

Josephine Baker

David Parmley

Space constraints forced David Parmley's excellently researched article on Josephine Baker to be abridged in the August 2024 edition of the France and Colonies Philatelic Society Journal (Vol 74, # 2 Whole number 305). To honour such a remarkable woman it was decided to publish the article in full on the website.

JOSEPHINE BAKER 1906-75 (YT 2899 / SG 3221)

Freda Josephine McDonald was born in St Louis in a poor area near Union Station and her mother, an adoptee of two former slaves, took in washing for a living. Aged eight Josephine was sent to work as a live-in domestic servant for local white families and by the time she was thirteen was working as a waitress and performing as a street dancer. Her marriage to Willie Wells ended in divorce the same year (1919) and she joined an organised street-dancing troupe – The Jones Family Band.

Her relationship with her mother had never been good and Josephine's natural talent for dance and inclination to perform did not improve matters. In 1921 she was performing with a vaudeville troupe, The Dixie Steppers, at the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia and met and married Billy Baker. Josephine had been promoted to last spot in the chorus line, which afforded her the opportunity to perform small solo tricks.

Billy's father took them to New York to see *Shuffle Along*, an enormously successful all-black musical playing at the 63rd Street Music Hall on Broadway. Running for 504 performances plus tours the show took an astonishing US\$9 million at the box office and launched the careers of Adelaide Hall, Florence Mills, Fredi Washington and Paul Robeson. Ground-breaking in its time, the show is probably best remembered now for the song *I'm Just Wild about Harry*. Josephine yearned for a part but was rejected as she was only 15 and the “sixteen years old” minimum-age rule was strictly enforced.

Her marriage kept Josephine with the Standard's resident troupe, but when the Steppers moved on, and on hearing that *Shuffle Along* was going on tour, she seized the opportunity and was hired for the show as a Honeysuckle Honey, leaving Billy behind (they were to divorce in 1925). Retaining her position at the end of the line, her opening night at New Haven almost proved a disaster when she introduced some impromptu routines which delighted the audience but not the stage manager who expected strict in-step and not comic interludes. She was ordered to pack up and go – until the reviews came out and songwriter Eubie Blake, one of the four writers of the show, overruled the stage manager. Not only was Josephine to stay but she was to develop her comedy routines with extra coaching leading to a billing as “That Comedy Chorus Girl”, later to join the Broadway cast.

Towards the end of 1923 *Shuffle Along* closed and for a while Josephine appeared dancing with the comedy and music act Buck and Bubbles before being signed for a solo spot, the new Sissle and Blake show *In Banville*. Here, dressed as a caricature piccaninny, her dance routines included mimicking animal movements, dancing the Charleston and One-Step as well as a comedy routine imitating a muted saxophone. Both audience and the critics were admiring; Josephine appeared fifth on the bill at US\$125 per week and had her own song, performed in an evening gown. Unfortunately the show was considered over-sophisticated (“too much art and not enough Africa” opined one critic) and ran only 96 performances in late 1924 (some of them under the title *The Chocolate Dandies*). Further re-packaged as *(The) Chocolate Kiddies*, the show toured Berlin, Hamburg, Stockholm and Copenhagen during 1925 where it was well received but, more importantly (especially for Josephine), paved the way for *La Revue Nègre*.



When *In Banville* closed, Josephine was owed US\$1,235 in wages and out of a job. Some cast members were heading to Harlem where some of the great musicians lived and worked and there were opportunities with clubs and bars on every street – so Josephine went too. The revue *Tan Town Topics* was playing at the Plantation Club and Josephine was sufficiently established to be hired with a featured billing as “the highest-paid chorus girl in vaudeville”. Whilst musicians Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong and singers Florence Mills, Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith had achieved fame and fortune the racially defined conventions of American show business offered little opportunity for a dancer.

During the twenties the jazz craze had swept through France and with it came the view that only black musicians could embrace the spirit of jazz. This had aroused interest in African culture which soon became a major influence on the arts. Rolf de Maré, the impresario of the modernist *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*, identified the opportunity and sought to bring music-hall acts into the theatre to present a fashionable mix of high and lowbrow entertainment. Advised to engage Negroes he was introduced to Caroline Dudley Reagan, the American socialite wife of a diplomat, considered to be a “Negro expert”. With the resources of de Maré Caroline sailed to New York to seek talent for the show which was already called *La Revue Nègre*.

