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Josephine Baker:
One in a Million

Josephine Baker will always be remembered as one of the most beautiful dancers of all time. Josephine Baker, starting as a young girl, had a fascination with dance. She was born in 1906 and grew up in St. Louis. Josephine Baker grew up in a single family home because her Father left a couple years after her birth. One day, at the age of 12, Josephine Baker decided to drop out of school and leave the poor neighborhood she had grown up in. Baker held many jobs in her young life; waitressing, cleaning houses, and babysitting. Josephine Baker never in her life ever depended on a man for money or support and was married multiple times in her life. Waiting and dreaming for the time when she would be able to perform on Broadway, Josephine also faced many criticisms. Critic, directors, and choreographers would often inform her that she was too young or too skinny or that her skin was too dark. Josephine Baker was able to overcome this opposition and began her career at the age of 15, later becoming known as one of the most versatile performers; working on the stage, in movies, and in recordings.

Josephine Baker began her career touring with Bessie Smith on the Vaudeville circuit. In the years to come, at age 15, Josephine Baker auditioned for a role in the production *Shuffle Along* to be dismissed and then asked to return when she was 16. Baker after not having made the show the first time around did stay on the set and worked as a dresser, giving her the opportunity to watch rehearsals and learn the dance steps. She was soon seen as the obvious replacement for one of the dancers who dropped out of the production. Josephine Baker danced and sang in the chorus under Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake; Josephine Baker had made it to Broadway, *Josephine Baker, who exploded rather than emerged, was sixteen years old when she was hired as end-girl on the chorus line* (Sterns 133). During the performance, she became noticed by making humorous facial gestures and fumbling dance movements. The animated and funny motions became associated with Josephine Baker, drawing many people to the show. Following the *Shuffle Along,* Josephine Baker captured a leading role in the show *Chocolate Dandies* which launched her into stardom. Josephine Baker could also be found performing in numerous nightclubs such as the Cotton Club and the Plantation Club. Josephine Baker became consumed with dance and traveled to Paris where she joined *La Revue Negre.*

The people in France at the time seemed to have a fascination with the artworks of African culture. Josephine Baker came to Paris in 1925 and was so widely accepted that she became a citizen in 1937. Josephine Baker had a way of captivating the stage with her exotic beauty and her mastering of dance. In Paris, Josephine Baker was manipulated and transformed into a star, being called names like *The Black Venus.* Josephine Baker brought with her many *American* dance moves, *Josephine Baker will probably be most remembered for her introduction of the Charleston and Black Bottom to European audiences* (Emery 230). One of Baker's trademark dance movements was called the *Itch.* These dances were extremely new and exciting to the European public. Along with dance steps like the Charleston and the Black Bottom, Josephine Baker became known for her extravagant costumes, or lack there of. She would often perform her dances with little clothing or even naked, playing into the public's interest in the black female body; claiming to be conscious of the manipulations that the white people were creating. Josephine Baker celebrated her rear end in her dances and possessed the talent

to *really shake her body.* She quickly became the most photographed woman in the world. ¶One of Josephine Baker*s most remembered outfits was her banana skirt. By dancing with *La Revue Negre,* Josephine Baker soon became the most popular entertainer in France, **Josephine Baker*s *La Revue Negre* embodied a transfusion of new blood and energy for a France stultified by tradition and sorely in need of renewal*(Gates 7). Baker was valued in Paris, providing her with an exceptionally comfortable salary, in which she was able to enjoy the finest luxuries in life. Josephine Baker loved all kinds of animals and owned many exotic animals like monkeys and leopard. Baker was able to break away from the stage at times and was cast in movie roles. Her most famous movie productions were *Zou-Zou* and *Princess Tam- Tam.* Josephine Baker was an extremely sensual performer and was able to inspire all that were able to see her dance.

¶¶Josephine Baker was a beautiful woman and celebrated in Paris, whereas in the United States she was not accepted. Josephine Baker being a citizen in France, did not return to the United States to stay for a long time, * While Miss Baker was a star of great magnitude in Europe from 1926 on, she did not achieve stardom in the United States, despite repeated attempts, until her appearance here [the United States] in 1951* (Emery 230). American critics were cruel and disapproving of her performances; Baker was even referred to as a *Negro Wench.* Josephine Baker returned to Paris disappointed and heartbroken. Later in her career, Josephine Baker became more politically active. She began to take a stance on issues, participating in resistance movements as an intelligence agent in the 1940s. Being the amazing performer that she was, Josephine Baker was able to express her ideals through dance. Often she would disguise her involvement with political movements by traveling and being in productions. Josephine Baker returned to the United States in 1951 and joined the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960*s, parading in Harlem. Josephine Baker would always refuse to perform in non-interracial clubs, and was also refused service at the famous Stork club due to her race. Baker adopted many children, later in her life, all being of different ethnicities. She called her children the *Rainbow Tribe* and tried to show how people of all races could live together in harmony. Josephine Baker was honored with many awards for her dancing and also received awards such as the Medal of Resistance in 1946 and the Legion d*Honneur in 1961 for her political activism. ¶In 1991, Josephine Baker was celebrated in the HBO production of the *Josephine Baker Story,* which won two Emmys for Outstanding Actress and Art Direction.

¶¶Josephine Baker acquired her fame at a rapid rate and her admirers were abundant all over the world. She received large amounts of gifts daily, so including cars and diamonds. Josephine Baker also holds the record for the most marriage proposals with about 1,500 in her lifetime. Josephine Baker danced for about 50 years and helped to open the door for all women, especially women of color. In 1975, Josephine Baker died of a cerebral hemorrhage hours after one of her shows. Her funeral was widely attended reaching almost 20,000 people who wanted to join in on the remembering of this fascinating woman. Josephine Baker was the first woman who was buried with military honors in France. The NAACP also named May 20th Josephine Baker day, which is soon approaching, allowing all people to reflect and honor the life of this amazing woman. Josephine Baker was one in a million; her energy and love for dance and life showed in her dance step and every aspect of her life.