

A: Hello, and welcome to Queer as Fact. I'm Alice.

H: I'm Hamish.

I: I'm Irene.

A: We're a queer history podcast released on the 1st and 15th of every month. Each episode one of us will talk about a person, a place or a topic from queer history from around the world and throughout time. This week it's Bisexual Awareness Week, and so we're going to be talking about bisexual activist, spy and performer Josephine Baker.

[intro music plays]

A: Before we begin we have several content warnings for this episode. There's going to be a lot of discussion of period typical racism, including mentions of lynchings and race riots, there are mentions of child abuse including sexual abuse, marriage between an adult and a minor, mentions of domestic abuse, a brief mention of drug use, period typical homophobia and some dubious interracial adoption policies, also some of this episode takes place during World War 2. So if any of that sounds like something you don't want to hear, feel free to skip this episode. We have plenty of other content that you might enjoy.

So Josephine Baker was born as Freda Josephine McDonald on the 3rd of June 1906 in St. Louis. St. Louis is in Missouri. At the time she was born St. Louis was the fourth largest city in the USA, and it also had a large black population, and so throughout her childhood there are a lot of race riots and lynchings and it was pretty awful all round.

Her mother was a 19-year-old – 19 at the time she was born – African-American laundry-worker whose name was Carrie McDonald, and Carrie McDonald was adopted by ex-slaves, so her parents were ex-slaves, and Josephine never knew who her father was, so there's speculation that he might have been a white employer of Carrie or he may have been a black boyfriend of Carrie. We don't know.

She grew up in a very poor area in a very poor household, and because her mother was 19 when she was born and unmarried she was shuffled around between several households as a child.

I: Like relatives households?

A: Yeah, so she lived with her grandma and her aunt a fair bit.

I: Okay.

A: And she also sometimes lived with her mother and her step-dad, 'cause her mother eventually married and had more kids. From the age of seven she was sent away to work as a live-in servant in various households.

I: I've met seven-year-olds and I always wonder about this. They don't make fabulous servants.

A: They don't, yeah. It always ended badly and it was just a very terrible situation for her pretty much all the time.

Her closest relationship when she was growing up was with her grandmother, whose name was Elvira. And so she enjoyed dressing in Elvira's old clothes and she'd put on performances for her family and friends.

I: Aww.

A: And she later extended this to performing outside the local theatre and she'd used that – it cost ten cents to go into the theatre, and so she'd perform outside to get money to go into the theatre to watch shows.

I: That was resourceful.

A: Yeah, she's super resourceful, yeah. She is. And she eventually started taking music and dance lessons with a local theatrical family who lived nearby in exchange for her doing some work for them like carrying their musical instruments when they went on tour and stuff like that.

At age 13 Josephine was living and working with a man in his 50s who is known as Mr. Dad.

I: I'm suspicious of this situation.

A: Yeah.

H: That's certainly a name.

A: That's certainly a name and this isn't going to go well; you're right to be suspicious.

I: Is that his actual name or...?

A: That's what everyone called him; I assume it's not his actual name. So yeah, at 13 she was living and working with this man called Mr. Dad, and we're not sure exactly what happened – there are kind of various stories about how this went – but it sounds like either he made some advance towards her that she wasn't comfortable with or they were in a relationship – we're not clear. She says he made an advance that she wasn't comfortable with. Her brother, who was a little younger than her, says "Oh no, she was just living with him and they were in a relationship and that was how it was." So, we don't know, but in response to this her mother's employer, who was a family friend, intervened to arrange a marriage for Josephine to a respectable man.

I: Isn't she 13?

A: She is 13, yeah. So this wasn't actually legal at the time.

I: I was going to say! I didn't think so, like this is 20th-century, isn't...

A: America.

I: Yeah!

A: Yeah. So you had to be 15 to get married. She was 13, and they just kind of fudged it.

I: Right.

H: That's less alarming than it could be but not the least alarming it could be.

A: Yeah. It's not great.

I: Mmm.

A: So at 13 she married a man called Willie Wells.

I: [laughs]

A: She's going to have two husbands with alliteration in their names so get ready.

I: So this is like a J.K. Rowling novel.

A: [laughs] This is a J.K. Rowling novel, there.

H: That or she has a really weird type.

A: Yeah. [laughs]

I: [laughs] Yeah.

A: I mean she didn't choose Willie Wells.

H: True.

A: So-

I: Her mother's employer has a weird type.

A: Yes. Willie was in probably his late 20s, though we're not really sure. So they married and they moved in together but it ended very soon and very badly. What happened was they got into a fight, she hit him with a bottle and he ended up in hospital.

I: [shocked laugh]

A: And he never came home.

I: That's terrible!

A: Not because he died in hospital, to be clear.

H: [laughs]

A: He just was like "I'm getting out of this," so...

I: "This teenager is crazy, I'm leaving."

A: Yeah, pretty much. Yeah.

I: Wow, nice job Josephine.

A: I'm not really sure why Willie would have agreed to this but we know nothing about him.

I: I was wondering that, like I wouldn't marry a 13-year-old.

A: No. We never see him again.

I: And it's not like a thing that has much cultural place here.

A: No.

I: So far as I know..

H: Like, maybe it's a favour to somebody.

I: Mmm.

A: Maybe it was.

I: Mmm.

A: Yeah. Not sure. All we know about him is that he was also black and I think he was gravel worker – he shovelled or....

I: He moved gravel around.

A: Transport.... He moved gravel around in some way. So he probably came from a kind of similar background to her.

After Willie left her Josephine was working waiting tables in a restaurant and while she was there she was spotted by blues singer Clara Smith. Clara was working at the time with a company that was performing at the Booke Theatre which was the theatre near Josephine in St. Louis, and she suggested to the director Bob Russell that the company should take on Josephine.

I: What caught her eye about Josephine? Was Josephine like, singing or performing or something or did she just look at Josephine and be like, "Well she's attractive."

A: It doesn't say Josephine was doing anything other than waiting tables. Josephine we know was interested in being in theatre so maybe they struck up conversation and she mentioned that to Clara and Clara took a liking to her and recommended her. There's nothing specific mentioned.

I: Okay.

A: So the company took her on as a chorus-girl and the sort of shows they were doing were kind of comedic – what's the word for those shows that have a lot of little small like....

H: Oh, like vaudeville acts?

A: Revue?

H: Oh, yeah. Okay.

A: Revue, yeah.

H: Yeah yeah yeah.

A: Were like comedic revue shows, so they include a lot of physical comedy, a lot of slapstick, and they talk about them including black-face, but they're done by black performers, so....

I: This was a thing, where black performers did black-face and they would like paint their faces up so they looked like white people doing black-face but they were in fact black people.

A: Yeah, so-

I: So they'd like paint the red lips on.

H: That is a lot of levels.

I: They're... I don't know a lot about this honestly, but I know this was a thing that happened and it's very strange.

A: Yeah. It was sort of about black people kind of – as best I understand it, and I should have included a disclaimer at the start that I am not fully qualified to talk about race in America, as a white Australian....

H: It maybe that nobody is fully qualified to talk about race in America.

A: [laughs] That's true. It's sort of black performers kind of exaggerating their blackness and this kind of caricature that never truly existed of being African, and this appealed to white audiences.

So Josephine herself played a particularly comedic role in these shows. She was often - the chorus-girl on the end of the line was often this kind of joke chorus-girl who kind of stuffed everything up and did weird different things and so she played that role.

So the director of the company was called Bob Russell, and fellow performer Booth Marshall said about this time, "Josephine had become Clara's protégé, you know, her lady-lover, as we called it. Bob didn't like that kind of hanky-panky but Clara was a big draw and anyhow, better a steady date than a fight in every city."

I: Those... protégé and lady-lover are two quite different words.

A: They are and Booth Marshall has definitely just conflated them.

I: Yes.

A: Josephine also wrote that Bob Russell, the director, didn't like her, but she gave a different reason, or she was less blunt about the reason, and she said, "Bob felt that his leading lady was monopolising my time. He wasn't paying me to spend hours in Miss Smith's dressing-room improving my penmanship."

H: Is that what they're calling it now?

A: Yeah I was wondering if that was euphemism. [laughs]

H: [laughs]

I: That's definitely a euphemism. Why would she be improving her penmanship in there literally?

A: I don't know. Yeah, I think it's a euphemism.

I: That's a euphemism.

A: She's never shown any interest in writing or had much of an education, so I think it's a euphemism.

I; Yeah, I'm using that from now on.

H: [laughs]

A: Improving my penmanship....

So it is worth noting when we compare those two quotes that Josephine herself never actually spoke or wrote openly, that we have record of, about her relationships with women.

I: How do we know they existed then?

A: We're getting there. So her son – and we'll get into more detail who exactly her son was, so although we call him her son he was.... kind of adopted into the family in his 20s.

I: Okay.

H: Okay.

A: But he did play an older-sibling role to her other children and she refers to him as her son – her son Jean-Claude wrote a biography of her, which is a very very comprehensive biography and he travelled all around and spoke to all these people that she'd performed with and including some of

the ones that had had relationships with her and so this information comes from those primary sources and those interviews that he's done.

I: Okay.

A: So like, although she never spoke about it-

I: -he's talked to her girlfriends and they've been like, "Yeah, we totally had sex."

A: No, I don't think anyone ever says they had sex, but they say things like, you know, "Oh, she was her lady-lover" or-

I: "We were lovers" or-

A: Yeah. There's a more explicit quote coming up that will probably make this more clear.

I: Okay, yeah.

A: But I'll leave that in its chronological place I think.

I: Yeah.

A: In 1921, age 14, Josephine, along with Clara and the rest of the company left St. Louis to continue on the company's tour. Clara left the company not long after that and that's the last we hear of her in connection with Josephine.

I: Bye Clara!

A: Goodbye Clara. But she did go on to have a very successful career, and she recorded over 100 songs and she worked with Louis Armstrong at one point.

H: Oh wow!

I: Wait is this Clara we're talking about?

A: Yeah, this is Clara.

I: Oh, nice.

A: So good on you Clara. She's good.

The company continued their tour to Philadelphia, and in Philadelphia Josephine met 23-year-old African-American man Billy Baker.

I: She's also called Baker.

A: No.

I: In the future.

A: She's called McDonald at the moment.

I: Ah.

H: Ahh.

I: She will become Baker.

A: She will become Baker. This is why she's Baker. So her and Billy got married. They travelled to New Jersey to get married because she was 14 and that wasn't legal in Philadelphia but it was legal-

I: But everything is legal in New Jersey!

[laughter]

I: We know this.