Looking for a star, Caroline had approached the aforementioned Mills and Waters but their demands far exceeded the budget allocated. However on a visit to the Plantation Club she saw Josephine perform and immediately knew she had found her star; although the show's choreographer was not convinced, Caroline continued to court Josephine with an offer of US\$250 per week (twice what she was currently earning). Josephine demurred from both a fear of the unknown and the thought that a girl from the ghetto might cross the Atlantic to a foreign land whose people spoke a different language and had different customs. But she must have realised the opportunity this presented and that America held no such chance and one night when Caroline arrived at the club Josephine asked if she could have the beautiful coat that Caroline was wearing and the deal was sealed.

The assembled troupe, which included jazz musician Sidney Bechet (covered in a 2002 issue) and pianist Claude Hopkins and his orchestra, sailed on the Cunarder *RMS Berengaria* on 15 September 1925, rehearsing on the way - but the first theatre rehearsal did not excite de Maré, who discerned a lack of exotic dynamite from performers whose style was attuned to white American audiences. The producer recalled their first meeting as a loud, rocking, multi-coloured crowd buzzing with “Harlem energy” – new costumes were the key, some darker-skinned performers and – crucially - naked breasts.

When the show opened on 2nd October at the 2,000-seat theatre it was already sold out for ten weeks in advance - or, as otherwise reported, the initial two-week run was immediately extended indefinitely following the opening performance. After the first part (a music-hall programme) the auditorium filled to capacity for the main attraction; the audience was captivated and excitement reached fever pitch when Josephine performed the *Dance Sauvage* with Joe Alex. The critics, too, were suitably impressed and Josephine was embraced by the French public who would come to adore her to the point that the mere mention of her given name would sent audiences into raptures.

In the light of her success Josephine took a suite at the Hôtel Fournet where she began to surround herself with the pretty things she had so longed for as a child. Gifts were showered upon her, the leading couturier, Paul Poiret, made her gowns for free, Helen Rubenstein did her make-up, and she was asked for her autograph so often that a rubber stamp was made. Josephine also acquired a menagerie of pets for the comfort and alleviation of loneliness they provided; these included a snake, two baby rabbits, a parakeet and a pig named Albert. It was wonderful for her to be able to walk the streets without abuse, go into shops and eat in restaurants. Whilst the show had attracted a small volume of negative or racist press comment, the overwhelming majority was adulatory.

The extended run of the show had resulted in the postponement of a season scheduled for Anna Pavlova until *La Revue Nègre* transferred to the Théâtre d'Etoile before a Winter and Spring tour to Brussels, Berlin and Moscow. Despite the efforts of fascist brownshirts to disrupt proceedings the Berlin performances were

a great success, but the tour never reached Moscow as Josephine returned to Paris to star in *Folies du Jour* at the Folies Bergère. The show cost half a million dollars to produce and Josephine was paid US\$5,500 per month making her the highest paid performer in France. Without Josephine, *La Revue Nègre* was forced to close. This was not popular with her fellow performers but Josephine was little more than a child and in such a precarious occupation it invariably pays to take opportunities which arise as one can never be sure how long popularity will last. Her highlight jungle dance in which she wore the iconic banana skirt is preserved on some 1927 film footage.

Driven to her Folies performances in a gifted Voisin car with snakeskin upholstery, Josephine had taken a large apartment on the Champs-Élysées and engaged the writer Georges Simenon to attend to her fan mail and proposals of marriage. Whilst Simenon became her lover he had no intention of leaving his wife to marry Josephine. Her working day would begin at The Acacia, a *thé dansant* club run by an American socialite, then on to the Folies and to clubs and cabarets where she would dance until dawn. Paul Colin had produced *Le Tumulte Noir*, a series of lithographs including several of Josephine and a young writer, Marcel Sauvage, had helped her to write a biographical preface for the publication. This collaboration led to his writing her biography. In December 1926 Josephine opened her own club *Chez Joséphine* in Montmartre taking away staff and clientele from The Imperial at which she had performed and which had changed its name to 'Josephine Baker's Imperial'. Accompanied by her new pet nanny-goat she would welcome guests including the Aga Khan and Colette.

