



Josephine Baker

June 3, 1906 – April 12, 1975

Contributions: American-born French entertainer, French Resistance agent, freemason and civil rights activist. The most iconic black cultural icon of the Jazz Age.

Why is Josephine Baker an important figure in Black History?

Josephine Baker was more than just an entertainer. She was a force, a visionary for civil rights. She leveraged her fame, powerful connections, and fortune to raise the profile of people of color through her provocative dancing, singing, and comedic talents. Her personal life was a testament to her political agenda. Throughout her career, she adopted 13 children from various countries. She called her family “the rainbow tribe” and took her children on the road in an effort to show that racial and cultural harmony could exist. She once said, “children of different ethnicities and religions could still be brothers.”

Josephine Baker threw out the rule book for what a young black woman could achieve, at a time when woman (of any color) were subservient and oppressed. She moved to France and declared it her home. While it was unusual for a woman during her era, Josephine never depended on a man for financial support.

She is noteworthy for:

- Refusing to perform for segregated audiences in the US, which was the early stage of her life-long commitment to the Civil Rights Movement
- She was the first Black woman to star in a major motion picture
- Josephine rivaled Gloria Swanson and Mary Pickford as the most photographed woman in the world, and by 1927, she earned more than any entertainer in Europe
- Was asked by Coretta Scott-King to take over the civil rights movement after Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination
- Her opposition to segregation and discrimination was recognized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1963, she was one of the few women allowed to speak at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom
- When Adolf Hitler and the German army invaded France during World War II, Baker joined the fight against the Nazi regime. She aided French military officials by passing on secrets she heard while performing in front of the enemy. She transported the confidential information by writing with invisible ink on music sheets. She was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honor, two of France's highest military honors for her service during the war

Recommended reading on Josephine Baker: [Josephine Baker: The Hungry Heart](#)