A: But everything is legal in New Jersey, so they got married in New Jersey. She did write on the marriage certificate that she was 19

I: [laughs]

A: But she was not.

I: Was she a very like, adult.... like a very mature, like, well-developed girl?

A: We do have photos of her at that time but I can't remember off the top of my head if she was or not.

I: 'Cause like if somebody is an adult man is marrying her at 13 and she's writing that she's 19 when she's 14.

A: Yeah.

I: Like is she just a very mature-looking person?

A: She might have been. She might have been. I don't know.

H: Do we.... This might be like.... Do we have like a concrete birth record for her or do we have a reliable source for her age?

A: We do have census records.... I don't know – are ages on census records?

H: Okay.

I: Yeah?

H: Yeah.

A: Yeah we do have census records that show where she was living throughout her childhood and she's got younger siblings that were interviewed for Jean-Claude's biography which was my main source so like, everyone corroborates her birthdate.

H: Yeah.

A: I think it's more that she was just trying to up her age. She was trying to do all these things like become independent and get married and stuff.

H: That makes sense. 'Cause you do sometimes see that as you go back in history where someone's misrecorded their birthdate at some point and they're like leading an army at like 5.

A: Yeah. [laughs]

I: [laughs]

A: Actually no we do have the record of her mother being in hospital when she was born.

H: Okay, perfect.

A: So we do know. There are records of her staying in hospital.

So she married Billy and in Philadelphia she stayed with Billy and his family when the company continued their tour. She was apparently very close to Billy's family; she referred to Billy's father as Papa, so she was kind of adopted into that family, but eventually she got a job in New York in a show called *Shuffle Along* and she left Billy behind and moved to New York.

I: Goodbye Billy!

A: Yeah, goodbye Billy.

H: Do we know anything about *Shuffle Along*.

A: We do know quite a lot about *Shuffle Along*. *Shuffle Along* is quite famous as a show.

I: So we can look up *Shuffle Along* later and post YouTube videos.

A: Yeah, there should be recordings of *Shuffle Along*.

H: That would be sweet!

A: Maybe not with her, but there should be recordings of *Shuffle Along* I think. *Shuffle Along* was an all-black musical show. It was one of the first shows to be on Broadway with a jazz soundtrack, and it was notable for being incredibly with both black and white audiences.

In New York Josephine roomed with a family called the Sheppards. Some of the Sheppard daughters were also in *Shuffle Along*, and here she had a relationship with Evelyn Sheppard. Evelyn Sheppard was the youngest of the Sheppard sisters, of which there were several, and both Josephine and Evelyn are about 15 at this time. Because she's the youngest child Evelyn is nicknamed Little Shep, which I like.

I: Awww.

A: And she apparently had a stutter. A fellow performer, Maude Russell, said, "Josephine was crazy about Evelyn Sheppard – Little Shep. I didn't think she was gay – she got around with too many men." And Maude continues to talk about, you know, this situation and was she gay? was she with men? and she says "Often we girls would share a room because of the cost. Well many of us had been kind of abused by producers, directors and leading men – if they liked girls. In those days men only wanted what they wanted and they didn't care about pleasing a girl. A girl needed tenderness, so we had girl friendships – the famous lady-lovers. But lesbians weren't well accepted in show business – they were called bull dykes. I guess we were bisexual, is what you would call it today."

I: So what she's kind of saying here is that she had women for romance and men for sex.

A: It kind of does come across that way, yeah.

I: Yeah.

H: Hm.

I: I also like the way that this person has solved all our "But it's in the past! How do we deal with like, put modern sexuality labels on it?" being like, "So, if this was now I would have been bisexual.

A: Thanks Maude Russell.

I: Thanks Maude.

A: Good on you Maude. [laughs] So yeah, Maude would have been a very old lady by the time she was interviewed, and she would like you to know that she was bisexual in modern terms.

Jean-Claude suggests that Josephine had many of her relationships with men because she saw them as a source of money or power or kind of a way to advance herself and her career, and so if we couple that Maude's quote it sounds like you know, they're kind of using men to get what they want but using women to get the emotional support they need.

I: Yeah. I mean again you get kind of material things from men and then emotional things from women.

A: Yeah.

I: So it's the sex from men and romance from women situation again.

A: [laughs] Probably this is a simplification and she was genuinely attracted to both men and women.

H and I: Yes.

H: At the same time, if she did rapidly fall in love with and marry a young man in the South and then run off to New York for work...

A: Yes, that's true. And Billy Baker – it sounds like they just met and fell in love and married, and that was quite happy and then she moved to New York for work. Yeah.

I: But yeah, I'm interested in – and you don't just see this in like, this, you see it a lot in historical discussions of queer women – this kind of, they went for women because men were not a good option for some reason.

A: Yeah.

I: And that's what you're getting here is the men tended to take advantage of them or use them or were not as emotionally present as they wanted, and so they would turn to women.

A: Yeah.

I: As opposed to a kind of "I'm inherently attracted to women and men" it's "Well men was the preferred option but it's not really working here so I've got a back-up."

A: Yeah, and I guess if you are already a person who is to some level attracted to both women and men in this kind of circumstance that's how it ends up panning out.

I: Yeah. I guess that's how it ends up feeling.

A: Yeah. So Josephine and *Shuffle Along* went on tour.

I: I imagined you were going to say "Josephine and Snuffleupagus went on tour."

A: I love Snuffleupagus.

H and I: [laugh]

H: I would definitely watch that show.

[laughter]

A: That would be a good show. No no no. Josephine went on tour with *Shuffle Along*, and she eventually stepped up into the lead role, and during this tour she sort of increased in fame and became reasonably well-know.

She was briefly, when they toured – it wasn't Philadelphia, it was somewhere else – anyway, sorry, she was briefly reunited on this tour with Billy Baker, who had also tried to have a career in dance but was unfortunately now waiting tables, and they seem to be quite happy together from the outside, but not long after this she started divorce proceedings against him.

I: I mean maybe they were still quite happy but just the situation didn't suit them

A: That's true, that's true.

H: They had been apart for a long time.

A: Yeah, and they were very young when they married.

I: Yeah.

A: But the divorce proceedings were never actually completed so she remained legally married to Billy but they separated.

I: Okay.

A: Josephine had two more female lovers that we know of at this time – dancer and violinist Mildred Smallwood, and fellow *Shuffle Along* performer Bessie Allison. So she went on to become Bessie Buchanan, who was the first African-American woman to have a seat in the New York State Legislature.

I: Well done!

A: So like, she had a lot of very successful partners.

H: Yeah!

I: She's obvious like, good luck.

A: Yeah. Mildred Smallwood was also the first black woman to appear in the American *Dance* magazine.

I: Oh!

A: Along with Maude Russell.

I: Oh that's quite cool!

A: So now you know. Yeah.

H: That's a big deal in dance?

I: That's just like, I know the magazine.

H: Ah, okay.

A: Okay, yeah.

H: Yeah.

A: So it was a big deal, yeah.

So in 1925 Josephine met socialite Caroline Dudley Reagan, white woman who was looking for performers for an all-black musical revue to take to Paris. Josephine joined her company and they left the USA on the 15th of September 1925. Both Bessie and Mildred came to see Josephine off, and there is a photo we have of Josephine holding a little violin which Mildred had given her as a going-away gift.

I: Were Bessie and Mildred like, they were fine with each other? There wasn't jealousy there or anything?

A: I think by this time she was only with one of them. I can't remember which one.

I: Okay, they were all just happy with that?

A: Yeah. She arrived in France in 1925 and the 1920s were a very exciting time in France. One of Josephine's later lovers, who we'll meet in a minute, called Bricktop-

I: [laughs]

A: Not her real name. [laughs]

I: Really.

A: [laughs]

I: I take it she had red hair.

A: She did have red hair, yeah.

I: Cool.

A: She did have red hair. Bricktop described the 1920s in Paris as "a time when people with money but no talent helped people with talent but no money." Which I liked.

H: [laughs] Nice.

I: That sounds idyllic. Like, that sounds like a good arrangement.

A: It doesn't sound idyllic, doesn't it.

H: If you have money but no talent, send us an email at queerasfact@gmail.com.

A and I: [laugh]

I: Yeah, let's keep that in. That was good.

A: Good, yes. So in the 1920s in France there was a fascination with African and African-American culture, so as we probably France has a lot of African colonies, and as well as that there had been American soldiers in France in World War 1, and-

I: I was about to ask, is it a particular interest in African-American culture?

A: It's both African and African-American, so it's African from their own African colonies, and African-American from the World War 1 soldiers who brought them things like jazz.

I: That's quite interesting.

A: So yeah, it's both. And at this time – so like I said Josephine's grandparents were ex-slaves – so at this... I don't know if they were ex-slaves who had been slaves for several generations, actually, but at this time African-American culture and African culture are often spoken of as still being quite close, even though they're probably, you know...

I: They're not that close.

A: They're not.

I: Yeah.

A: They're often conceptualised as being the same thing, and people go to see this all-black show to kind of see what they think is an exotic African performance, even though all the performers are American.

I: I mean, America is still not France, like, African-American is probably still exotic to them even if they're not misconceptualising that as the same as African.

A: That's true, that's true. There was definitely a level of fetishisation at work here in this interest in African-American culture and African-American and African dancers were very exoticised. We can see this in the actions of Rolf de Maré, who was the one who sent Caroline to America to set up this troop. When he saw the dancers when they arrived in France he was actually very disappointed in them because they had much paler skin than he expected and he just didn't feel they were African enough.

H: Hm.

I: So Caroline is French?

A: Caroline's an American ex-pat, so Caroline's husband is stationed in France.

I: Okay, so she went home to America to collect these African-Americans for her dance troop.

A: Yep. Yeah

H: So this was a thing that I was going to bring up earlier when you were talking about Josephine's potential heritage, but I don't know if it's relevant here or if it's even worth mentioning at all, but there's a thing where a lot of her photos make her look really white because photography's kind of crummy at the time.

A: [laughs]

H: And she has reasonably light skin.

A: Yeah.

H: And so there's a bunch of photographs of her where she looks really white because she's in high-contrast environments.

A: Well there are kind of two things to that. So, firstly photography.... Okay, maybe three things. Photography was bad.

H and I: [laugh]

A: It's the '20s. Josephine did – and many black women of the time did aim to make themselves look more like white women, so she was really happy with the photographs that came out where she looked more white.

H: Ah!

A: And she would often use.... She would bathe in lemon juice and she would use all these sort of chemicals and skin treatments in the hope of making her skin lighter.

H: That sounds very unpleasant.