Josephine made her film début in 1927, becoming the first black woman to star in a major film, the silent *La Sirène des Tropiques*; it ran to 86 minutes, long by contemporary standards. She would make only three subsequent films – *ZouZou* (1934) with Jean Gabin, *Princesse Tam-Tam* (a 1935 comedy) and *Fausse Alerte* (*False Alarm*), filmed in 1940 but not released until 1945 – or, in the USA and under its alternative title *The French Way*, in 1952. Latter-day reviewers have praised her performances and wondered why there had not been more films. It was probably, as has been suggested, that even France was not ready to see a black woman as their leading film star, however much they adored her. Or maybe she just found the process too tedious – she had certainly not enjoyed making *La Sirène*.

Between 1928 and late 1929 Josephine sang and danced in 24 cities across Europe and in South America. This exercise required fifteen trunks of equipment including 137 costumes, 196 pairs of shoes, 64 kilos of face powder and 30,000 publicity shots as well as an entourage of staff. At the end of this she was the finished and polished article as a star with the requisite poise and grace, conversational skills and mastery of performance. During this tour her companion and *qua* manager had been Count Pepito de Abatino; this former stonemason posed as a phoney count and was probably in it for the main chance; he did, however, exert a pivotal role in developing Josephine's career. This transformation was reflected in the status of the men pursuing her who included the Crown Prince of Sweden, the Russian opera singer Feodor Chaliapin and architect Le Corbusier, who became her lover.

In 1930 Josephine was given the starring role in a new revue at the Café de Paris where Mistinguett, enormously popular and regarded as the Queen of French cabaret, had just completed two successful runs. She regarded Josephine as an unworthy rival and took every opportunity to racially abuse her. The show, *Paris qui Remue* (Paris which stirs or swinging or bustling Paris), was themed in response to the forthcoming Colonial Exhibition and, given the extent of French influence in Africa, Josephine was considered an ideal representative. Victor Scotto wrote the song *J'ai Deux Amours* – 'Two loves have I, my country and Paris' - especially for her and this would become her signature tune selling over 300,000 gramophone records. The show was later updated as *La Joie de Paris* and went on to tour several European capitals, plus Alexandria and Cairo, running 481 performances. At the age of 24 Josephine was a millionaire from her performance earnings and testimonials for prestige product and was vying with Gloria Swanson and Mary Pickford as the most photographed woman.

In the early 1930's Josephine's total acceptance was confirmed by her regular attendance at the opening ceremonies for the Tour de France cycle race, once cutting the starting ribbon. She had acquired another

pet – Chiquita, a tame cheetah (well as tame as you might expect a cheetah may be) which accompanied her on stage and socially, led round on a lead with a diamond-encrusted collar. On one occasion Chiquita jumped from the stage into the orchestra pit causing the musicians (and their hearts) to miss a beat or two. 1934 saw Josephine star in a revival of Offenbach's comic opera *La Créole* which ran for six months and in 1935 she was persuaded to return to the USA to star with Fanny Brice, Bob Hope and Eve Arden in *Ziegfeld Follies of 1936*.

Arriving in the land of her birth she was treated abominably and refused accommodation in hotels (except on condition that she used the service entrance and did not enter the lobby) and service in restaurants. Given that she was, without exaggeration, an international superstar this racial discrimination in the so-called “land of the free” was outrageous but indicative of the routine treatment of black citizens. Matters were exacerbated by the racist remarks of her co-star, Brice – who, as the daughter of an immigrant Hungarian Jew, one might think would have known better. Critics, probably prejudiced and influenced by Brice, reported badly on Josephine's performances. In May 1936 Brice became ill and the show closed after 115 performance; it was to re-open in September after Brice had recovered and run another 112 performances with Gypsy Rose Lee replacing Josephine who had returned to France to star in *En Super-Follies* at the Folies Bergère.

