

Joséphine Baker (1906–1975)

Joséphine Baker, alias Freda Josephine McDonald, who was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on 3 June 1906 and died on 12 April 1975, was an American-born singer, dancer, actress, leading showgirl and French Resistance agent.

A music hall star and icon of the Roaring Twenties, she played a key role in the Resistance during the Second World War. She subsequently used her popularity to fight racism and advocate for the emancipation of Black people, particularly through her support for the American civil rights movement.

Her wartime activities earned her the French Resistance Medal, the Knight of the Legion of Honour, and the *Croix de Guerre* (War Cross) 1939–1945 with palm. Joséphine Baker will be interred in the Panthéon this autumn, becoming the first Black woman to join the prominent figures buried there.

Joséphine Baker was also one of the leading ambassadors of French haute couture, especially following the Second World War. In addition, she became a muse for the cubists, who revered her style and shapes, and sparked enthusiasm among Parisians for jazz and Black music.

Life as an artist

Joséphine Baker joined the travelling Dixie Steppers troupe in 1920. She danced at the Standard Theater in Philadelphia, but aged barely 16, she set off to try her luck in New York.

She joined several musical comedy troupes and met Caroline Dudley Reagan, a socialite who saw enormous potential in Joséphine and suggested that she go with her to France to become the star of a show: *La Revue Nègre*. On 2 October 1925, Joséphine opened at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and soon packed the house.

In 1927, she signed with the Folies Bergères to perform one of the leading roles in a revue. That same year, the young star launched her singing career and appeared in the film *Siren of the Tropics*. In 1931, she scored an unforgettable success with the song *J'ai deux amours* (*I Have Two Loves*).

A courageous female activist

When the Second World War broke out, Joséphine Baker became a counterintelligence agent, as part of which she frequented Parisian high society. She later worked for the Red Cross. She joined the Free French secret services on 24 November 1940. She conducted important missions and remains famous for having used her sheet music to conceal messages. During her first mission, she hid a microfilm containing a list of Nazi spies in her bra, and handed it over to British agents. Following the Liberation, she continued to work for the Red Cross, and sang for soldiers and Resistance fighters near the frontlines.

Joséphine Baker's career was closely linked to the Harlem Renaissance movement, of which she was a fierce advocate. The movement promoted the emancipation of African Americans, who had faced racial segregation following the abolition of slavery in 1865. In 1964, Joséphine returned to the United States to support Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights movement. She took part in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, giving a speech at the event. She was also involved in the work of the French *Ligue internationale contre l'antisémitisme* (International League against Antisemitism), which became the *Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme* (International League against Racism and Antisemitism) in 1979.

Links with Monaco

From 1964 onwards, Joséphine Baker was riddled with debt and harassed by the tax authorities. Princess Grace of Monaco, a friend of Joséphine's, offered her a home in Roquebrune for the rest of her life and invited her to perform at charity events in Monaco. At the Monaco Red Cross annual gala in August 1974, Joséphine gave a triumphant performance at the Monte-Carlo Sporting Club in a biographical revue lasting 70 minutes. She gave eight further sold-out performances. Following this production, she unveiled a retrospective, *Joséphine à Bobino*, on 24 March 1975, to celebrate 50 years in show business. The retrospective was funded by Prince Rainier III and Princess Grace, among others.

After her death on 12 April 1975, Joséphine Baker's funeral was held in Paris on 15 April, with Princess Grace in attendance. Her remains were then taken to the Principality, where a second funeral was held at Saint-Charles Church on 19 April. She was finally laid to rest in Monaco Cemetery on 2 October, in a vault constructed from African black granite donated personally by Princess Grace, who also attended the burial. That same year, on 7 August, Princess Grace became godmother to one of Joséphine Baker's granddaughters, who was born on 17 June at Princess Grace Hospital in Monaco and named Stéphanie. On 13 April 1976, a bronze medallion bearing the image of Joséphine Baker was unveiled in the lobby of the Monte-Carlo Sporting Club. In summer 2021, the Council of the Commune decided that the area of Larvotto that is set to host the Lartigue fountain and the fitness area for adults will be named after Joséphine Baker.

The artist's final stage costume and headdress are held by the NMNM.