A: Yeah. There are several stories of her burning off her hair putting chemicals in trying to straighten it.

H: Holy moly!

A: And things like that. In her first opening performance in France she put a straightening chemical in her hair the night before, so her hair would be straight when she went on stage and I'm not sure if the chemical was just horribly strong or if she misused it – she left it in overnight and it burnt all her hair off.

H: Ooh!

A: And so she actually went on – and I think there are photos of this performance – but she actually went on wearing a hat painted to look like hair.

H: Huh!

A: And she had no hair that day.

I: Yes! I think I've seen this picture.

A: Yeah it does look – when you look at her hair, even if you don't know, you think, you know, her hair looks very plastic and shiny, and...

I: Yeah!

A: You probably think it's hairspray or something but it's actually a lacquered hat, so they got a cap and they painted it with black lacquer to make it look like her hair.

H: Is this the performance – because it reminds me of a photo where she has very – maybe that's just the style, but has this shiny lacquered-on hair – is this the performance with the banana skirt?

A: [laughs] No, the banana skirt comes later.

H: Okay.

A: The banana skirt comes later. But I think to some extent that style of hair that she had in the first performance kind of became....

I: Her image.

A: Her image.

H: Yes.

A: And so even if she's not wearing a hat painted like hair that was kind of the hairstyle she maintained.

H: Yeah. At this time very heavily-oiled hair was a style and you had things where in a theatre seat on a theatre seat you'd have an anti-macassar which is a-

A: Ohh, yeah!

H: -like a little sheet that goes over the back which is to prevent macassar staining – which is a hair-oil – staining the theatre seats because people would just wear so much oil in their hair.

I: I'm so glad I didn't live at that time. That sounds gross.

A: Yeah. They still have those on planes!

H: Huh! Yeah, of course!

A: Yeah. And I think I was on a plane with someone and I asked what they were called and they were like, "Yeah, it's the anti-macassar!" and I was like "What the hell is this?"

I: [laughs]

A: But now we know. So yeah, while we're on this topic, a couple of other things – because skin-colour - even within a black group – skin-colour was a very sensitive issue for Josephine and probably for everyone: when she was at home in St. Louis she was considered to have quite pale skin and that caused some kind of tensions within her family because her younger siblings were all much darker than her because her step-father was also a black man. When she was in *Shuffle Along* in America she was often bullied by other members of the cast because her skin was too dark.

H: Hm.

I: Wasn't *Shuffle Along* a black show though?

A: Yes.

I: But they just picked the pale black people?

A: Yeah, so the women performing in New York were often very pale black women and they would look down on Josephine because she was quite dark, and there was another woman performing in that show who did the singing who was made to sing from the wings because she was considered too dark to be on stage.

H: Wow!

I: They did this in – this is a bit of an aside – they did this in the opening ceremony of the Chinese Olympics.

A: [laughs] They did!

I: They had a little girl singing a song and they selected two girls – they selected one who was like their sort of perfect picture of Chinese little-girl beauty, so she's this little cute, round-faced thing, and they had another girl who could sing and had to do it from off-stage 'cause she wasn't pretty enough.

H: Ohhh dear.

A: Mm.

I: So that's a thing.

A: Yeah. So that was also happening in the '20s. So when this group of women – quite pale-skinned black women – travelled to France along with Josephine the producer felt that they weren't as "African" as he'd hoped and so he encouraged them to add sort of bright coloured, mismatched clothing to their costumes, and some of them were actually painted their skin darker to better fit the audience's expectation of an African show.

H: Huh.

I: Okay. And so that might be part of the reason why Josephine ends up in the lead of this then, because as you say she's darker than the other women in this troop?

A: Well no, 'cause Josephine was put in the lead back in...

I: Ohh, okay, back in America.

A: America.

H: Right.

A: Josephine's in the lead out of her talent and her dogged desire to be in the lead. [laughs]

I: Okay. Josephine's just very dedicated. Alright.

A: She's very very dedicated, yes. She works very hard.

So yeah, in spite of it being quite problematic, the fascination with African and African-American culture in Paris did mean that there were a lot of unsegregated environments where Josephine – who had always lived in a segregated country – could mix with white people, so they would have have, you know, balls that were African-themed, where both white people would go to see these exotic Africans and black people would go because it was their culture and you know....

I: They wanted to be...

A: They wanted to be at an African-themed ball with a lot of other people of African heritage.

H: Or just wanted to go to a party.

A: And, y'know, there's a lot of people of all races who would come to go to a party. So another thing that Rolf de Maré changed about the performance was he asked Josephine to perform nude which to Josephine was a very shocking request and something she would have thought was very demeaning and which she never would have done in America, but-

I: I understand they're more chill about these things in Paris.

A: Mm, it was more common for both white and black women in Paris.

I: Like, remember the Nijinsky costume story.

A: Yeah, yeah. So this is the same era as Nijinsky.

I: Yeah.

A: It's a similar sort of thing, where this would have been shocking in America but it was more acceptable in France. So, um, she went onstage nude and the closing number was her doing this very, very sexualised dance with a man and it was, it caused a huge... Not a scandal, but it was a big deal in Paris.

I: Yep.

A: That this had happened. That this dance was, know, everyone was talking about this dance. So the next day, a journalist asked her "What was your most vivid memory of last night?" after the opening performance. And she didn't mention the dance at all and what she said was, "For the first time in my life, I was invited to sit at a table and eat with white people." So this was a big deal to Josephine.

H: And presumably also a big deal to a bunch of other people that we've covered before.

I: Yes.

A: Yes.

H: Like imagine them reading it in the paper over their kippers.

A: That's true, yeah. All the other people who there at that time. So to backtrack a bit to Bricktop who I mentioned earlier.

I: Bricktop sounds cute, I'm imagining a kind of butch, dykey kind of lesbian here, to be honest.

A: Yeah, yeah, that's what you should be imagining.

I: Good.

A: Bricktop's great.

I: I'm glad I have the right image of Bricktop because I like Bricktop already.

H: Certainly the name Bricktop is very evocative.

I: Yeah, it is.

A: I think Bricktop could deserve her own episode, she's very cool. Um, so Bricktop was also American.

I: Okay.

A: She was of mixed Irish and African descent, so she had dark skin but red hair which was why it was such a notable feature and why she was called Bricktop. Her name, she's actually born Ada Smith, and in France at this time she's really at the centre of both this sort of fascination with African culture and she runs her own club, um, she's also at the centre of the American expat community. So she was a performer in America and then she travelled to Paris where Cole Porter used to hire her to dance at his parties and teach, um, African American dances like the Charleston at his parties.

I: Do I know who Cole Porter is?

H: He wrote, um, uh, did he write *Anything Goes*?

A: I don't know if I could name any of his famous works.

I: You say this as though I know him.

A: Yeah, you are supposed to know who Cole Porter is but I'll have to Google this...

H: Um, he wrote a, like, [singing] "Birds do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it..."

I: Oh yes, I know.

H: Yeah.

A: He did do *Anything Goes* as well, yeah.

I: Oh, alright, yes.

H: Thank you, Google.

A: Thank you, Google. Yeah, no, so he's quite, quite... And he did *I Get a Kick Out of You*, if you know that one.

I: Yep.

A: Yep.

I: See, I do know music, I just don't know current popular music.

A: Yeah.

I: I know lots of songs.

A: Yeah. So that's Cole Porter, and so Bricktop also famously taught the future Edward VIII to do the Charleston.

[laughter]

I: Is he the one that abdicated?

A: He is the one that abdicated, yeah, he married Wallis Simpson and he stepped down.

I: I forgot her name was Wallis.

A: By the time Josephine arrived in Paris, Bricktop was running her own nightclub, which was frequented by people like T.S. Elliot and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

I: Okay.

A: And F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "My greatest claim to fame is that I met Bricktop before Cole Porter did."

[laughter]

A: Bricktop and Josephine had an affair and Bricktop said about Josephine, "Josephine was gorgeous, I mean naked or with clothes," because she often went onstage naked. Speaking of the fact that Josephine often went onstage naked, so because that was quite... or more normal or accepted in France, Josephine...

I: Was it... it may have been more normal and accepted in France then than it is now? Like imagine if like a Broadway show had full nudity in it now.

H: Hm.

A: She was wearing an ostrich feather.

H: Oh, of course.

A: A single ostrich feather. But yeah, Josephine did say when she arrived in Paris that she was shocked by the number of pictures of nude women that she saw everywhere. She said, "In the

theatres, women could show themselves without clothing. I couldn't believe it, so I bought dozens of pictures of nude women."

I: Very heterosexual there, Josephine.

A: It was just 'cause she was, it was just the culture shock.

I: It was just art.

A: It was just art.

I: Such art.

H: Yes, definitely.

A: So, Bricktop does remain a recurring feature in Josephine's life though we're not clear how long their relationship continued for. We will see Bricktop several times again, I think.

I: Good, I love her.

A: She's great. So, uh, Josephine's show she was in was hugely successful and as its star she was wined and dined by a whole lot of rich people; they bought her clothes and flowers and exotic pets.

I: What kind of exotic pets? Does she have, like, a snake and a giraffe?

A: She had a snake, she had a monkey, she had a cheetah.

I: Oh, wow.

A: I think those are the ones she had at this time, but there's many exotic pets to come. She's all about exotic pets. Her cheetah was called Chiquita.

I: Chiquita the cheetah.

A: Yes, she used to walk it down the street.

I: I think I've seen this picture, actually.

A: Apparently it's actually in Anastasia when Anastasia goes to Paris.

H: Huh.

I: Yeah!

A: You see Josephine Baker walk past with her cheetah in her banana skirt. So, um, yeah, the season of the show was supposed to last only two weeks but it was extended to ten. The person booking into the theatre after who had to wait for their extended season was the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova and so she had to wait while they extended the season.

I: Oh, I read about this, she was very offended.

A: [laughter] She was very offended, she was very offended.

I: She's always very offended. One time she did like 21 pirouettes on the back of an elephant.

[laughter]

H: Wow.

A: That's so good.

H: Yeah.

I: When she was on tour in Egypt or something.

A: Great, I love it. Um... [laughter]

H: We've got a dessert named after her here. You may have it also. It's delicious. It's called pavlova.

A: It's just made of meringue and cream and fruit and...

I: I personally don't think it's delicious but anyway...

A: I love it.

H: Irene is wrong in this respect.

I: I don't like meringue.

A: Okay. So after France, they went on tour to Germany. They went to Berlin.

I: What year are we in?

A: Uh, we're still in '25, maybe '26?

I: Okay, so...

A: We're in the mid-twenties.