In 1937 Josephine married Jean Lion, a wealthy sugar merchant and aviator, and took French nationality. Lion organised flying lessons and Josephine acquired a light aircraft but Lion had wanted her to give up show business and while she eased off for a little time by 1939 she was travelling for a tour of Brazil. On her return France was in the throes of preparation for war and Josephine went to entertain troops manning the Maginot Line as well as record patriotic songs to be played for the troops, before opening in her new show – *Paris – London* with Maurice Chevalier at the Casino de Paris. The first night was a charity gala performance (Josephine supporting the Red Cross) with an audience of French and British troops. Chevalier had insisted on appearing in the second half (assuming he was the principal star) and whilst Josephine acceded, her first half performance overran after the audience demanded encore after encore so that Chevalier's spot was truncated. He was apoplectic and threatened never again to perform for the troops; Josephine had to remind him exactly why and for whom they were there. Her relationship with Chevalier had never been amicable and from that point descended into contempt which increased as Chevalier went on to perform before the Nazi occupiers.

Before the outbreak of war Josephine had been recruited as an Honourable (or Honorary) Correspondent of the Deuxième Bureau – basically an unpaid agent or spy. Being multilingual as well as having access to society and diplomatic parties she could gather valuable intelligence; her light aircraft enabled delivery of aid to refugees as well as provide mercy flights for the endangered. She worked with the Resistance and set up a headquarters at her country home, the *Château des Milandes*, and her show-business travel was the ideal cover for courier duties. Even when stricken by bouts of serious illness her sickroom served as a dead drop and Resistance meeting place.

By 1941 it was too dangerous to remain in France and Josephine relocated to Casablanca. Her work in entertaining troops was immense but being a diva she made stipulations.

These were not quite as might be expected of a diva inasmuch as she insisted that she would not be paid and would cover all travel costs, nobody would pay for admission and there would be no segregation of audiences. Surely these conditions give a true insight into Josephine's character. For the purposes of this project she was commissioned as a sub-lieutenant in the French Women's Airforce Corps. The light of liberation dawned in 1943; de Gaulle organised a gala ball at L'Opera d'Alger and had secured Josephine's services to headline the event. This was no problem as the beneficiary was the Red Cross. In the presence of de Gaulle, Josephine was almost overawed but overcame her nerves and was invited to meet him in the interval when he presented her with a gold Cartier Cross of Lorraine as a token of his personal appreciation. Josephine had organised a grand finale where a giant tricolore overlaid with the Cross of Lorraine would fall from the ceiling. Inspired by de Gaulle, Josephine would give the performance of her

life in the second half and when the tricolore fell as she sang a bravura delivery of *La Marseillaise* the audience went wild. Following this performance she commenced her trek across the North African littoral in the wake of the Allied advance as far as Cairo, entertaining the troops as they went and gathering intelligence as well as three million francs for Resistance funds.

In 1944, prior to the D-Day landings, Josephine was to return to French soil to entertain US troops in Corsica. Unfortunately the aircraft carrying her and her entourage was forced to ditch off the coast; luckily a detachment of Senegalese troops was resting on the beach and came to the rescue. In true style the show went on and Josephine went to airbase after airbase entertaining crowds of 30,000 at a time. In October 1944 she returned by liberty ship to France where she was the guest at numerous victory celebrations and volunteered to visit Germany to sing at the notorious and disease-ridden Buchenwald death camp. In Spring 1945 Churchill invited Josephine to London for a victory tour and she performed for the RAF.

Following a further spell in hospital in 1946, in 1947 she married Jo Boullion (Lion, who had a distinguished war service, had been divorced in 1940) a composer, conductor and violinist who had accompanied Josephine during her troop tours. They purchased the Château des Milandes and adopted twelve children of various nationalities who Josephine described as her "Rainbow Tribe". By 1949 she was sufficiently recovered to return to the Folies Bergère where she was a resounding success, quickly regaining her pre-eminence and an enhanced gravitas bolstered by her wartime heroism.

