



# JOSEPHINE BAKER



Josephine Baker was an American-born French entertainer, French Resistance agent, freemason and civil rights activist. Her career was centred primarily in Europe, mostly in her adopted nation of France. She was an amazing singer and she was the first black woman to star in a major motion picture, the 1927 silent film *Sirens*.

## FAMILY AND EARLY LIFE

Freda Josephine McDonald was born on the 3 of June 1906 in Missouri, U.S. Josephine spent her early life at 212 Johnson Street in the Mill Creek Valley neighbourhood of St. Louis; there were many houses around there without indoor plumbing.

Josephine's mother married a kind but unemployed man, Arthur Martin, with whom she had son Arthur and two more daughters, Marguerite and Willie.

Soon Josephine began working in a white people laundrette. One woman abused her, burning Josephine's hands when the young girl put too much soap in the laundry. By age 12, she had dropped out of school. At 13 she worked as a waitress at the Old Chauffeur's Club near Pine Street.

## PARIS AND RISE TO FAME

In a 1974 interview with a magazine, Baker explained that she obtained her first big break in the bustling city of Paris, which is the capital of France. "No, I didn't get my first break on Broadway."

She became famous first in France in her mid-twenties. Here, she became an instant success for her amazing dancing. After a successful tour of Europe, she broke her contract and returned to France in 1926 to star setting the standard for her future acts. Baker performed the "Danse Sauvage" wearing a costume consisting of a skirt made of a string of artificial bananas. Her success coincided with the "Art Deco" movement, and also with a renewal of interest in non-Western forms of art, including African. Baker represented one aspect of this fashion.



## WWII



In September 1939, when France declared war on Germany in response to the invasion of Poland, Baker was recruited by the French military. She snuck coded messages into her songs to help the allies. She travelled from country to country singing her songs full of secret messages. Allegedly, she'd transport secrets embedded in her sheet music too.

## LEGACY

Baker died on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1975, aged 68, in her beloved Paris. She had become well-known for her distinctive dance style, the flapper costumes she wore, her singing, and even some minor acting in French cinema. In Europe, she brought popular black dance styles to the stage. The new attitude forming around black people in Europe, and specifically Paris, was in large part due to Baker. She is also known really well because she is in a great book called 'Little Leaders'.



FIND OUT MORE...

<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/23148/5-things-you-didnt-know-about-josephine-baker>

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EXAMPLE QUESTIONS: USE HEADING 3 FOR THIS THERE NEEDS TO BE 5 QUESTIONS

1. What was one of her famous dances called?
2. How old was she when she left school?
3. What is the book called that she features in?
4. What was contained in her songs during WWII?
5. In which year did she die?