I: Nazis aren't about to happen just yet.

A: Nazis aren't about to happen but that's not to say-

I: That there's not tension.

A: -Europe is fine. There were anti-black protests outside the theatre when the show arrived and there was definitely tension. Later, when Josephine toured Europe, I think on her next tour of Europe, um, there were a lot of protests and she had to leave Vienna without performing because of the huge unemployment and also the racism, people were angry that there was this really, what's the word I want...

I: Lavish?

A: Lavish, yeah, this really lavish production, and also that it was being put on by black people. So she does encounter a fair bit of opposition in Europe as we approach the war. Um, but in her first time in Germany, she had a lovely time. Another woman who performed with Josephine who wouldn't give her name in the book when she gave this quote...

I: [laughter]

A: Said, "We danced with no clothes on, so to keep us warm, they gave us cocaine."

[laughter]

H: We definitely need to do an episode on pre-war Berlin, because...

A: Oh yeah, we do.

H: Yes.

A: It's so good, so much is happening. Um, so they would perform one show a night, sometimes two shows a night, and then they would go out to clubs and they would-

I: Do more cocaine?

A: -stay out and party until all hours of the morning, then they would sleep, then they would get up and rehearse and perform. In the first half of his biography, Jean-Claude Baker kind of says, "They were working so hard, I don't know how she did it" and then in the second half, he meets this woman and he says, "So I found out how they did it."

[laughter]

A: Which I enjoyed.

H: PSA: Don't do drugs, kids.

A: Yeah, cocaine is bad, don't do it.

[laughter]

A: So, um, Count Harry Kessler was one of the men who attended these parties that Josephine would go to and perform at and he wrote in his diary one night that at the party at 1 am, he saw "Miss Baker, naked except for a pink gauze loincloth."

I: I like the way she manages to find, like, pink gauze loincloths... Did she bring this to the party, did she just like pick up a pink scarf somewhere and be like, time for my naked show?

A: Yeah, it may have been a scarf.

H: I definitely like the idea of her having a briefcase with, like, an ostrich feather and a pink gauze loincloth, just, y'know, in case.

[laughter]

I: Yeah.

A: And, um, the other woman she was there with he said was "the young Landshoff girl dressed as a boy sporting a black tie."

I: [laughter]

H: Do we know who the young Landshoff girl is, has she been introduced?

A: She hasn't been introduced, she's just a fellow performer I think.

H: Right.

A: And, um, at 4 am, later in the diary he notes, "Reinhardt, Vollmoeller, and I were standing around Miss Baker and Miss Landshoff who were embracing like a pair of beautiful young lovers."

I: So what we're saying is that they just watched her have sex.

A: That appears to actually be what happened. So that gives you an idea of 1920s Berlin.

H: Certainly that is perhaps an accurate picture of 1920s Berlin if Christopher Isherwood is to be believed.

A: So, although she was with *Shuffle Along*...

I: Yeah.

A: ...and on that tour, before she left Paris, Josephine had actually signed another contract with the *Folies Bergère*, which she wasn't supposed to have done because she was under contract with...

I: *Shuffle Along*?

A: Not *Shuffle Along*, this, um, all black show, *La Revue Negre*. So she left the *Revue*, her employer Caroline was very angry and took her to court over it but Caroline said she got to the steps of the court, she saw Josephine, and she thought "You know what? I'm just too fond of her, I just can't do it" and she dropped the case.

H: That's brilliant.

A: So Josephine went back to Paris to dance in the *Folies* and this is where she wore her famous banana skirt.

H and I: Ah!

A: Have you seen the banana skirt?

I: I'm aware of the banana skirt.

A: Yeah, so she's naked except for...

I: Bananas.

A: ...a string of bananas around her waist.

I: Yes.

H: Which despite being horrifically racist was a big deal at the time, like, it made a lot of news and those photos are very widely circulated.

A: Yes, yes, and I also think, like, obviously the white view of black people at the time was horrifically racist but to some extent they kind of were able to utilise that to their own advantage, so... I'm trying to think how to word this, like...

H: I mean, that earlier comment, not good, but better.

A: Yeah, yeah. So yeah, it was horrifically racist, but...

H: Yeah.

I: But it was making her money.

A: She made do with what she had and she did well for herself. Back in Paris, Josephine met a Sicilian man, Guiseppe Abatino, he called himself Count Guiseppe Abatino.

I: Okay.

A: But he was not a count.

H: [laughter]

A: And he's known as Pepito. Um, so, Giuseppe was on holidays in Paris and somebody else at this time basically says, Guiseppe was there to pick up rich women. Um...

I: Is Josephine rich yet?

A: Josephine is doing pretty well for herself and she's definitely on an upward trajectory.

H: She's certainly at least cheetah-snake-and-monkey rich.

A: Yes, she is cheetah-snake-and-monkey rich, that is true. I think she had a Rolls Royce in Berlin.

I: Oh.

A: She's quite...

I: Did her cheetah drive the Rolls Royce in like a chauffeur cap?

A: Yes.

I: Good, that's how I imagined that.

A: Um, so Pepito and Josephine fell in love and after a brief return to Sicily to visit his family, he came back to Paris and said to her, "I can't live without you, you're looking at your new manager."

I: Oh dear. He just hired himself at her.

A: He hired himself and he becomes her manager.

H: That's how you get jobs.

A: Yeah, I'm doing it wrong.

I: Just go in there and insist you have them.

H: Mm.

A: So he was originally actually hired as her tango teacher.

I: [laughter]

A: This is how they met.

H: Is that a euphemism?

A: Uhhhh. He *was* hired to teach her the tango.

H: Oh, okay.

A: Whether what he did was teach her the tango may or may not be a euphemism. So Pepito and Bricktop didn't get along.

I: I see.

A: Bricktop says, "Pepito taught Josephine everything and the first thing he taught her was that she shouldn't talk to me." I don't know if that was because he was homophobic or-

I: Jealous.

A: -because it was just a clash of personalities or if he was just jealous or... That's unclear.

H: Hm.

A: But, uh, yes, and that is the last we see of Bricktop for a bit.

I: That's a shame, she's my favourite character.

H: Yes.

A: So with Pepito as her manager - Pepito is actually a very good manager - Josephine's fame grew and she began to star in films. She was the first black woman to have a leading role in a silent film.

H and I: Ah!

I: Cool.

H: Do we know which film?

A: Uh, I don't know how you... It's called *Zouzou*, I think?

I: That sounds horrifically racist.

A: So her films were often... not autobiographical, but they often followed a kind of similar trajectory to her as a poor black woman kind of becoming famous.

I: Yep.

A: But not necessarily her life, like they would often be a woman from Africa or things like that.

H: Mm. Was she enough of a celebrity at this time that that was, that was known about her that she, that she was a woman coming up from the bottom?

A: I think it's hard to say because Josephine herself never told the truth about her life.

H: Hm.

A: She always spun various stories about... So a story she used to tell, uh, the French press at this time was that she'd come to France because she'd accidentally fallen asleep on a boat in Argentina and woken up in Paris.

[laughter]

H: I suppose in the days before PR managers you had to kind of make your own.

I: [laughter]

A: Yeah, and often on, like, her marriage certificate, her passport, it's always somebody different is put down as her father and their occupation changes.

H: Huh.

A: So sometimes she's just the daughter of a doctor, but sometimes she's the daughter of, you know, a manual labourer and yeah. She's always changing the story about her life.

H: That's interesting.

A: So yeah, she's kind of an enigma but they knew that she'd arrived from America to Paris in what was not a particularly wealthy company.

H: Okay.

A: And was now doing very well for herself. Josephine also opened her own club at this time, called *Chez Joséphine*.

I: That was imaginative.

A: They're all called that. So Bricktop had *Chez Bricktop*...

I: [laughter]

A: That's what people did. She used to have a pig called Albert at her club, she used to walk around with Albert...

[laughter]

A: And a monkey whose name I can't remember. [laughter]

I: And a snake. And a cheetah.

A: And a snake. And a cheetah.

H: If we're going by previous naming conventions, Manny?

A: Yeah, she had several monkeys, so I'd believe at least one was called Manny. One is called Glug Glug.

[laughter]

A: That's later though. Glug Glug is my favourite one. Okay, um...

H: Suck it, all other monkeys.

I: Does Glug Glug fight Nazis?

A: Glug Glug is during the war, yeah.

I: Okay, yeah.

A: So it was probably at *Chez Joséphine* that Josephine met the writer Colette, although they may have known each other earlier. So I don't know if you've heard of Colette...

H: Is this a sort of Madonna situation or does she have a last name?

A: She only has one name. It is Colette. Colette... She was actually born with Colette as her surname.

H: Huh.

A: But she used it as her only name. So Colette is quite a famous bisexual author and someone who definitely deserves her own episode and hopefully will get one soon. She was over thirty years older than Josephine and she worked as a writer and as a journalist and in musicals and she starred in films. She'd been married several times to men but she was also very open about relationships with women. This is one of the few times we see Josephine be more open about her relationships with women. She says, "Colette loved me very much. I used to visit her after work on summer nights." So that's as explicit as Josephine herself gets.

I: Did they practice their penmanship?

A: They probably did.

H: Certainly summer nights is very evocative.

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, it definitely is, it definitely is. So early in her writing career, Colette published a series called the Claudine series which are coming-of-age novels set in an all-girls' boarding school.

I: I love that genre dearly. [laughter]

A: Yeah, it is very homoerotic, as far as I could tell, and also largely thought to be autobiographical.

I: I was about to ask.

A: Uh, in 1907, she scandalised Paris and almost caused a riot and the police had to be called in-

H: Ooh!

A: -when she had an on-stage kiss with her lover, another woman, at the Moulin Rouge.

I: Oh, good.

A: Um, but unfortunately, although she's a very exciting person, we don't know very much about her relationship with Josephine at all. We basically know that one thing that Josephine said. Um...

H: I definitely want to be queer enough at some point that I cause a riot.

A: Yeah.

I: I was about to say, I want to cause riots by kissing girls, that sounds fun.

A: Okay. I think we can achieve this.

I: I will write this, like, in my ambitions.

A: [laughter] Bucket list.

I: You know, you know when you see, like, people and they become famous and people ask them about it and they're like, "Well I decided when I was this old that I realised I want to become an actress, you can see it written in my diary."

A: [laughter]

I: It will be like that, but it'll be like, "I want to start a queer riot."

A: Okay, good.

H: If you're in Australia and want to be part of a mob, email us at queerasfact@gmail.com.

[laughter]

A: So Josephine also asked her old lover, Bessie Allison, who became Bessie Buchanan, who we mentioned before, to come to Paris to be her companion at this time.

