Josephine and Johnny:
A Moment in Time

by Johnny Barnes Selvin

Saturday morning in Bordeaux. Up early, excited about my day, going to a beautiful region of France that I had not yet visited. The air was crisp and cold under clear blue skies, a perfect day for a University of California Abroad excursion.

After touring countless cathedrals, castles, and a few wineries, we were offered a sunny, early Spring bus trip to the Dordogne to tour France's prehistoric caves and grottoes. I welcomed a road trip with thirty of the ninety UC students who, like me, were spending the 1965-1966 academic year at the University of Bordeaux.

The year 1966 was a pivotal year in my life. It was the year I immersed myself in the language and culture that I loved; the year I would graduate with my B.A. in French Literature; the year I accepted a marriage proposal from a fellow UC June graduate and planned an August wedding before flying to Massachusetts for Peace Corps training. And, if all went according to plan in 1966, 1967 would find me teaching French in Ghana, West Africa. So, 1966 was a year of detailed planning, and hard work.

A get-away day of relaxation and prehistoric cave exploration in the Dordogne sounded wonderfully refreshing. We boarded the bus with our excursion escort and left big city Bordeaux behind for a peaceful day in the country at 8 am, on March 19, 1966.

After a morning of stalagmites, stalactites, cave paintings, and hibernating bats, we were back on the bus and headed for lunch. We took a country road that followed the Dordogne River past small well tended forests and vineyards, then slowly wound up a hill. The slow ascent offered lush, verdant views of the Dordogne River Valley. We passed the Château de Castelnaud, a medieval fortress on the hill overlooking the river and arrived in the pretty little village of Castelnaud-la-Chapelle.

Promptly at noon our bus stopped in front of a small café. As we entered, while looking for an empty table, I was surprised to find, seated in a dimly lit corner of the café, an elderly woman with a medium brown complexion like mine! Alone, head held high, she surveyed the crowd of students that flowed through the door. An espresso cup sat empty on her table. The

woman looked as if she'd been sitting there a long time, watching the door, waiting for someone who was probably not coming.

We had all been given bag lunches as we boarded the bus in Bordeaux. I joined the students ordering drinks at the bar. When I glanced back at the café, the woman at the corner table was still there. And, she was staring at me.

She pushed back her chair, stood up, and with a confident stride, made her way through the café headed in my direction. Her black hair was pulled back into a tight bun revealing a clean, unadorned face. Wrapped in a moth eaten fur coat and wearing torn black net stockings and low scuffed black heels, the woman approached and stopped in front of me. She reached out her arms, and with a welcoming smile, took my right hand in both of hers and held it warmly. Fine lines and wrinkles fanned from the corners of her eyes, deepening as her smile broadened. The woman looked at me as if she knew me, as if I was the one she had been waiting for.

The warmth of the greeting from this odd, but compelling stranger in a random cafe on a hill in the Dordogne left me wondering who she was and who she thought I might be.

Like me, the woman standing before me was clearly of African descent. My Arkansas-born, African-English-Irish mother had taught me to greet anyone of African descent with a polite nod or a smile.

Still clasping my hand in hers, she asked, “Do you know who I am?” I stared at her, smiling quizzically, and responded, “Should I know you?”

The woman replied, “Let me introduce myself. My name is Josephine Baker.” She paused, then added, “Please call me Josephine.”

I was shocked! Of course I recognized her name, but I didn’t recognize her sixty year old face. I searched my memory, but found no clear image of Josephine Baker — not even of her youthful face. A vague image of a young, uninhibited dancer, either half-nude or elegantly dressed in haute couture, did come to mind.

Growing up in Northern California, I had stumbled upon only a few articles about Josephine Baker. Ebony and Jet, two magazines focused exclusively on African American culture offered glimpses of the lives of many gifted African Americans, including those who had left the U.S. to live as expatriates in France. Langston Hughes, Sidney Bechet, James Baldwin, and Josephine Baker were among those who had chosen France, opting to live free of the legal racial discrimination and bigotry that had confronted them at home every day. I am certain that the knowledge of African American expatriates thriving in France, influenced my

love of French literature, and my choice to study at the University of Bordeaux. It also helped place me, in 1966, in a small cafe in the Dordogne with Josephine Baker.

I first heard Josephine Baker's thin, quavering voice singing her signature song, *J'ai Deux Amours, Mon Pays et Paris* in 1963 in my college dorm. Like most Americans, I did not know that Josephine was, for many years, the highest paid and most celebrated entertainer in all of Europe, as both her fame and great wealth had come to her in France in the 20's and 30's long before I was born. I've learned a lot about "La Baker," as she was known in Europe, but on the day we met, I knew very little.

Josephine, still holding my hand in both of hers, spoke to me in crisp American English. She wanted to know my name, my nationality, and why I had come to France. I told her that my name was Johnny Barnes, I was a native of northern California, and was, for the academic year, a student at the University of Bordeaux.

