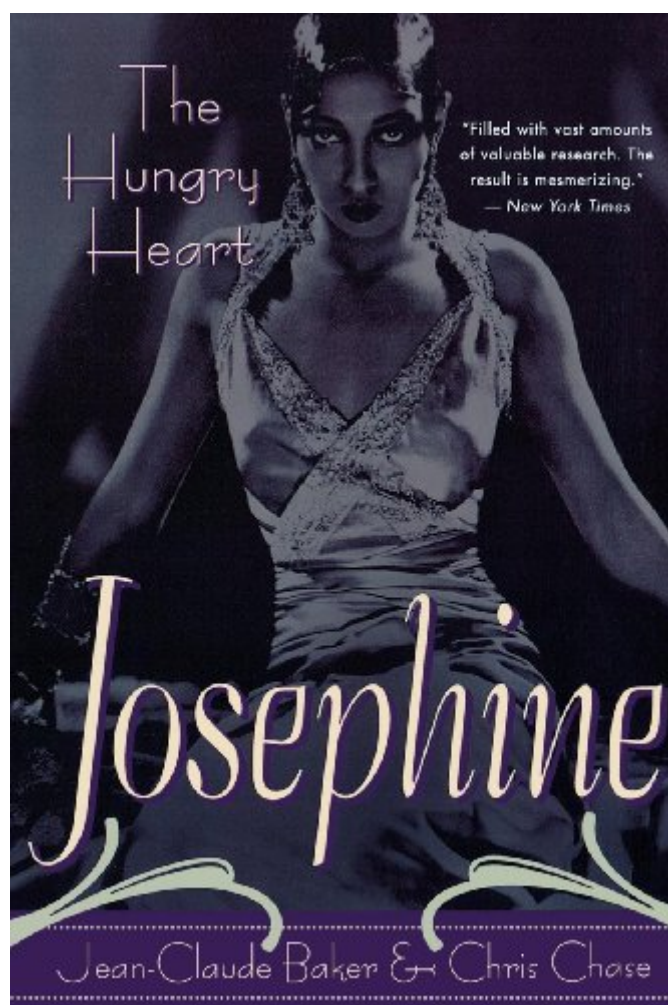


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Josephine Baker: The Hungry Heart



Synopsis

Based on twenty years of research and thousands of interviews, this authoritative biography of performer Josephine Baker (1906-1975) provides a candid look at her tempestuous life. Born into poverty in St. Louis, the uninhibited chorus girl became the sensation of Europe and the last century's first black sex symbol. A heroine of the French Resistance in World War II, she entranced figures as diverse as de Gaulle, Tito, Castro, Princess Grace, two popes, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet Josephine was also, as one critic put it, "a monster who made Joan Crawford look like the Virgin Mary." Jean-Claude Baker's book also reveals her outbursts that resulted in lasting feuds, her imperious treatment of family and entourage members, and her ambivalent attitudes concerning her ethnic background. Reconciling Josephine's many personas— "Jazz-age icon, national hero of France, proponent of Civil Rights, mother of children from across the globe— "Josephine: The Hungry Heart gives readers the inside story on a star unlike any other before or since.

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Customer Reviews

Jean-Claude gives a well balanced account of the life and times of Josephine Baker. With

unabashed frankness he describes her sexual escapades and decadent appetites, her manipulative and cunning business dealings, and her unbelievable selfishness. This biography paints a very clear picture of the woman who gave definition to the term "diva." Her demands of those who handled her and worked for her would go beyond unreasonable. For instance, she would borrow enormous sums of money from friends and would never pay them back, and would then call on them again for more favors as if she had never defrauded them. There was no request too outrageous for this woman to make. Realizing that her family in St. Louis was suffering the horrendous racial atrocities of America, she brought them to her home in France only to use them to work for her on her estate. At one point she disowned her brother because he would not allow her to adopt his child and raise it as her own. She would work her nurses, her maids, and the children's tutors so hard that the turnover became virtually unmanageable. Her maids would work extremely long hours, and as a result her employees became disgruntled and would often steal from her. She used men like one would use Kleenex. She brazenly carried on affairs with married men, some of whom were husbands of friends and fellow-entertainers. She engaged in enumerable sexual affairs (and orgies) with both men and women. Wild goings-on aside, she was a consummate entertainer--constantly reinventing herself and giving herself completely to her audience. In an era when black performers suffered atrocious injustices, she persevered.

When most hear the name Josephine Baker, images of her sensually dancing across a stage in nothing but a skirt made of bananas comes to mind. There's much more to her than that and Jean Claude Baker (one of her adopted sons) gives us the dish. He recounts Tumpy's (a childhood nickname) poor beginnings in St. Louis to her death as a worldwide superstar in Paris. I'd really recommend this book to anyone who wants to know what Josephine was really like. The good, the bad, and the ugly. Good things first, she was an untouchably talented dancer who has continually inspired dancers of all generations even after her death. Her voice, a shrill and lilting instrument, grew to almost Sarah Vaughn like heights. Despite her talents, Josephine could be a selfish and hurtful woman. She had a problem with lying all throughout her life. She never knew her father, but one minute she'd claim he was a successful black lawyer in Chicago and the next he was a simple Jewish man. Her whole early life in St. Louis would be flipped and turned around at her whim, to the point where published accounts would contradict themselves. Luckily, Jean Claude interviewed the people who knew her best and gave true accounts of her personality. She was also extremely promiscuous in her later teens. She went through male and female lovers like underwear and had no hesitation to use others when it would benefit her career. Even her legendary Rainbow Tribe

was created out of plain publicity (shout-out to the Octomom). She barely spent time with the kids and left them in the constant care of nannies. She also had a penchant for slapping people she was angry with and her kids were no exception.

Out of the many biographies I've read in my life, this is by FAR the BEST I've ever picked up, and has to be considered the definitive account on The Late, Great Josephine Baker, one of the most important celebrities in modern history. First, there are many great professional and candid pictures which I appreciated. More important, though, is that foster son Jean-Claude Baker did exhaustive research in writing this book, tracking down every major Josephine contemporary to interview and reading through hundreds of her personal letters, legal documents, and even her own multiple autobiographies to bring her back to life. But this is not just the tale of one entertainer. It's the detailed story of a brimming entertainment era from long ago. Through this book I was introduced to Florence Mills, Fats Waller, Butterbeans & Susie, Bricktop, and the like. I learned about many past entertainers of all colors, and their work, especially The Late, Great Mistinguett, so the reading experience is educational as well as entertaining. The end result is a colorful, globe-trotting epic that never slows down and that leaves the reader both transported and spent. Of course, the book's subject contributes to this effect: Josephine Baker was a very courageous, usually outrageous woman filled with shocking contradictions and paradoxes, some of them offensive, others heartbreaking. I will admit that a few incidents were difficult to read: my heart hurt for her when she was blatantly discriminated against personally or institutionally, and I marveled at her bravery to perform in racially-hostile countries (including none-other-than America).

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