

Josephine Baker

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Josephine Baker's life was defined by passion- not only for her role as a stage entertainer, but also for the political causes that she so firmly supported.

The international star and dazzling performer who captivated audiences for nearly 50 years was born in St. Louis Missouri, and left school at age 8 to work as a maid. Perusing a desire to be a song, dance, and comedy star, Baker ran away from home at 16, bound for New York's Broadway. There, she performed with the Bessie Smith Blues Show and appeared in the 1924 production of "Shuffle Along," the nation's first African American musical.

Opportunity knocked in 1925 when actress Ethel Waters turned down a role in "La Revue Negre" a New York production that toured in Paris. Baker performed instead; and quickly captured the hearts of French audiences, who embraced her comedic, sassy, and seductive performances. She went on to perform in Folies-Bergere and the Casino de Paris, and received the attention and adulation that a performer of her caliber deserved- recognition often denied African American entertainers of the day.

During World War II, Baker continued performing as an entertainer for North



Africa troops while also driving an ambulance and gathering intelligence for the French Resistance. Her war efforts earned her France's highest military award- the Legion of Honor Medal.

In a much-publicized demonstration of concern for equality, Baker and her husband adopted 12 children- 11 of whom were orphaned- of different nationalities, including African, Korean, Venezuelan and Italian.

Baker continued to speak against racism and oppression throughout her life, and her unwavering fight for civil rights prompted her to deliver a speech at the 1963 March on Washington. Her love of entertaining also endured, and she performed until her death in 1975.