Josephine immediately invited me to her home. She said it was just up the road, and that she'd like to speak with me, adding that she'd also like for me to meet her children, all twelve of them.

I was intrigued, delighted, and, while still not entirely sure of her identity, I was also quietly overwhelmed by this generous, unanticipated invitation to Josephine Baker's house. And, I truly wanted to believe that this intense woman, smiling and staring at me, continuing to hold my hand firmly in hers, and appearing to be very poor, was the celebrated woman that she claimed to be.

The village café was filled with young Californians enjoying lunch hoping to soak up as much French culture as possible in one year. Not one of them realized that Josephine Baker walked among them that day in that little café in the Dordogne.

I gently reclaimed my hand, and, together, Josephine and I walked toward the café's entrance. I stopped at the door, explained to a student acquaintance that I had just received an invitation from a total stranger that I could not refuse. I asked her to accompany me.

Josephine did not object. My friend was thrilled. I explained to Josephine that I had only one hour. And, off we went!

Josephine Baker set a brisk pace as we walked side by side down a rough country road, chatting, keeping it light, getting to know each other. I told her that I was shocked and delighted to find her, a famous African American entertainer in this little village. Josephine corrected me, saying that she was no longer American. "You find me in France because this is where I belong."

I later learned that the woman that I was walking with that day in 1966 was born Freda Josephine McDonald on June 3,1906, and was raised in abject poverty. She rarely saw the man said to be her father. Her mother, Carrie McDonald, a washerwoman, later married Arthur Martin, who gave Josephine a step-sister and two step-brothers, but little financial support. Josephine's early childhood in Saint-Louis was marked by neglect, abuse and trauma. Poorly clothed and often hungry, she scavenged discarded food for her family. As a vulnerable 8 year old girl, Josephine worked for white Missourians as a live-in housecleaner.

She was 11 years old on February 3, 1917 when she witnessed the East Saint Louis Massacre where between forty and two hundred African Americans were murdered as they tried to escape burning homes and businesses.

Josephine spoke of that traumatic day in a speech she delivered in Saint Louis, in 1952 on "The Josephine Baker Homecoming Day."

"We children, she said, stood huddled together in bewilderment, not being able to understand the horrible madness of mob violence…hiding behind the skirts of grown ups frightened to death with the screams of the Negro families running across this bridge with nothing but what they had on their backs…So with this vision I ran and ran and ran."

Josephine dropped out of school and ran away from home at 12. She lived in cardboard shelters, scavenging food, and dancing for coins on street corners. At 13, she both married and divorced Willie Wells, divorcing him in order to perform with The Jones Family Band, a troupe of street vaudevillians. At 15, Josephine married her second husband, William Baker whom she divorced at 19 when an opportunity arose for her to perform in New York with a new vaudeville troupe, The Dixie Steppers.

Josephine Baker was a survivor! Over and over again, she saved herself from a life of deprivation and misery, and guided by her indomitable spirit, she danced and sang her way to superstardom.

Arriving in Paris in October, 1925 with La Revue Nègre, at the peak of the French Jazz Age, with the demand for African American performers far greater than the supply, Josephine quickly distinguished herself. Paris loved Josephine and Josephine loved Paris. Her rise to fame and great wealth was meteoric. But, when performing in America, Josephine continued to face and fight against racial hatred. She looked for change each time she returned to the U.S., but found none. She refused to perform for segregated audiences and demanded treatment equal to that accorded America's most successful white performers. She told me that her life had changed dramatically the first time she went to France where she saw and felt what it was

like for African Americans to be treated just like everyone else. In France, Josephine could breathe. In France, Josephine was just “French.”

In 1937, Josephine Baker stopped running. She had found her safe place. She renounced her American citizenship and became a French citizen, with her marriage to Jean Lion, a wealthy French industrialist.

My relaxing day in the country had suddenly become both magical and unsettling. It was a day that I would not fully appreciate for many years. I walked with Josephine a short distance up the road and turned right onto a wide dirt path. Before us, appeared a beautiful, 15th century fairy-tale castle, Josephine’s “home,” which she called “Les Milandes.”

Why had she chosen to invite me to Les Milandes? My guess was that after observing the students entering the village café, and noting that I was the only African-American in the group, she felt an immediate kinship with the American who looked like her. I felt safe with Josephine Baker and honored that, for whatever reason, she had chosen to invite me into her life, if only for an hour.

I decided to listen carefully to all that she had to say to me and to thoroughly enjoy this wonderfully serendipitous gift: an hour in conversation with Josephine Baker. My excitement grew with each step up the dirt path to the castle.