Josephine had not forgotten her pledge to the black GI's she had entertained during the war – "Let's beat segregation but let's beat the Nazis first." So, when invited to USA in 1951 to perform in Miami she insisted that her audiences were not to be segregated – a public battle she won. She followed the sold-out Miami shows with a national tour, being greeted everywhere with rave reviews, six months of bookings and the promise of more. However, on reaching New York the couple were refused accommodation in as many as 36 hotels, it being viewed unseemly that a black woman and a white man should share a room. Josephine was utterly appalled and wrote news articles describing her experiences, boycotted certain venues which applied segregation and even made a citizen's arrest of a man who racially abused her. This provoked a torrent of abuse from the Ku Klux Klan and others but Josephine stated publicly that she was not afraid. Matters came to a head when Josephine was refused service in Manhattan's Stork Club - she walked out, supported by Grace Kelly and others – all vowing never to return. Josephine sought the assistance of leading columnist Walter Winchell, who she thought was an ally, but he launched a stream of invective in his column including the preposterous notion that Josephine had communist sympathies. This led to her work permit being revoked and she was forced to leave the US.

During the early 1950's Josephine would tour Germany, Norway, Italy, Spain, Algeria, Morocco and finally Japan in 1954 visiting both Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She continued to tour widely and in 1963 returned to USA where, dressed in full military uniform, she stood alongside the Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr as the only woman speaker at the 'March on Washington' event. After King was murdered in 1968 his widow approached Josephine to take on his leadership role but Josephine declined, saying she had to be in France for the sake of her children. Josephine continued to tour widely including Cuba in 1966 at the request of Fidel Castro.

The costs of running the château with its large staff were enormous and Josephine's generous nature and lack of business acumen, exacerbated by the loss of support from Jo (who she divorced in 1961) were exploited so that by 1964 she was in financial difficulties. Although Brigitte Bardot led an appeal which drew support from celebrities, public figures and the public at large it could not prevent the inevitable and in 1968 the chateau was sold to pay debts. Josephine's long term friend Grace Kelly (now Princess Grace of Monaco) would provide Josephine and her children with a villa in Monaco.

Despite these vicissitudes Josephine performed at the Olympia in Paris. In 1973 Josephine performed at Carnegie Hall to a standing ovation and the following year was summoned to the Royal Variety Performance at the London Palladium. In the same year she performed at the Monegasque Red Cross Gala before appearing at the Gala du Cirque in Paris.

In 1975 a “comeback” (not that she had been away) revue *Josephine à Bobino 1975* was produced by Prince and Princess Ranier and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to celebrate her fifty years in French show business. The show opened on April 8 when Josephine read out a congratulatory telegram from the French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in which he pledged that France would never forget what she had done for the nation and for the Allied war effort. The audience included Mick Jagger, Sophia Loren, Shirley Bassey, Diana Ross and Liza Minnelli and it was necessary to set out folding seats to accommodate the throng. Josephine sang 34 songs and, although frail, danced a little. The audience was enraptured and the reviews ecstatic and with its Paris run sold out was scheduled to go to London, New York and elsewhere. After four performances Josephine was discovered unconscious, surrounded by glowing newspaper reports and messages from fans and well-wishers. A few hours later she was dead, having suffered a stroke.

Josephine's funeral was accorded full military honours, the only woman of American birth to be so honoured. A vast procession of 20,000 assembled to pay their final respects. Her remains were interred at the Cimetière de Monaco in a black granite Vault of Africa provided by Princess Grace.

But that was not the end! Josephine's legacy was enormous and testaments to her are innumerable, none more so than the Château des Milandes, purchased in 2001 by Angélique de Saint-Exupéry and turned into a Josephine Baker museum which welcomes over 120,000 visitors a year. That was until in 2021 President Macron decreed that Josephine Baker should be interred in the Panthéon to join the foremost figures of France. She was only the sixth woman to be accorded such an honour, and the first black woman. The symbolic interment took place on November 20 when members of the French Air Force bore into the historic mausoleum a casket containing soil from various places Josephine had lived.

With abject apologies for this brief summary which does no justice to extent of her bravery, courage and patriotism in the allied cause I recommend, to anyone with an interest in exploring this further, “The Flame of Resistance” by Damien Lee (2022). Her deeds were recognised by the awards of the *Médaille de la Résistance avec Rosette* (accompanied by a personal letter from de Gaulle), the *Croix de Guerre avec Palme* and - France's highest honour - the Légion d'honneur, for which she was nominated by de Gaulle.

When Ernest Hemingway described Josephine as “a sensational woman” he was not far off the mark.

David Parmley