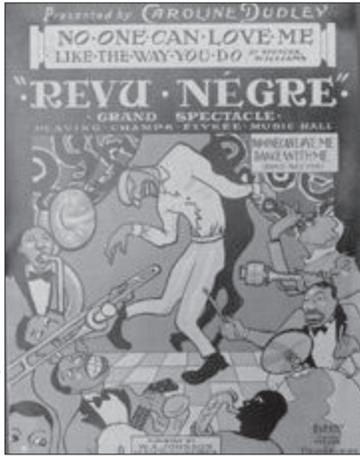


# An American in Paris: La Belle Joséphine

By Bob Merchant

Although the United States did not participate in the Exposition Des Arts Décoratifs et Industriel Modernes, it provided the star attraction at the second major exhibition to open in Paris in 1925, *La Revue Nègre*. Just as the Exposition set the pace and defined an entire era for the decorative arts in all areas of applied arts and pure decoration, the arrival of a nineteen-year-old American named Joséphine Baker set Paris on its ears. She quickly established herself as the most talked about and exciting celebrity of the next decade and beyond on the European continent. She personified the Syncopated Jazz age for Paris in the last half of the flamboyant twenties, just as she would define chic and glamour in the thirties.



Joséphine Baker was born in St. Louis on 3 June 1906, the illegitimate child of Carrie MacDonald and Eddie Carson. She had a dismal childhood of poverty in a city beset with tense race animosity and prejudice that would eventually erupt into one of the worst race riots in American history. Her dream was to escape and the goal of any aspiring young person set on a career in show business then, as now, was New York. It happened.

Joséphine was first noticed in "Shuffle Along," the 1921 show with a score by Sissle & Blake. She was hardly a star and was simply noted as "The Comedy Chorus Girl". In these days Joséphine had a talent for mugging and crossing her eyes much to the delight of audiences and much to the chagrin of her fellow chorines. But she was on her way.

Next came another Sissle & Blake effort called "Bamville". The show eventually opened on Broadway in September 1924 as "Chocolate Dandies" with Joséphine Baker by now billed as one of the stars along with the likes of Elisabeth Welch and Valiada Snow.

In the spring of 1925 "Chocolate Dandies" closed. Shortly thereafter, Spencer Williams and Caroline Reagan offered Joséphine a salary of \$250 a week to appear in Paris in "La Revue Nègre". At the time, Baker was working at the Plantation Club for \$125 a week. Despite the high wages of-

ferred for the Paris engagement, Baker found it difficult to give up the steady employment at the Plantation Club for an iffy show to be produced in a foreign country where she was not known and did not even speak the language. But finally Joséphine was persuaded and the company of "La Revue Nègre" sailed 21 September 1925 on the Berengaria.

The rest, as they say, is history. *La Revue Nègre* opened to rave reviews and Joséphine Baker was instantly a sensational new super star. She had three songs in the show but it was her dancing that scandalized and thrilled the audiences. Known as "Danse Sauvage" Joséphine Baker appeared in only a few pink ostrich feathers contorting and cavorting in a wild and uninhibited expression of African-American syncretized rhythms....a free and wild spirit the likes of which had never been seen before. The craze for Jazz and the age named after it had truly begun for sophisticated Parisians.

In the years that followed, Joséphine Baker went from strength to strength appearing in the "Folies Bergère" 1926-1927, the Casino de Paris, and even at her own fabulous *Chez Joséphine*.



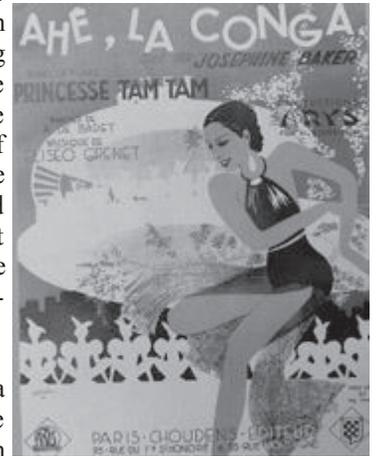
She made a brief and unhappy return to the United States in 1936 to appear in *The Ziegfeld Follies*, becoming the first, and the last, Black woman to star in the Follies. She was turned away by the New York hotel at which she had reservations so as not to offend the hotel's Southern clients. American audiences simply could not accept a black artist of such a glamorous and exotic persona. American critics panned her performance. Soon returning to France, she became the highest paid entertainer in Europe making appearances in Berlin and London as well as Paris.

Of course, there is a lot more drama in a career like this. A career that spanned over fifty years of adulation, loves, unhappiness, and comebacks. There's Joséphine fleeing Paris in 1940 with her maid in her Custom Super 8 Packard, Jo-

*(Continued on page 2)*

*Josephine Baker (Continued from page 1)*

Josephine Baker entertaining the allied troops in North Africa, Josephine being awarded the Croix de Lorraine by General De Gaulle for her support of the French resistance during the Second World War, and her triumphant return to Paris after the war as a patriot and heroine.



Josephine Baker was a very prolific gramophone artist in Europe from 1926 onwards. Her style and range as a singer are rather remarkable. One listens to a "Jazz Baby" on a 1927 Odeon and a sultry ultra-sophisticated chanteuse on a 1937 Columbia. Can this be the same woman? Yes, of course it is and it is all rather delightful. Happily most of these old 78's are available right now and are beautifully remastered on a number of CDs.

Not satisfied with merely listening to Josephine Baker? Baker made two films—*ZouZou* in 1934 and *Princesse Tam Tam* in 1935. Both films are available on videotape from Kino.

Further reading:

*JOSÉPHINE BAKER* by Patrick O'Connor & Bryan Hammond (Jonathan Cape, London 1988)

*NAKED AT THE FEAST* by Lynn Hanley (Dodd, Mead & Co. NYC 1981)