

# JOSEPHINE BAKER (1906-1975)

## *Bisexual Civil Rights Activist and Entertainer*

### Lesson Plan



*“UNFORTUNATELY, HISTORY HAS SHOWN US THAT BROTHERHOOD MUST BE LEARNED, WHEN IT SHOULD BE NATURAL.” – Josephine Baker*

Born to a humble working-class family, Josephine Baker grew up cleaning houses and babysitting for wealthy white families who reminded her to “be sure not to kiss the baby.” After dropping out of school, she lived on the streets of St. Louis where her street-corner dancing led to a career in Vaudeville during the Harlem Renaissance. In 1925 she joined “La Revue Nègre” in Paris where her exotic and sensual performances made her an overnight sensation. In 1934 Baker was the first African American female to star in a major motion picture, *ZouZou*. During the Nazi occupation of France, she joined the French Underground and smuggled intelligence coded within her sheet music to the resistance in Portugal. In recognition of her services she received the Croix de Guerre, the Rosette de la Résistance, and was made a Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur by General Charles de Gaulle. In spite of her gallantry, after the war, Baker was refused service at New York’s popular Stork Club for being black. In response she refused to entertain in any club or theater that was not integrated – setting off a firestorm about integration. Thrust into the role of civil rights icon, Baker was the only woman asked to speak at the March on Washington in 1963. Though she performed less and less in the ensuing years, in 1973 she opened at Carnegie Hall to a standing ovation, finally receiving the recognition that had long eluded her in the U.S. On April 12, 1975 – shortly after receiving rave reviews for a retrospective on her 50 years in show business – she suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and passed away at the age of 68. She received full French military honors and was interred in Monaco at the behest of long-time friend, Princess Grace. Josephine Baker – who believed in a truly multiracial society – adopted 12 children from nationally and racially diverse backgrounds. She was a true pioneer who never gave up on life in spite of tremendous challenges, and remains one of the most beloved icons of her era.



#### Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: Have you ever seen or heard entertainer-turned-activist, Josephine Baker, perform?
2. Read the biographical information, above.
3. **Group Discussion A:** Describe something that happened to Baker when she was younger that may have soured her outlook.  
**Group Discussion B:** What critical choice did Baker make that prompted her career to sky rocket?
4. Extend knowledge: Read the selection at <https://www.thoughtco.com/josephine-baker-french-resistance-45273>

#### Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Listen to Baker’s performances in the following clips: 1934 Zou Zou (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMaSGMOnr8>); 1950 TV performance <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHrOV8YorHI> and her 1968 concert <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cgmuv7BAnU>  
How would you describe the evolution of her artistic ability over these time periods?
2. Legacy Project Website Investigation: Explore other resources at [http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Josephine Baker Resource List.html](http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Josephine_Baker_Resource_List.html) to learn more about Josephine Baker.

#### Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Examine Baker’s humble beginnings, her years a Parisian sensation, her French Resistance involvement, and her performance at Carnegie Hall in the link at <http://www.cmgww.com/stars/baker/about/biography.html>.  
How would you describe the stages in her personal development?
2. How did Baker advocate for freedom against discrimination? View this at <http://www.biography.com/people/josephine-baker-9195959/videos> and read her quotes at <http://www.cmgww.com/stars/baker/about/quotes.html>

#### Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Many distinguished leaders like Charles de Gaulle, Princess Grace of Monaco, and Rev. Martin Luther King thought very highly of Josephine Baker. What motivated each of these people to become so enamored of her?
2. Baker’s bisexuality was revealed publicly by her son after her death. Speculate about why Baker was prevented from openly discussing her sexual orientation during her lifetime?
3. Bisexuals are often left out many discussions involving LGBT issues. How would you advocate for bisexual civil rights today?