



The Josephine Baker Story

By Ean Wood

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This is the story of no ordinary life...Josephine Baker emerged from sordid poverty and racial intolerance in early 20th-century St Louis to delight audiences across the world becoming a genuine star of the stage.

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The Josephine Baker Story By Ean Wood Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

After she had been the toast of Europe for 15 years, Baker met with the following assessment of her heralded American tour from Time magazine: "Josephine Baker is a St. Louis washer-woman's daughter who stepped out of a Negro burlesque show into a life of adulation and luxury in Paris [but] in sex appeal to jaded Europeans, a Negro wench always has a head start." Clearly, the racism Baker thought she had left behind when she went to Europe with an all-black musical revue was still alive, yet one more barrier against a woman who consistently faced and overcame adversity. In this chatty and informed biography Aculled mostly from existing biographies and general books on the era A Wood (George Gershwin) charts the amazing life and times of "La Baker." Her life story reads like a novel coauthored by Toni Morrison and Danielle Steel Ashe rose from poverty in the U.S., became famous for dancing almost nude in the Folies Bergere (she wore only a skirt made of bananas), worked for the French Resistance, spoke out vehemently against Nazism and all forms of racism, married numerous times and became a glamorous international star who performed until her death in 1975. While Wood's biography contains no surprises, its workmanlike diligence is an improvement over Lyn Haney's 1981 *Naked at the Feast*, which glossed over the complications of Baker's life, and Phyllis Rose's 1989 *Jazz Cleopatra*, which took an oddly hostile tone to the performer. Wood is not at his best explaining the deep contradictions of Baker's life and politics (such as her support of Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia), but he offers a good introduction to her life and times.

Photos not seen by PW.

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From [Booklist](#)

Josephine Baker is a fascinating, complicated Jazz Age figure, an icon of African American power and talent and an example of how white culture projected wildness and sexuality onto African American performers. One of the most liberated performers, she had to move to Paris to achieve any social equality, and to play the bare-breasted native to win applause. Wood's biography exhaustively recounts her rise from impoverished childhood in St. Louis, Missouri, to initial success in the segregated world of American vaudeville to international fame as a star of the Folies-Bergere. Wood clearly loves Baker and has spared no pains to gather as much about her as he can for this readable book. Still, he does gush, and it is hard not to wish he had spent a little more time delving into the cultural implications of Baker's success in a very overtly racist world. After all, none of her Caucasian cabaret contemporaries--Colette and Dietrich, among them--had to strip, don bananas, and pretend to be a "wild and free jungle nudist" to attract crowds. *Jack Helbig*

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Users Review

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