

Centennial exhibit fetes Josephine Baker

ST. LOUIS (AP) — "Josephine Baker: Image and Icon" opens Friday at the Sheldon Art Galleries in St. Louis, where she was born 100 years ago this June.

The free exhibit highlights the career of the Black entertainer, who left a segregated United States in the '20s to become an international superstar and the toast of Paris.

Her erotic — and often amusing — dancing fractured racial barriers in Europe, as audiences in 1920s Paris looked on in astonishment at the sexy moves of a nearly naked Josephine Baker.

Decades after her last performance, in 1975, images of Baker shimmying her hips to a jazz beat still evoke excitement. "Everything is rare. Posters and programs that were probably turned out in the hundreds are impossible to find today," exhibit curator Olivia Lahs-Gonzales said about the show, two years in the making.

As part of Baker's centennial celebration, Webster University in suburban St.

Louis will show three of her movies from the '20s and 1930s this weekend. Yale University film studies professor Terri Francis is among a handful of scholars who will speak during a Josephine Baker symposium on Friday.

Not many people know the full breadth of Baker's life, Lahs-Gonzales said. She's mostly remembered for her provocative dance with only a string of bananas around her waist.

If it were not for her nephew, Richard Martin Jr., Baker's roots here might have been forgotten. It was only in the last 10 years that a St. Louis street was renamed Josephine Baker Avenue in her honor.

Baker ran off from St. Louis with an all-Black traveling road show, the Dixie Steppers, at the age of 13 and was a sensation in Paris before she turned 20. She spent most of her life in France, obtaining French citizenship.

Many images in the show depict a slice of Baker's life that was not well recognized in the states, including her roles with the French resis-



An exhibit for Josephine Baker opens Friday in St. Louis.

tance during World War II and her adopting and raising 12 children from different ethnic backgrounds at her estate in Bordeaux, France.

As visitors to the Sheldon galleries stroll past magazine covers, posters and photo-

graphs of Baker, her voice can be heard through recorded song.

The exhibit chronicles the life of the jazz-age expatriate and entertainer turned humanitarian and civil rights activist. Lahs-Gonzales searched extensively to track down vintage memorabilia -

many items belonged to private collectors and public galleries.

A few works were hanging in the St. Louis home of Mary Strauss. The art philanthropist has collected images of Baker for more than 20 years and donated a number of items to the exhibit, including a massive movie cut-out from Baker's 1930s film, "Zouzou."

"She's so adorable — that's what I love about her," Strauss said. "Even when she's being sexy, she's cute and funny about it as if she doesn't take it very seriously."

As Ernest Hemingway put it, she had a "smile to end all smiles." Her uninhibited dance moves were exotic, yet tasteful enough to draw standing ovations from both men and women.

"But she was so many other things and really paved the way for other African-American stars," Strauss said. One of Baker's biggest disappointments, though, was that she was not accepted in America, as she was in the rest of the world, said Richard Martin III, Baker's great-nephew.

"The dancing, the entertainment got her on the scene. But she was truly a humanitarian and concerned about human rights for all people. That's what I'm most proud of," Martin said.

Baker was the only woman to speak at the 1963 "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. And when Baker toured the United States, she chose not to perform in segregated places.

"We'll show the world that racial hatred is unnatural, an emotion dreamed up by man," Baker said. "There is such a thing as universal family ... it's possible for children of different races to grow up together as brothers." But her ambitious plans for racial harmony and to establish a college focused on international race relations around the time of the civil rights movement never materialized. She died April 12, 1975, at age 68.

"Josephine Baker: Image and Icon" runs through Aug. 26 before it moves to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Another 'Idol' contestant out

Special to Sentinel-Voice
Paris Bennett sang "Kiss" and the pint-size soul singer and judge favorite kissed "American Idol" goodbye Wednesday, becoming the latest singer sacked in viewer voting.

The departure of the 17-year-old Fayetteville, Ga., resident narrowed the number of "Idol" wannabes to four. The winner will be crowned May 25.

Contestants sang two songs one from the year of their birth and one from any Billboard chart's current top 10 in Tuesday night's program.

Though judges Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul praised Bennett's funky take on Prince's 1988 hit "Kiss," judge Simon Cowell derided it as "screechy" and "annoying."

In a turnaround, her second performance a cover of Mary J. Blige's "Be Without You" was deemed "pitchy" by Jackson but well received by Cowell.

"I think she did rather well with that," Cowell said.

Elliot Yamin, 27, had the next-lowest vote total.

Cowell offered typical sugar-free criticism on Tuesday's program, saying

Yamin's rendition of "On Broadway" was "disjointed." He also said he was "just a little bit concerned" following his cover of Michael Buble's "Home."

"I'm not sure I would have chosen the lyrics, 'I want to go home,'" Cowell told Yamin.

Nearly four years since its debut, "Idol" continues to rule the ratings. It has attracted 25 million to 33 million viewers each telecast this season.

Host Ryan Seacrest said on Wednesday's program that viewers called in nearly 46 million votes.

Eviction

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linked to rappers Lil' Kim and Capone-N-Noreaga, leaving one man wounded. Lil' Kim, whose real name is Kimberly Jones, is currently serving one year and a day for lying about the shootout to a federal grand jury.

Andrea Ferguson, a spokeswoman for Hot 97,

said in a statement that Wednesday's incident took place outside the building before any station guests arrived at the studio.

"The security of our employees and neighbors is a paramount concern," she said. "We have been working with the building's security and the NYPD to implement

strengthened security measures, and we will continue to do everything we can to protect our employees, neighbors and guests.

"With respect to the eviction, we have not seen anything other than what was in the paper this morning, but there is no legal basis for eviction whatsoever."

Brownlee

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He makes his Met debut next March as Almaviva in the company's new production of Rossini's "Il barbiere di Siviglia."

Brownlee, a native of Youngstown, Ohio, received

a bachelor of arts degree from Anderson University and a master of music degree from Indiana University.

The Tucker award, named in honor of the great American tenor, has been given since 1978 to American sing-

ers poised on the verge of a major international opera career. Winners are chosen by a panel of opera administrators, conductors, singers and critics. Past winners include Renee Fleming and Deborah Voigt.



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