I: Right.

A: And Bessie did come.

H: Once or twice.

A: [laughter] Um, yes, Bessie did come, but she didn't stay long and Bessie's brother-in-law told Jean-Claude that part of the reason was that Pepito hit Josephine and Bessie was just too uncomfortable with being in that situation.

H: Fair enough.

I: That, yep.

A: But, uh, Bessie and Josephine do stay close throughout their lives and when Josephine returned to America we will see Bessie again. So they may have continued their relationship. In fact, she's going back to America right now. In 1935, so after ten years in France and a very successful career, Josephine and Pepito sailed to New York where he'd negotiated her a contract.

I: I want Pepito to leave.

A: Yeah... Pepito... They had a very passionate relationship.

I: Tumultuous.

A: But it was very tumultuous.

H: Certainly he sounds like kind of C-minus human.

A: He does sound like a C-minus human. He's kind of a low-level con-man in that he faked being a count and... Yeah, he's, he's not great.

H: Although, if I had to have a manager, I think I'd probably pick a low-level con-man.

A: That's probably true, yeah. That's probably true. He was a very successful manager and he did definitely advance her career and he...

I: But if I had to have a manager, I would not date my manager.

A: No, I would not date my manager.

I: That seems like a bad call.

H: Yes, definitely.

A: Yes.

A: So they arrived in the USA, and Josephine who'd been living in unsegregated France for ten years was quite shocked-

I: Ah.

A: -by the realities of the segregation that was still going on in America.

H: That seems quite reasonable.

A: Yeah, so Pepito had booked a hotel for them and the hotel would take Pepito but wouldn't take Josephine.

H: Wow.

A: Because he was Italian but she was black. And, this was when they arrived in America, they ended up driving around for several hours before she slept on the floor of a friend's art studio and she

eventually found another hotel but it's interesting to note that when she wrote postcards back home to France, she always used the postcards from Pepito's hotel.

I: Ah.

A: So nobody knew this had happened.

H: That makes sense.

I: Yeah.

A: She was quite embarrassed by how she was treated in America. So during this American tour and probably because of how she was being treated as a second-class citizen and would no longer just accept that as a part of her life, Josephine largely avoided and ignored the African-American districts of cities she visited and kind of stuck to appealing to white audiences and mixing with a white crowd. In interviews at this time, she would say that her father was Spanish and her mother was half Native American and kind of try to take away from the idea that she had African heritage. We don't 100% know that her mother wasn't half Native American, for the record.

I: Or that her father wasn't Spanish.

A: She doesn't know who her father is.

I: Yeah.

A: But she says throughout her life that her grandmother was Native American and that's never been proven or disproven, she may have been. Audiences both black and white were quite put out by this and they felt she was denying her heritage, so, um...

I: I don't know, maybe if you stopped oppressing her, she'd stop lying about it.

A: Yeah, so, the, um, black audiences felt betrayed by her but white audiences who'd been expecting to see this exotic black dancer felt that they weren't getting what they'd expected and one critic said, "Miss Baker has refined her art until there's nothing left of it." And they kind of accused her of refining what... Because she had been a comic dancer.

I: Yeah.

A: Of refining and refining that and trying to become white and so it wasn't what they wanted to see.

H: Because they're definitely talking about her art.

I: Yep.

A: Yes. Um, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the newspaper, said something which I think kind of supports what you just said. It said, "It might seem in Europe where colour isn't the handicap it is here, Miss Baker does not mind being known as a Negro, but over here, it is something else, and who can blame her."

I: I mean, that seems fair.

A: Yeah. Yeah. So I think the *Philadelphia Tribune* kind of summed up that situation pretty well. But the racial tension and the fact that they often couldn't stay in the same hotel and things like that caused a rift between Josephine and Pepito.

I: I mean, I'm sad about the racism but I'm not sad about Pepito.

A: Yeah, he eventually ended up going back to France quite a while before she did.

She was quite proud of herself that while he was gone she managed to negotiate her own contracts and everything so that was good.

I: Aww.

A: She didn't do quite as well as he did but she was proud.

H: Yeah, she sounds like a very competent woman.

A: She's a pretty competent woman, yeah. So eventually Josephine also headed back to France, but on the 21st of September in 1936 Pepito died of cancer.

I: Bye Pepito!

H: [laughs] I feel like you're not sad about that.

I and A: [laugh]

A: He did hit Josephine.

I: Yeah.

A: He wasn't great.

I: He sounds sleazy.

A: He was definitely a sleaze. In spite of the issues their relationship Josephine's friend Anna Sosenko said, "I think a good part of her died when Pepito died."

I: Oh no. Josephine. You can do better.

A: Don't worry, she's going to keep trying.

I: Good.

A: There are many people to come. In fact, just over a year later she remarried to a man called Jean Lion, who was a Jewish business owner from a small town in France. So she married Jean Lion in the small town where he was from which was previously best known for its chicken hatcheries, but became very famous in this year for being the location of Josephine Baker's wedding.

H:[laughs] That's definitely life goals: being so famous that you change the identity of a whole town.

A: It is, it is. In the weeks approaching the engagement with Jean Lion she actually courted engagements with several different men and so when she announced she was getting married a lot of people, even her own lovers, kind of said, "To who?"

I: [laughs]

A: And some of them... one person... who was it? Andre Rivellet, I think it was?

I: Assumed it was him?

A: Assumed it was him.

H: [laughs]

A: Or somebody congratulated him on his engagement, and he was like, “No, she’s not marrying me.”

H: That’s amazing!

A: [laughs] So Andre was obviously quite upset about this.

H: Mm.

A: But he did say that he felt that what Josephine was doing was looking for a white husband, any white husband, to kind of legitimise her and cement her French identity, because she’d been so upset about how she was treated in America, and marrying Jean Lion allowed her to get French citizenship, but three months later she filed for divorce.

I: Isn’t she already still married to Willie Wells from way back?

A: She’s not legally married to Willie Wells because she was underage.

I: Okay, no, who was the next one? Baker?

A: She is legally married to Billy Baker.

I: Billy Baker, yeah.

A: And Billy was apparently quite surprised when she came back to America and didn’t look him up.

H: Oh, ouch!

I: Aww.

A: But, yeah. She’s managed to pass that off as not being an issue in her new marriage.

I: Okay, yeah.

A: But yeah, technically still married to Billy.

H: Maybe we should have some sort of marriage counter.

A: Well, I did skip over a brief fake marriage with Pepito.

H: Yes!

I: I was going to say, you told me she was married to Pepito, didn’t you?

A: Did I? Well, she announced to the press that they had married, but then when people tried to follow it up they discovered that there were no records of that, and this had never happened, and probably the reason is that she was still married to Billy and she was worried that would come in the records.

H: Right.

A: But she wanted to have the press sensation of Josephine Baker getting married.

H: She certainly sounds like a very savvy promoter.

A: I think she is. I think she is.

I: But we’re up to like four marriages of some kind.

A: So we've had Willie Wells, Billy Baker...

I: Pepito.

A: Pepito in a sham marriage, and now we're at Jean Lion.

I: Given that she continues to like, live with Pepito and be in a relationship with Pepito and she says she's married to Pepito, I'm willing to call that a marriage.

A: Well, she did say – when the press eventually said, “Josephine, what's the deal? You're not married.” – she said – I don't have the exact quote in front of me, but she basically said, “No I'm not married, but I thought it would be fun to say I was” or something like that.

H and I: [laugh]

A: So she did acknowledge that it wasn't true.

I: Okay.

A: There are two more to come.

I: Okay.

A: So in 1939-

I: The war happens.

A: Not quite yet. Before the war happens, Frida Kahlo comes to Paris.

I: Oh, okay.

A: To hold an art exhibition.

I: I hope Josephine's better in bed than Trotsky.

H and A: [laugh]

H: Do we want to explain that comment?

A: Frida Kahlo also had a relationship with the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky. [laughs]

I: And apparently she said he wasn't that good in bed.

A: [laughs] So that's interesting because many many people, including published books, will claim that Josephine and Frida had a relationship, but I couldn't find any evidence for this.

H: Huh.

A: Which I'm quite sad about, 'cause I wanted it to be true.

I: I guess she was worse than Trotsky then.

A: Maybe. Every source I chased down either led me to citations that just didn't follow up, like it would “On page 122 of this book it says Josephine slept with Frida Kahlo” and you'd go to page 122 and it just demonstrably never mentions Frida Kahlo.

I: Do you look in the rest of the book, 'cause you might be looking at different edition.

A: Yeah. Yeah, no, I looked! I looked.

H: If you have evidence that Josephine Baker slept with Frida Kahlo, email us at queerasfact@gmail.com.

A: Please do, because everyone says it so I thought it would be true, but I just could not find it. There is a photo of them together, so we know they met, and the 2002 film *Frida* which is a story of Frida's life does show them in a relationship which I think is what kind of cemented this rumour for a lot of people as being true. Apparently archives of Josephine's letters which I couldn't read, firstly 'cause they're in French and secondly because I'm in Melbourne, do tell of some relationships she had with women so it could be in these archives but if so it's kind of weird that nobody ever referenced these archives when they said this happened; nobody ever included a footnote saying "I did my research in this archive" so yeah. I don't know. I want it to be truth.

H: Definitely it would be fun to go on like an archive tour and get a copy of *The Encyclopedia of Pleasure* and go through Josephine Baker's letters. That would be-

A: It would be good! When we're rich. When we find that person with money but no talent.

H: Yes. [laughs]

I: Who will email us at queerasfact@gmail.com

H: [laughs]

A: We'll go on a world tour. It'll be great. [laughs] So as you said, in 1939 the war broke out.

I: I do know about the history.

A: In September. Because of the connections that Josephine had formed by travelling and performing and mixing with like, as we know, she was friends with Bricktop, who had taught Edward VIII to dance, she was mixing in like, quite high circles, Josephine was recruited by a French military intelligence office Jacques Abtey as an Honourable Correspondent, which basically means an unpaid spy.

I: I see.

A: Abtey was working on no budget at all, so he was kind of relying on love of country to get people to...

I: So he basically was just going around to people that he thought had the necessary skills going, "Do you want to be spy? I can't pay you but it'll be super cool!"

A: "But you love France, right?" and Josephine did love France a lot, because unlike America it had treated her well.

H: Certainly she's kind of an ideal candidate where she is to some degree powerful, she's wealthy, she's obviously very clever and also she's defending the place that was not racist to her from all of the racists.

A: Yes, yes. Yes, so she was a very good candidate, and she happily accepted. Abtey and Josephine also became lovers.

