

Trailblazers in Opera: Josephine Baker

LESSON PLANS FOR GRADES 6 AND UP

OBJECTIVE

To learn about a woman from St. Louis, Missouri who was a dancer, singer, actress, fashion influencer, World War II hero for the French Resistance, and Civil Rights activist who made a major global impact.

By the end of the this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify key facts about Josephine Baker's early life and background.
2. Describe her major career accomplishments.
3. Explain how she helped others and why she is considered a hero.
4. Connect her artistic influence to social change.
5. Demonstrate this understanding through games, movement, discussion, and an assessment.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Who is Josephine Baker?

What makes someone a hero or activist?

DAY 1

Say: Today we are going to learn about a famous dancer, singer, and activist named Josephine Baker. Ask students: What is an activist? (A person who works to bring about political or social change.)

1. View [Josephine Baker | Living St. Louis](#) Video from PBS (28 minutes - Please review for and note brief risqué costuming at 9:11 and racially insensitive artwork at 10:19.)

Say: Are there performers today who exhibit the same traits and experiences as Josephine? If so, who are they and how are they like her?

DAY 1 CONT'D

2. Mini-Lesson: Put all or some of the following facts on the board, print them out, or use this slide deck.

- She was born Freda Josephine McDonald on June 3, 1906 in St. Louis, Missouri.
- She grew up in poverty and started working at a very young age.
- She experienced racial discrimination and a lot of hardship, witnessed the East St. Louis Race Riot of 1917 which influenced her later activism.
- As a teenager, she joined dance groups and performed in New York. At age 19, Josephine moved to Paris, France where her career exploded.
- She became known for her charisma, comedy, singing, dancing, and bold costumes.
- Starred in shows such as La Revue Nègre, became a major figure of the Jazz Age and one of the most famous entertainers in the world.
- First African American woman to star in a major motion picture (Siren of the Tropics, 1927) and used her fame to fight racism and promote equality.
- Became a spy for the French Resistance in World War II and carried secret messages written in invisible ink on her copies of sheet music.
- Adopted 12 children from different countries that she called her “Rainbow Tribe” to show that people of all races could live together peacefully.
- Spoke at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963.

3. Divide into groups and discuss how Josephine’s experience with segregation and discrimination may have influenced her as a performer and an activist. (Share with the class.)

DAY 2

1. Review Josephine Baker’s Life:

- Read the one page article as a review: Josephine Baker | National Women’s History Museum. Consider also reviewing the historical facts on page 1 (slide deck).

DAY 2 CONT'D

- Complete the following worksheet: [Josephine Baker Worksheet](#). Discuss the vocabulary in the Matching Vocabulary section. Discuss Josephine's role as an activist for Civil Rights and her role as a spy.
2. The Charleston, an energetic dance of the Roaring Twenties (also known as the Jazz Age) was popular when Josephine was in her late teens and early twenties. Look at the [Revival of Shuffle Along](#), one of the musicals that helped launch Josephine to stardom.
- Movement Activity:
 - Choose one of the following videos to view and challenge your students to learn how to do the Charleston. Encourage the students to add funny facial expressions like Josephine did. Have a dance-off!
 - [How to dance the Charleston Basic Step](#)
 - [How To Charleston 1920's style - Lesson 1 \(Solo Charleston\)](#)
 - [How to dance the Charleston basic step? Everything you've ever wanted to know!](#)
 - Discuss which dances today have the same moves or are exactly like the Charleston.
3. Game: Timeline
- Make copies of the events given on Day 1. Hand them out and let students put them in chronological order. You can have two or more teams and time them. The team that has the most facts in the correct order wins!
4. Reflection: Ask students "Why should we remember and honor Josephine Baker?"

Post-Lesson Assessment:

- Poster Drawing Contest: Students can create a poster of main events in Josephine Baker's life such as her dancing in shows, dancing and acting in movies/her career in France, or speaking during the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

LISTENING RESOURCES

Allow students to listen to examples of Josephine's singing with the following:

Listening Examples:

- [Paris, Paris, Paris](#)
- [J`ai Deux Amours \(1953\)](#) (I Have Two Loves: My country and Paris)
- [La Vie en rose](#)
- [Demain](#)

Extension: Have students write messages or create designs using invisible ink like Josephine Baker did as a spy. You'll need paper, paint brushes or cotton swabs, baking soda, water, turmeric, and either rubbing alcohol or hand sanitizer. [See more here](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Josephine's Connection to St. Louis:

- [Discovering African American St. Louis: A Guide to Historic Sites](#) (pp. 22 - 23 #44 and p. 24) [To show where Josephine grew up in Mill Creek, a predominantly Black community which was a cultural hub for performers located in the Central Corridor in what is now Midtown St. Louis.]
- [Josephine Baker Becomes First Black Woman Honored At France's Pantheon](#)
 - NOTE: Please preview all materials for risqué costuming.

Josephine's Impact on Opera:

- [Perle Noire](#) - Composer Tyshawn Sorey and poet Claudia Rankine created the score and words. [Julia Bullock Interview](#) and her performance of Josephine Baker songs.
- [Josephine](#) - a one act opera (designed for one singer and is about 30 - 45 minutes long) Music and words by Tom Cipullo

Josephine's impact on American history:

- [Josephine Baker Honored](#)
- [East St. Louis Riots](#)
- [East St. Louis Riots - PBS](#)

STANDARDS

Missouri Fine Arts Standards

MU: Re7 - Describe how music reflects cultural and historical contexts.

MU: Cn11 - Relate music to history and social movements.

VA: Cr2 - Create artwork that represents ideas and events.

VA: Cn11 - Connect art to social, cultural, and historical contexts.

DA: Cr1 - Explore movement to express ideas

DA: Pr4 - Perform dance with expression and purpose.

DA: Re7 - Analyze how dance reflects culture and history.

National Core Arts Standards

MU: Cn10-11 - Relate music to cultural and historical contexts.

VA: Cr1.2 - Use visual imagery to communicate meaning.

VA: Cn11 - Relate artistic ideas to social change.

DA: Cr1 - Generate movement ideas inspired by historical themes.

DA: Pr 6.1 - Perform dance reflecting style and context.

Missouri Social Studies Learning Standards

2.A - Analyze the causes and consequences of historical events.

2.C - Explain the contributions of individuals to society.

2.D - Use historical sources to interpret the past.

3.C - Examine ways individuals can influence change.

4.A - Analyze how location influences culture and identity.

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