

Charlie Kays

Professor Popalisky

African American Dance History

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Let the Antics Begin □

Dropout, famous dancer at fourteen, screen actress, singer, French Military Intelligence Agent during World War II, adoptive mother to twelve multi-racial children (ten males and two females) known as the "Rainbow Tribe," and political activist, Josephine Baker was a woman of versatile talents, and a woman of black color. □ Born in St. Louis, Missouri to Carrie McDonald and Eddie Carson in 1906, Josephine Baker gets her last name from her second husband, Willie Baker. □ During her career as a dancer and singer, Josephine Baker made a name for herself in France during her routines in La Revue Negre. □ During this show and her famous banana dance, Josephine danced in partial and full nudity, exposing her body to audiences all over Europe. □ Her performances gave her stardom and the nickname of Black Venus. □ Josephine Baker's unorthodox approach to stage dance began a new era in dance history.

Josephine Baker made her Broadway debut in 1921 as a chorus girl in "Shuffle Along," created by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake at the age of fourteen. □ A dark girl in a chorus dominated by African American girls so pale as to be almost passable for white, Josephine Baker stood out like a sore thumb. □ She further extricated herself from her fellow chorus girls by seeming to forget the steps during her first performance. □ Instead of running offstage in tears, or standing stock still, frozen into inaction, Josephine began to improvise, adding cooky facial expressions to accompany her steps. □ Her untoward antics during the show were well met by both the audience and the directors, earning her a spot as a clown act during subsequent performances. □ Josephine became known for the myriad of wacky and zany faces that she made during shows as well as for her dancing and was a star by 1924 when she performed in "Chocolate Dandies". □ These actions, as well as becoming her trademark in the United States and earning her fame as a class act comedian helped to combine acting and dancing on the stage.

Following her own, highly individual sense of ideals, Josephine traveled to France in 1925 to perform in La Revue Negre on the stage of the Theatre des Champs-Elysees. □ It was on that stage that Josephine gained her fame, due in part to her entertaining skills, her exotic African looks, and her willingness to expose those parts. □ It was in France that Josephine found

acceptance as a performer despite her status as a black woman, indeed it was because of her African looks and her complete willingness to use the European obsession with the African American body, which was considered highly erotic for its tribal primitivism and exoticism, by exposing her body unabashedly that brought her wealth and fame in Europe.□ Her performance in *La Revue Negre* touched French audiences so deeply that even the critics who did not speak highly of the show itself spoke extremely well of Josephine's work.□ Her appearance on stage unclothed helped to establish the African female body as an object of both beauty and desire.

From 1926 to 1927, Josephine Baker introduced the buttocks to the dance community.□ It was during her banana dance that Josephine became known for her use of her backside, employing it as a sexual object not to be ignored anymore.□ She shook her butt proudly in front of thousands of audience members throughout her career in Europe, making her responsible for the sudden influx of sexual interest in the butt.□ It was due to her unorthodox performances on the stages of France and Europe that she came to be considered one of the most sensual performers of all time, responsible for the inspiration of works by writers such as E.E. Cummings and Ernest Hemingway, and the artwork of Georges Rouault, and Alexander Calder.□ Josephine Baker's willingness to expose her body for her art made way for a revolution in dance, one that honored the body and took it from the regal and stiff-necked to the sexual yet refined celebration of the human form.

Josephine Baker was not just an innovator in the dance world, but a full time political activist, using her work as leverage in standing up for and obtaining her beliefs.□ In a time when African Americans had very little power of choice, Josephine Baker put both her life and her career on the line to stand by those beliefs.□ Working with the Red Cross, she put her life on the line in order to help French refugees find safety during World War II.□ Using her career as a cover, she worked as an intelligence agent, carrying military intelligence from France to Portugal written in invisible ink on sheet music and using her fame to charm foreign consulates into processing visas for her associates.□ Her status as a prominent entertainer allowed her the freedom to venture freely, an ability that not many had at the time.□ In honor of her heroic efforts during and after the war she received the *Croix de Guerre* and a Medal of the Resistance in 1946 as well as *Legion d'Honneur* from Charles deGaulle.

Dedicated to her belief in the equality of all people, independent of race, religion, or social status, Josephine Baker put her career on the line as a form of civil rights activism.□ Kept out of some high class white clubs despite her fame as an entertainer, Josephine began to boycott all discriminatory clubs.□ Her pocketbook was put on the line when she began to refuse to perform in segregated nightclubs, leaving her dependent on previous earnings and commissions from less wealthy African and middle

class white clubs.□Her performances, often accompanied by songs of her own construction, were an extension of her personal philosophical beliefs.□ By refusing to perform in segregated clubs she was directly responsible for the integration of Las Vegas nightclubs.

Beginning with her untoward antics on Broadway in 1922, her willingness to expose her body as art in France, and her decision to use her career to achieve political ends, Josephine Baker made a name for herself and brought dance to a new level of sophistication while overcoming the boundaries imposed upon her by her skin color, paving the way for artists such as the great Bill T Jones to make their stories and known.□Josephine Baker appeared on stage in a tribute performance a week before she died at sixty-nine, still very much a captivating performer despite her advanced age.□She died in her sleep in 1975 of a cerebral hemorrhage, the night of a party given in her honor by a friend.