I: Don't date your spy handler!

A: [laughs]

I: I mean that's definitely like, one of my fantasies but I don't think it's good life advice.

H and A: [laugh]

A: Oh dear. So when Paris was threatened and eventually taken by the Nazis, Josephine fled to a chateau in the south of France which she named Les Milandes, in an area that wasn't yet under German occupation. Jacques Abtey, who at this time was desperately trying to smuggle out the sensitive military intelligence documents and also information on German activity in France got in touch with her and along with two other agents he came to stay at her chateau with her, and there's this really nice bit where they're at the chateau trying to work out how the hell they're going to get these documents out of France, where they talk about how they go hunting and fishing together, and they sit and listen to Charles de Gaulle on the radio, and Churchill's speeches, and they also hold séances.

I: [laughs]

A: Which apparently Josephine would always ruin by laughing.

H and I: [laugh]

A: She couldn't take a séance serious.

H: This would make a fantastic movie.

A: It would, it would. It would be very good. So eventually they make a plan to go to Lisbon and then on to England, 'cause Charles de Gaulle- how much do you know? Oh, I should probably cover this. So Charles-

I: I know that he's an airport.

A: He is an airport.

H: Yes.

[laughter]

A: Okay, we'll back up. So, when the Germans invaded and occupied Paris, the French government surrendered.

I: Yes.

A: And Charles de Gaulle, who was a general, fled to London and on the radio from London he made a speech saying basically "Although my government has surrendered, I'm not going to surrender. France is going to continue to fight." He was sentenced to death as a traitor by France, but he also became the leader of the Free French movement, which is, you know, the French Resistance.

H: And he made relatively regular broadcasts I think. He was a very public figure at the time.

A: He was. He was a very public figure and he was one of Josephine's great heroes. So he led the French Resistance that resisted both the Nazi occupation and the French government that was allowing the Nazi occupation.

I: I'm a little bit entertained that you accidentally said "nasty" instead of "Nazi".

H: Certainly you weren't wrong.

A: That too. So Josephine and Jacques Abtey have this plan to get to Lisbon, get out of France, go into Lisbon, and then continue from there to London where they're going to give these documents over the Charles de Gaulle and his people, and that's going to help the French Resistance.

So Josephine claimed to be heading to Lisbon to continue on to South America for a tour, Abtey posed as he ballet master, he wore false glasses and a fake moustache.

I and H: [laugh]

H: Nice. Nice.

A: Yes. [laughs] They wrote the information on the German activities in invisible ink on her sheet music.

H: Wow! This is some proper like, stereotypical spy stuff.

A: Oh yeah, it's genuine spy stuff. And they would pin the photographs and any other documents which couldn't just be copied to her underwear under her clothes, with safety pins.

H: Nice.

A: And so despite the risk of being a black American woman travelling through occupied France, they made it Spain, managed to get the last seats on a plane to Lisbon and from there they sent their information over to London. They didn't actually go to London themselves.

Josephine later returned to Lisbon without Abtey, who couldn't manage to get a visa a second time to get into Lisbon, and so during the day she'd travel around Lisbon gathering information. At night she would perform to keep her cover. So periodically she would go back and forth to Morocco, where Abtey was stationed, transmitting information over the Charles de Gaulle, and they would send the information back, so once again, she was pinning the photographs to her underwear and kind of just relying on the fact that because she was Josephine Baker no-one was going to search her too closely. Had she been caught – and other people in her situation were caught – she probably would have been killed.

In 1941 Josephine fell very ill.

I: Oh no!

A: She was actually going to a gynaecologist, 'cause she could never get pregnant, and she was trying to find some sort of solution.

I: Considering the lifestyle she's leading it's probably very convenient that she can't get pregnant.

A: That's true. She really wanted kids though, and she was actually going to a gynaecologist and some of the drugs he gave her in the hope of helping her be able to become pregnant caused an abdominal inflammation and she became very very sick.

I: Was this one of those "I'll give you arsenic. You might get better" situations.

A: I don't know. I don't know how dodgy it was, but she ended up spending the second half of 1941 and most of 1942 in hospital in Morocco, so it was about 19 months.

H: Wow!

A: The American newspapers actually reported that she'd died, mistakenly.

I: [laughs] I mean, this is probably convenient for her. She can fake her death and do anything.

A: That's true. Well, even though she was in hospital and was very very sick this didn't really stop her work and instead her hospital room became an excuse for American and Moroccan and Free French officials to kind of meet and exchange plans and talk to each other by just saying, "Oh, we ran into each other! We were visiting Josephine!"

H: That's amazing!

A: So yes, that didn't stop her. After she eventually came out of hospital the Americans had arrived in Morocco, and she performed for American troops, and once again, she was very shocked because the American army was segregated and she tried not to perform for segregated troops because she basically wanted to boycott that, and she says that seeing that once again how people were treated in America, she felt as though she'd abandoned her people in America by just going to France and living this unsegregated life, when she'd left all these people behind who were still living in segregation. And also unfortunately for her, because she was a popular figure with the troops, she was used to sort of teach them about things like safe sex, not getting venereal disease, and also to tell them to endure segregation until the war was over.

H: Wow, that's rough.

A: Yeah, so that was a very rough time for her. There is one story that I like from this time though, where she was – so she toured all over the Middle East and North Africa doing this during the war, and at one time she was performing and German planes flew overhead and they had to turn off the lights, and everyone had to get down, and they say that while that was happening Josephine wandered over to the buffet and started eating all the ice-cream.

[laughter]

A: The lights came back and everyone just saw Josephine with the empty ice-cream bowl.

[laughter]

H: That is fantastic!

I: Good on Josephine. That's very relatable.

A: Yeah, I'd eat the ice-cream when I was bombed too.

H: The moral of this entire podcast is that Josephine Baker is way cooler than you.

I and A: [laugh]

A: She is, she is. So seeing segregation in the American army – and I'm not going to go into detail about this because we don't have time – did cause her to become very involved in the Civil Rights movement later in life. She travelled back to the USA many times, and she would insist that audiences for her performances weren't segregated, she would speak at universities about things like interracial marriage, and she was actually one of the speakers at the March on Washington, which is where Martin Luther King made his famous "I have a dream" speech.

I: Oh!

A: She was invited to come and speak there, and she received a personal letter of thanks from Martin Luther King.

So on the 25th of August 1944 Paris was liberated.

I: Wheeee!

A: Hooray! In October Josephine returned to France. She was personally thanked by Charles de Gaulle, she was made a sublieutenant, given a uniform, which she was very proud of.

I: Is Charles de Gaulle's name actually "de Gaulle"?

A: That is his name, yeah.

I: This seems like a massive coincidence.

A: That's just his name!

I: That he's like a French hero called "de Gaulle".

H: Yeah.

A: [laughs] Yeah, it's just very convenient for France. There was an anti-aircraft gun in Corsica named after her.

I: Aww! [laughs]

H: Nice!

A: And she also got the Legion of Honour which is the highest French medal for military of civil activity. At this time, Josephine met orchestra conductor Jo Bouillon. I'm going to just say here that Josephine throughout her life was often called Joe, and the reason I've chosen not to call her Joe is because Jo Bouillon is also called Jo.

[laughter]

A: And this would have just led to a mess. In her childhood she was called Tumpy because she was chubby.

I: Aww!

H: That is an adorable nickname.

A: And a lot of the people who met to her even when she was performing in New York still refer to her by that name.

I: Yeah.

A: So Josephine and Jo toured together performing for troops, fundraising for the war effort, along with a young singer called Collette Mars. Collette was in her early 20s and she tells this story of travelling on an overnight train with Josephine, Jo, and Jo's male lover. So Jo was bisexual and generally – I can't say if he had a preference for men or if people at the time just made a big deal about the fact that he was sleeping with men, but he definitely had relationships with men. So Josephine was determined to seduce Jo, and so she got into bed with Collette to make Jo jealous, and Collette says "Josephine took my hand and put it on her supurb breast. I have to say it was very agreeable."

I: [laughs]

H: Wow.

I: "This is quite agreeable...."

A: "But I did not dare to go further."

I: Aww.

H: That sounds like a terrible missed opportunity.

A: I mean they were in a train compartment with two other people.

H: That sounds like a *terrible missed opportunity*.

A: Who were admittedly also in bed together at that time.

I: I mean it really sounds like, yeah, they're setting themselves up for a kind of train orgy.

A: [laughs] Yeah. Train orgy never eventuated. I think this is something that do see with Josephine-

H: Train orgies?

A: No!

[laughter]

A: No, we see her using, like, sex and her sexuality as a power thing, or kind of to manipulate people around her. And interestingly Jo Bouillon is not the only example of a man who largely appeared to prefer to men who she was determined to seduce. One of her dance partners from around this time, Frederic Rey, said "Josephine knew I was gay, but she didn't care. I had to sleep with her. She had to possess you. Once I slept with her, we were good friends and it never happened again."

I: She sounds like if she were a man I'd think she was an awful person.

A: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I don't know. I think this comes back to the thing we said before about her kind of using sleeping with men to advance her career, and things like that. She's kind of using sleeping with men as a power thing.

H: Yes, and there's definitely a difference between an abuse of a power structure that you're on top of and a subversion of a power structure that you're on the bottom of.

I: I think that's the thing why if she was a man I would feel like this was terrible but as a woman I'm like, "Well, okay Josephine."

A: Yeah, and like-

I: I mean I guess she's made so much of her like, self-identity around kind of being successful and being sexual that if she wants to sleep with someone she's kind of like, "Well I've got to do it or I've kind of betrayed myself" or I don't know how to phrase that – like it's part of her identity, like her sense of self.

A: Yeah, no I-

I: Has to do with sexual success.

A: That may be true. And I also think – so if we look at when she first arrived in France and Rolf de Maré asked her to perform naked, she's been sexualised against her will and then kind of embraced that.

I: I mean she was in a child marriage when she was 13.

A: Yeah.

I: She's been... yeah.

A: Yeah. So she's kind of embraced that and like, turned that to her advantage and started using that.

I: Yeah.

A: Because it's what she has to do, 'cause it's what's happening to her, perhaps. So by the end of the tour, Josephine had decided to marry Jo. And when they asked her why, she said, "I needed an orchestra," because he was an orchestra conductor.

H and I: [laugh]

A: They got married on her 41st birthday. They had a pretty tumultuous relationship, they break up, they initiate divorce proceedings, then they get back together.

I: Has she divorced any of the other people yet?

A: Ah...

H: You did mention her maybe divorcing Pepito who she wasn't married to.

