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- News
- Arts & Entertainment
- Restaurants
- Music
- Film
- Best Of
- Promotions
- Classifieds

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Video Cut-Ups

Multimedia artists re-open the Josephine Baker Files

By *Malcolm Gay*

Article Published Apr 26, 2006

Take one bunch of bananas, add twelve adopted children, a stint of undercover work for the French Resistance during World War II, four husbands, a tireless record fighting racial discrimination in the United States, a menagerie of exotic pets and an almost 50-year career as one of the world's steamiest and most intrepid entertainers — mix, *et voilà*: the life story of Josephine Baker.

Born in St. Louis a century ago, Josephine Baker — known alternately as the "Black Venus" and the "Creole Goddess" — is now the subject of a host of centennial symposia dedicated to all things Baker. This Friday marks the opening of the Sheldon Art Galleries' summer-long exhibition, *Josephine Baker: Image and Icon*. This weekend, the Webster University Film Series will screen four of her films in conjunction with the Sheldon's exhibition.



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Kicking off the film series this Friday night at Webster's Moore Auditorium is perhaps the most eccentric Baker tribute: *Josephine Baker: A Centennial Remix*. Produced by Paul Guzzardo and Kathy Corley, the multimedia show seeks to expose audience members to the complexities of Josephine Baker's historical role through the use of digital images set to house music.

"I'm intrigued by Baker because of her relationship with [former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation] Herbert Hoover and [radio and newspaper commentator] Walter Winchell," says Guzzardo, adding that Winchell not only invented the modern gossip column, but also changed the

face of journalism by making the private lives of public figures fair game. "I consider those two to be the most culturally significant Americans from the twentieth century: One was the father of the state surveillance model, the other is the father of talk radio – gossip."

Baker left the United States for Paris in 1925, when she became a dancer in *La Revue Nègre*. Often clad in nothing but a feather dress or a string of bananas, Baker quickly turned her exoticism and sex appeal into Continental success. But though she was well loved in Europe – it's said that during her career she received 1,500 marriage proposals, and in 1927 she earned more money than any other performer in Europe – American audiences rejected her when she returned in 1936 to star in the *Ziegfeld Follies*.

Though her European success continued unabated, whenever Baker visited the United States she was dogged by the segregated nation's rejection of a successful black performer. After she was denied service at New York's famous Stork Club, Baker engaged in a high-profile media war with Walter Winchell, a powerful, pro-segregation journalist.

"By accusing the Stork Club of racial discrimination, she allowed dozens and dozens of people in positions of power to begin pricking away at Winchell," says Guzzardo. "By pricking away at Winchell, she assaulted the individual who had the closest relationship with Hoover: Hoover's mouthpiece."

In *Josephine Baker: A Centennial Remix*, Guzzardo and crew have made digital copies of declassified information from the FBI's voluminous Josephine Baker file, as well as video footage culled from her films. To that he's added digitized files on Winchell and Hoover, creating what he calls a "digital archive."

Using the digital archive's repository – as well as three large projection screens and a ten-by-two-and-a-half-foot monitor wall – VJ Zlatko Cosic is able to mix images the way a DJ mixes beats. But in the case of *A Centennial Remix*, DJ Leon Lamont will handle the sound.

Given the spontaneous nature of remixing, the show is different each time it airs. The archive transforms, revealing different aspects of Baker and her collision with Hoover and Winchell. The archive also grows, and this Friday Guzzardo plans to have his "Media Van" (a delivery truck tricked out with a wall of monitors on one side) parked out front, as well as a roving "video eye," a video camera with a direct feed into Cosic's booth that will move through the audience.

Sound like a multivalent and tech-saturated event? Well, that's exactly what theory-phile Guzzardo says he's gunning for.

"No longer is the abstract point of view of a news gatherer who is describing the role of Walter Winchell sufficient," he says. "Dealing with the digital archive might allow a level of complexity which might be more appropriate for today's information ecology. It's very, very easy to just see Baker as a banana dancer, but that doesn't do justice to her – and it doesn't do justice to ourselves."



Paul Guzzardo: Shapeshifting sights and sounds.

Music Details

Who / What:

[Josephine Baker: A Centennial Remix](#)

Music Date:

Friday, April 28 at 8 p.m.

Music Genre:

Jazz & Blues

Details:

Free
314-968-7487

Where:

Moore Auditorium on Webster University campus (470 East Lockwood Avenue, Webster Groves)

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Music

[Beat Happenings](#)

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