Reedy Press, St Louis

Dr Anette von Wagenheim