I: No Pepito died.

H: Ah yes.

A: She divorced Jean Lion.

I: Okay, she probably divorced Jean Lion.

A: I think she just kind of left Billy Baker and hoped no-one would notice, and she was never legally married to Willie Wills.

I: Okay.

A: So it's okay. But we do hear many stories in Jean-Claude's biography of both of them having affairs, Jo with men, and Josephine apparently slept with female ballet dancers in an attempt to make him jealous.

I: [laughs]

A: And also an unnamed Mexican actress who she was apparently very attached to but we don't know who she was.

H: Yet another mysterious problem that could have been solved by polyamory.

A: Yeah, yeah. I mean I don't really know.... I think they ostensibly were okay with the affairs, but were not okay with the affairs.

H: Okay.

A: Yeah.

H: That's interesting.

A: I know, it sounds kind of like it was – and I think it is a French thing, from what I've heard it's more accepted or more expected.

H: Hm, that makes sense.

A: For someone to have a mistress or something like that, but I think it also caused a lot of jealousy and a lot of problems in their relationship. Alice: So, maybe just failed polyamory was what happened there.

Hamish: Mm.

Alice: So, Josephine was performing in France, touring the world. When she went to America she would be fighting for civil rights. She was also criticised a lot in America because when she went to South America she would talk very negatively about the USA and the way that black people were treated over there, and so um, the FBI had quite an extensive file on her and believed she was probably a communist.

Irene: What year are we in now? Still '40s?

Alice: Mm, eh, I wasn't - I was just talking generally, so, '40s onwards.

I: I was going to say, once we hit the '50s, the FBI believes that literally everyone is a communist.

A: We're heading in to the Cold War, the FBI has over a hundred pages of files on her and probably thinks she a communist.

H: That sounds like a very entertaining document.

A: I think it would. The FBI does also know that she sleeps with both men and women, so they know she's bisexual.

H: Is there a...is there a disclosure thing in the US that would have that released now?

A: Uhh, Jean-Claude does quote it.

H: Okay.

A: Jean-Claude does quote it, so he may have seen it.

H: So we could potentially find it. That might be a thing that we go looking for later.

A: I think we'd have to go to America, I don't think it'd be online.

H: Yeah, yeah, I guess.

I: Do you - do you think the cheetah had a file too?

A: [laughs]

I: Do you think Chiquita the cheetah was a communist?

H: [laughs]

A: I don't know if Chiquita the cheetah was a communist.

I: I hope so.

A: So, Josephine had this dream of how she was going to fix racism, which.....is interesting and problematic. And I think we should talk a little bit about it. So, she wrote to a friend, Miki Sawada, who...she slept on the floor of Miki's art studio.

I: Okay.

A: The first time she went back to America. Miki was now running an orphanage in Japan, and Josephine wrote to her and said, "I would like you to find for me a Japanese baby, of pure race, a healthy one, two years old. I want to adopt five little two year old boys, a Japanese, a black from South Africa, and Indian from Peru, a Nordic child, and an Israelite. They will live together like brothers."

I: I mean, I see what she's getting at here.

H: The Pitt-and-Jolie strategy.

I: Yeah.

A: The what strategy?

H: The Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie strategy.

A: Yeah! Yeah, it's exactly the same thing. Yeah, so, um, she actually ended up adopting twelve children, in total.

H: Wow!

I: Wow... It's, yeah, that's a number.

A: It's a number and she didn't quite cope, to be honest. She wasn't...

I: Well, that's probably what you get when you adopt five two-year-olds at once.

H: [laughs]

A: She didn't adopt them all at once, but they were all quite close in age. And they came from around the world, including two from Japan, one from, um, South America, but I don't think he was from Peru. Once from Finland.

I: Why was she so specific about Peru?

A: I don't know. That's good question. She may have been there while she was in-

I: Okay.

A: -the Americas. I'm not sure why she chose Peru. And um, she never managed to adopt an "Israelite", as she said, an "Israelite" child-

H: That's...

A: -because of some adoption laws.

H: That's definitely one of the least problematic words she could've used.

A: That's true. I mean, it's not the word I would have chosen. That's why I had to say it in like, quotes.

H: Fair enough, but still.

A: She adopted a young French boy, names Alain Jean-Claude. But she renamed him Moïse, which is the French form of Moses.

I: Oh I remember you telling me this when we looked up how to say it.

A: Yeah, she attempted to raise him as Jewish, she would only feed him kosher food, he wore a little yarmulke.

I: Is she....Jewish?

A: She is not Jewish, no.

I: Or she just thought she would....have a go at this?

A: This was just part of her plan. She also adopted a boy from ah...Morocco, who, she knew nothing of his background except that his name was Jacques, and she renamed him Brahim and decided to raise him as a Muslim.

I: [laughs]

H: Mm.

A: Yeah, it's interesting.

I: Did she like, know some Muslim people to check up on to do this right?

A: She did have plenty of Moroccan friends by this time, because of the time she spent in Morocco during the war.

I: Okay, okay.

A: I don't know - oh, she did have Jewish friends, 'cause she used to work with refugees, helping out refugees in...

I: Oh yeah, she used to have a Jewish partner.

A: Yeah.

I: Like, Jean Lion.

A: She had some background, but...

H: Points for intent. Few points for execution.

I: Yeah...

A: I think that's true. And um, Moïse, when he was about 19, came out and said, "I'm not Jewish, I was born in Brittany, I'm Catholic."

I: [laughs]

H: Wow, that would've been awkward.

A: But interestingly he now lives in Israel, so I don't know what's going on with Moïse's identity, but it's strange and complex.

I: I mean, if you can convince Israel that you're Jewish, don't you get citizenship?

A: I don't think Moïse could've convinced Israel that he was Jewish.

I: Oh...But he was raised Jewish...kind of.

A: [laughs] I don't know how well she raised him Jewish.

H: But certainly not all Israelis are Jewish.

A: No, that too. It was just interesting that somebody who was-

I: To migrate to Israel...

A: -raised Jewish and then rejected that Jewish identity to then migrate to Israel. I don't know, it's strange and complex.

I: Did he feel negatively about being raised like, fake-Jewish by Josephine?

A: I don't know, the only thing I could find was that point where she said, "No, I'm from Brittany, I'm Catholic."

I: How old was he when she adopted him?

A: Ah, I think he was about two. They were mostly about two. But yeah, Josephine definitely struggled to raise her children. She really loved babies, and she was good with babies, but once they became teenagers and she had a lot of them, she didn't cope well. There was a lot of conflict, they would say, you know, "Oh, I hated my mother", and things like that.

H: Certainly you can be, uh, a brilliant person, and an excellent spy, and still not have the skills to raise twelve teenagers.

A: I think that's absolutely true. I think she took on something that she just could not do. Yeah. But there's also some interesting things to talk about in the way she treated her sons in terms of, um...

I: Were they all boys?

A: There were two girls. Mostly boys. But yeah, so some things do come up in terms of queerness and how she felt about homosexuality. She tried to stop her sons because it was, by this time, probably the '60s, she tried to stop them growing out their hair and wearing flares and all that.

I: [laughs]

A: Because she said that bell-bottomed trousers were for homosexuals.

I: Josephine, you literally danced naked on the stage. You need to chill.

A: She did.

H: Although it should be noted that bell-bottomed trousers were an abomination.

A: [laughs]

I: But I think the fact that they're an abomination and the fact that they're for homosexuals are not actually connected.

H: No, not at all.

I: They just incidentally happen to have both these traits.

A: Yes. Her son Jari was eventually caught with another boy, and she sent him away to live with Jo Bouillon, who was now living in Argentina in one of the stages where they'd broken up.

I: Josephiiiiine. Josephine, you're a bad mother.

A: And um, Jari's brother Brahim said, "She was afraid he would contaminate us."

H: Wow.

I: You don't think....you might be the problem here Josephine? You too are queer.

A: Yeah. Josephine herself is queer. Not openly queer, though. And she is a women, which, you know, she may have conceptualised these things as being very different. That's quite common.

I: Yeah...

H: Certainly the idea of a unified queer identity is relatively recent.

A: Yes. But it is interesting that Jo Bouillon was gay. Frédéric Rey, who she was very close with, and who throughout the time with her family, the children kind of knew as Uncle Frédéric, was gay.

I: I mean, sometimes you see this thing when parents are trying to like, oppress their queer children, where they'll kind of frame it as, no I just want you to be able to be happy.

A: Yeah, I don't want you to experience the kind of troubles that a person growing up queer will experience.

I: yeah. She might've been aiming for that. I don't know. But then she wouldn't've just sent him away. I mean, maybe she sent him to Jo like "Look if you want to sleep with men, go to Jo and he'll tell you how to do it."

A: Yeah, Jo was apparently a very good and supportive parent to the kids.

I: Aww.

A: Yeah, they appreciated Jo a lot.

H: Good on you Jo.

A: Yeah. Josephine's eldest son, Jean-Claude, who wrote her biography, is also openly bisexual. And um, Josephine is quite supportive of that.

H: Huh.

I: Maybe she just doesn't like decisive people.

A: But it's also maybe that so...Jean-Claude she met when he was fourteen and first really kind of took on as her son when he was in his early twenties, so it was probably a different thing that raising him herself.

H: Okay.

A: But yeah, he had worked in gay clubs, and he would take her back to the gay club where he used to work, and he said, "She entered the packed gay club like a queen visiting her subjects. We sat by the dancefloor, and every couple that passed threw kisses, and Josephine with a motherly smile would throw kisses back."

H: That's very confusing.

A: It is. It's just genuinely very baffling.

I: Yeah, this is quite complicated.

A: And I don't quite know what to take from this.

H: That historical characters are complex and should be explored in depth.

A: Yeah, but once we get to the exploring in depth, what do we decide, if anything.

I: I mean, I don't know. Continue.

A: So, just to give an attitude to the wider queer community, because obviously we've talked about how it would be different how she felt about queer women and queer men, so um, she was very supportive of another performer, who went by the name Coccinelle, who was a transgender entertainer, activist and actress, and probably deserves her own episode. Coccinelle remembered Josephine very fondly. Josephine referred to her as "my daughter". So they had quite a good relationship, so that's an aspect of the queer community that Josephine was fine with.

I: Josephine just seems to have been quite accepting except when it's her own children.

A: Yeah, yeah.

H: Was this separated in time? Did she grow to be more accepting of a queer community or a queer identity over time?

A: Ah, not really, no. She doesn't seem to have.

H: Huh.

A: Coccinelle knew her quite late in life, and because she adopted children from the late '40s, '50s onwards. Yeah, it would've been about the same time that her children were becoming teenagers and coming out.

