

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • CELEBRITY

The Uniform Under the Feathers

Josephine Baker, from the Folies Bergère to French Military Intelligence

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Contribution Track • ERA V–VI • St. Louis, Missouri & Paris, France

Who She Is

Josephine Baker was born Freda Josephine McDonald on June 3, 1906, in St. Louis, Missouri; her father's identity was never definitively established. She sailed for France in 1925 and, in *La Revue nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées that October, became an overnight sensation performing the "Danse Sauvage." In 1926 she debuted the banana-skirt costume that made her internationally famous at the Folies Bergère — an image this entry does not present uncritically: contemporaries nicknamed her "Black Venus" and "Bronze Venus," branding built on the same European exoticization and sexualization of Black women's bodies that the act simultaneously exploited and, through sheer command of the stage, transcended. In 1937 she married French industrialist Jean Lion and became a French citizen, renouncing her American citizenship.

Intelligence Work and Occupation

From September 1939, Baker was recruited by French military intelligence as what the service called an "honorable correspondent," gathering information at embassy parties and diplomatic gatherings under cover of her celebrity. Her estate, the Château des Milandes, sheltered Resistance fighters and refugees during the German occupation. For this work she was awarded the Resistance Medal, the Croix de Guerre, and was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur. This entry treats the specific tradecraft details often repeated about her wartime work — invisible ink, notes concealed in clothing — as drawn from postwar and biographical retellings rather than a primary intelligence record, consistent with her biographers' own observation that Baker was an active shaper of her own legend throughout her life.

A Line She Would Not Cross

Baker returned to the United States periodically and refused to perform for segregated audiences — in 1951 she fought and won the desegregation of a Miami nightclub's audience before her engagement there. On August 28, 1963, in her Free French uniform and wearing her Légion d'honneur medal, she addressed the crowd at the March on Washington. She spoke during the event's preliminary remarks; the march's official printed program did not include a speech by any woman, a fact this entry states plainly rather than repeating the popular but imprecise claim that she was the day's only woman speaker — she was, more precisely, the only woman to address the crowd from the podium that day outside the formal program.

"I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens... But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad." — Attributed to Josephine Baker, March on Washington, August 28, 1963

After King's assassination in 1968, Coretta Scott King reportedly asked Baker to take on a leadership role in the movement; Baker declined, citing her responsibility to the twelve children of different nationalities and backgrounds she and her husband had adopted at the Château des Milandes, a household she called her "Rainbow Tribe" and intended as living proof that children of different origins could be raised as siblings. She died April 12, 1975, in Paris, days after a final retrospective revue celebrating fifty years on stage.

NC Local Lens

No documented connection between Josephine Baker and North Carolina, Fayetteville, or Cumberland County was found in this research pass. This entry claims no NC connection while noting that a dedicated search of North Carolina newspaper archives and Black press collections — the kind of source most likely to hold a record of a Southern tour stop, if one exists — could not be completed here, and the question should remain open for future research rather than settled.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

"Cup of coffee" quote: widely circulated but not confirmed here against a primary transcript of her remarks — treat as attributed, not verbatim-confirmed.

March on Washington speaking role: she addressed the crowd during preliminary remarks; the formal program's "Tribute to Negro Women" segment separately recognized Daisy Bates, Diane Nash, Rosa Parks, Gloria Richardson, and Myrlie Evers. Keep this distinction precise in any retelling.

Wartime intelligence tradecraft details: sourced to biographical retellings rather than a primary intelligence-service record; her biographers themselves note she blended fact and self-mythology throughout her life.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* (New York: Random House, 1993).
2. "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," National Archives, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.archives.gov/>.
3. "Josephine Baker," Légion d'honneur records, Grande Chancellerie de la Légion d'Honneur, France.
4. "Josephine Baker Was the Star France Wanted — and the Spy It Needed," *The New Yorker*, retrospective feature.
5. "Josephine Baker Inducted into the Panthéon," 2021, French Ministry of Culture press materials.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.