H: Hmm...

A: It's just...more a conflict within her family versus the outside world.

H: That's interesting.

A: But at the same time, especially in her later life and throughout her career into the modern day, she was very popular with the queer community. She's a bit of a queer icon, not necessarily because she herself was queer, but her shows were often advertised through gay bars and clubs in her later life. Her outrageous costumes and make-up, which had been normal when she was kind of a younger woman with a huge amount of money, came to be seen as quite, kind of, camp, in her later life.

H: Mm, especially as trends moved on.

A: Yeah, especially as trends moved on. And also just the way that she kind of fought against what society expected of her. In terms of race, in terms of gender, and in terms of how she sort of played with her own sexuality and the way in which her audience sexualised her and she responded to that, she didn't fit in the box that society may have wanted her to fit in when she began.

I: In terms of gender? You haven't really said anything about her gender.

A: I was thinking about her gender in terms of being a woman who was very powerful, very famous and very successful, not doing what was expected of her gender.

I: Okay.

A: Of, you know, a girl who was born the daughter of, you know, a laundry worker, expected to kind of just, you know, grow up, and get a job, and...

I: I mean, she did. She grew and got a job.

A: [laughs] She did. But not the job that was expected of her.

H: Mm.

A: Yeah, so she kind of transcended society's expectations of her in a lot of ways, and that seems to be something that has resonated with queer communities. In 1973, two years before her death, um, she performed at Carnegie Hall, and it was Bricktop who announced her performance.

H: Oh, wonderful.

I: Oh, Bricktop reappears!

A: Bricktop is back! And Coccinelle talks about her later performances, saying, "Her make-up then was as outrageous as a drag queen's. She did not care. It was funny. Marvellous." So that was kind of her image, later in life.

H: Certainly if you open with ostrich feather and close with ostrich feathers, that's fairly consistent image.

A: But if you've aged fifty years in the middle, the image changes, even though the ostrich feathers don't.

H: Yes, exactly.

I: Yeah, I was going to say, a young woman doing a sexy dance with ostrich feathers is a sexy dance with ostrich feathers. An older woman doing it is camp.

A: Yeah. No, and I think that's right. And I think that's why that kind of image changed.

I: That's like...that social problem we have where older women aren't allowed be sexual.

A: Yeah, whereas Josephine continued to be sexual throughout her life, to the very end. And people do talk about her, like, they would see her before she was going to go on stage, and they would say, you know, she looked old, she had strokes and a few heart attacks before her death, she looked old, she looked exhausted, and then when she came out on stage they said she was transformed.

H: Oh.

A: And she looked young and sexy. So, two years after that performance, with Bricktop there, at Carnegie Hall, she died, in 1975, aged 68.

I: That's...you said she was old, but that's not super old. Like your parents are 62.

A: [laughs] True. I more meant that she lived a....I wanted to say long life, but not necessarily a long life.

H: A jam-packed life.

A: Yeah, a jam-packed life. She got a lot done.

H: And it's not young, either.

A: No, it's not young. When someone dies at 68, you don't go oh no, that's so young, like you would if they died at 30.

I: Yeah.

H: Especially considering that she was born...relatively early in the 20th century, so...

A: That's true, she was, yeah, yeah.

So that was the life of Josephine Baker. I want to return to the fact that it is Bisexual Awareness Week this week, and just say a little bit about that. So, when I started researching Josephine, I knew she was bisexual, and I knew she's been a spy and a performer, and that was probably all I knew. And I'd probably seen the bananas.

I: I knew about her...because my dad told me about her around a campfire, one time.

A: Did he tell you she was queer?

I: Yes! He did. He told me she was queer, and that she was a spy, and that she was a black entertainer, and he didn't know a lot more than that, but he knew she owned a snake.

A: Okay, that's true, she did own a snake.

H: Important question, was this an outdoor fire, or a fire with ostrich feathers.

I: Outdoor fire. It was my father.

H: Okay.

I: [laughs]

A: But yeah, so I started researching her, and I discovered that she'd been married to...one, two, three...four different men. I didn't actually mention her final marriage! [laughs]

H: [laughs]

A: I had to cut her final marriage! Which was a strange marriage to a long-time friend, which was never a legal marriage, but they did take their vows in Church.

H: Please tell me it's Bricktop.

A: It's not Bricktop. It's a man.

H: Ah, shame.

A: But yeah, they took their vows in church, Josephine did say that it wasn't going to be a marriage about sex. It wasn't a sex-related marriage, and it wasn't a legal marriage, but she did take vows with another man in Church. Um, so that's...Willie Wells, Billy Baker, Jean Lion, Pepito, Jo Bouillon, and this last man, whose name I've forgotten...six marriages.

H: Solid.

A: So yeah, when I was researching and I discovered she was married to six men, and her relationships with women were largely short, there wasn't much information on them, and most of it came from this one biography, I was kind of sitting there going, "Is she bisexual enough for bisexual awareness week?" Which is a terrible question to ask.

I and H: Yes.

A: And I acknowledge that I should not have looked and gone “Is she bisexual enough?” when we know she was attracted to both men and women.

I: And I mean, especially when you had Maude there being like, “Ah yeah, I remember when me and Josephine Baker were young. We used to sleep with women and men. You’d call us bisexual.” Like...

A: Yeah, she was definitely bisexual. And, yeah, what I was asking was like, “Is she enough of a bisexual for Bisexual Awareness Week?”, so I’m telling you that because I should never have asked that question and that was a bad question to ask.

I: [laughs]

A: Because anyone who is attracted to both men and women is welcome to identify as bisexual, and once they’re dead, if they haven’t said, I think we are able to call them bisexual when we talk about them.

I: We talk a lot, I think, in a lot of our episode, when we have people who, you know, only show interest in women, or whatever, and we sit down and we say, “But can you really call them a lesbian, that’s a fairly modern term,” or whatever, and we’re like, “I don’t know if this really applied in this historical context.” Does your...I mean, I feel that, like you said, we’re welcome to identify Josephine as bisexual, after she’s dead. Does this apply generally? Are you going to apply this generally?

H: I think it’s convenient to be able to translate historical sexualities to something that can be easily conveyed to a listener, but I think it’s a good point to make, that it’s not necessarily a one-to-one translation. Queer identity has evolved a lot over time, and it will continue to evolve.

A: That is true, but I think...It really depends on the person. She’s from the ‘20s, and some of the people she had relationships with are still alive, and we have people like Maude saying she would’ve called it bisexual, and it’s still close enough to us in time that it’s easy for us to kind of conceptualise how these relationships were working.

I: Yeah.

A: The further back you go...like, if I was talking about how in Ancient Greece, men - adult men - slept with both young boys and their wives, I wouldn’t say, you know, adult men in Ancient Greece were bisexual. But I would say Josephine Baker was bisexual.

I: Yeah.

A: So yeah. I think that’s not something we can give a hard and fast answer to.

I: I think she fits close enough to our cultural conceptions of what relationships look like.

A: Yeah. And I just kind of want to make clear, even though she did have most of her...

I: I mean, she could only marry men. That’s legally how that was.

A: Yeah, even though she did have several marriages with men, and most of her relationships with women seem short and fleeting, not only if that was absolutely what she’d chosen would that not negate her bisexuality, but also we can’t be sure that in a more accepting time, she would’ve have chosen something very different.

I: It’s also I think hard to say necessarily that her relationships with women were short and fleeting when...like, her relationships, even her marriages, that you’ve described, have been quite short.

A: That's true.

I: She marries people she separates from them after not very long, and often like, remains friendly with them, but doesn't like...

A: That's true, Yeah, actually no her marriages with men, I suppose, are quite similar, it's just that because they're marriages, I probably kind of thought about them differently.

H: And they have more of a durative aspect, because they have a documented beginning and end and it seems as if they exist for that whole period, where they might not necessarily be a romantic or sexual relationship for that whole time.

A: True, and I suppose with someone like Bricktop, we know she had a relationship with Bricktop, but we have no idea, like, they obviously knew each other at the time of Josephine's death, that's years and years later. We don't know when this relationship started or ended, or if it was an on-and-off kind of thing.

I: Yeah, I was going to say when you said, oh, her relationships with women were short and fleeting, and then she had six marriages to men, I found it quite odd that you drew this distinction. Because you described her relationships with men and--

A: Mm... And they were also pretty fleeting, yeah. Yeah, that's true.

I: Yeah. Like, six marriages in your lifetime kind of...says that. They've been short relationships.

A: Yeah, that is very true. That is very true. I've kind of like, I think I thought about them differently because they were marriages but they were, essentially a very similar thing.

I: You have made several ideological errors in this episode.

A: I have made several ideological errors in this episode. But I think that's why it's useful for us to have this episode, and it is why I ultimately decided to stick with Josephine Baker, when I thought about, "Is she bisexual enough?", I thought, "Well, I'd better do her, because here's some internalised biphobia we have to deal with."

H: So if you're having a bunch of extramarital sex, make sure to document it so that historians can talk about it later.

A: [laughs] That's true. We really appreciate Anne Lister. Please keep a diary.

H: Mm, definitely.

A: Documenting your lesbian sex.

I: Do one of those diaries...you know at the start of like, Bridget Jones' Diary, where she'll have like her weight, and like, cigarettes she's had today, and things like that.

A: Mm.

I: There's a bunch of like, statistics she keeps track of at the top of her diary.

A: People I've slept with.

I: Yeah, that's what...."Orgasms, past week."

H: Or even better, get a spreadsheet going, like Keynes.

A: Yeah. And it was a bit difficult because she never said she slept with women, so we have to believe everyone that Jean-Claude talked to.

H: Thanks Maude.

A: With that, we've been Queer As Fact. I'm Alice.

H: I'm Hamish.

I: I'm Irene.

A: For all our listeners who have sent in recommendations and suggestions on who we should do episodes on in the future, we really appreciate them and we are working on them, but we do often record a month or so in advance, so we might be slow to bring out the episode, but that doesn't mean we won't do it, and so keep sending in the suggestions. If you want to contact us, you can email us directly at queerasfact@gmail.com, we're also on Tumblr as Queer as Fact, on Facebook as Queer as Fact, on twitter as Queer as Fact, and we're on iTunes, and if you listen to us on iTunes, we'd really appreciate it if you'd rate us and review, because that really helps us, and if we get some good reviews, we might read them out on our next episode. We'll be back on the 1st of October, still in the jazz age, where Eli will be talking to us about jazz-age bisexual and heiress Henrietta Bingham. Thanks for listening and we'll see you then.