We arrived at Le Château des Milandes, not at the majestic entrance I had anticipated, but at the family entrance, the kitchen door on the castle’s ground floor. Josephine tried to open the door, but found it locked. She knocked. A smiling, young, French-African couple opened the door and welcomed us into the castle kitchen. There, seated at the large, round kitchen table, finishing bowls of vegetable soup, were Josephine Baker’s children — all twelve of them — her human, in the flesh, statement against racism, her internationally known “Rainbow Tribe.”

The pleasant chatter and giggles of twelve well dressed, well behaved children enjoying lunch together filled the room. Josephine was raising her adopted children of different races, colors, and countries of origin, as siblings. She described them as living proof that we are all one race, capable of living together as one loving family.

In the center of the table were a variety of cheeses, a bowl of apples and pears, baskets of cut baguettes, and plates of sliced meats. A few of the children were politely waiting for their next course. They looked more like classmates than siblings. Josephine’s ten sons appeared to be very close in age, nine or ten years old. Her two daughters looked much younger.

Josephine turned to her children, and spoke to them in French. "*Bonjour mes enfants.* Please welcome our new friends from America." The children responded with a polite "*Bonjour, Maman.*" Addressing me and my friend, the children chirped, "*Bonjour et bienvenues, Mesdemoiselles*."

Josephine looked pleased. She explained that she had saved each of her children from extremely harsh beginnings like those she had endured as a child in Missouri. Her children were, she said, all "magnificent human beings."

She introduced me to the energetic, young African couple, describing them as great tutors and loving caregivers. As Josephine and I spoke, the couple moved quickly around the table, ladling more soup for one child, passing the baguettes and cheese to another, addressing, one by one, the needs of all twelve of Josephine's children.

The scene I witnessed in Les Milandes' kitchen was joyful. It was the perfect, I couldn't help thinking, perhaps carefully staged, picture of family harmony.

Josephine's children, of Japanese, Moroccan, Finnish, Ivorian, Columbian, French, Venezuelan, and Algerian origins went on with their lunch, laughing and talking discreetly at the large, round table, like a tiny model United Nations. Clearly accustomed to the comings and goings of their mother and random guests, they took little notice of us as we left the kitchen.

We immediately entered the castle's formal dining room. I had toured a number of castles in France, but never a privately owned medieval château guided by its chatelaine. We moved faster than I would have liked past a dining table long enough to seat twenty guests. The elegant table hugged the wall, stretching along the left side of the room. The table was formally set and appeared to be ready and waiting to receive guests for an important dinner. Touched by the sunlight streaming through the tall, mullioned glass windows, the crystal glasses, fine china, and polished silver sparkled. Silver candelabras holding long white tapers were spaced along the table. They had, I imagined, cast an enchanting light over many candlelight dinners. The table linens and velvet chairs were in subtle tones of beige and pale olive green. The rest of Josephine's dining room was noticeably empty. There were no settees or tea tables in the room, no comfortable armchairs facing the unused walk-in fireplace, no buffet to aid in serving, and no armoire to hold the table linens. The castle's dining room, like its chatelaine, appeared to have fallen on hard times.

We left the dining room and followed Josephine who walked toward a wide, white stone spiral staircase. She had stopped, looking a little impatient, at the base of the stairwell, to wait

for me and my friend. Josephine had not invited me to Les Milandes to give me a tour of her castle. But, as bizarre as the day had become, I was still a bit in tourist mode. We hurried up the white stone stairs following our host, and stopped at a dark wooden door on the first floor. I eagerly awaited the sight of the private sitting room that I imagined existed on the other side of the door.

Josephine pushed open the heavy wooden door to reveal a high ceilinged spacious room with a row of tall windows that looked out on the gardens. There was nothing elegant about the room. It was furnished as an office workroom. We followed Josephine into the room where a plain, rectangular wooden table stood against the wall beneath one of the windows on the left. Six wooden chairs were scattered haphazardly about. My friend took a seat near the door, quietly pulled an apple out of her bag, and began to eat her lunch.

On entering the spacious, sparsely furnished room, my eye went immediately to the right wall near the door. Seven beautiful dark amber violins were arranged and securely mounted on the wall. The collection of full size violins whose full-bodied sound I could well imagine, made up for the otherwise empty room. I'd played the violin for nine years, but never one as beautiful as these. Two of the instruments, obvious favorites, showed signs of wear.

"Are you the violinist?" I asked Josephine who stood at the work table arranging colorful stacks of papers.

"No," she replied. "I'm not the violinist. The violins belong to Jo Bouillon, the children's father. He's the musician in the family. Jo's in Argentina right now, but he'll be home soon."

Josephine asked me to join her at the work table. I crossed the room to the table and she began to reveal what was really on her mind.

"There is," she said, "far too much hate in the world. Most of it is aimed at people like you and me who have done nothing to deserve it." Josephine had learned, growing up in Missouri, that, in America, her brown skin meant that she would always be treated as inferior to any man, woman, or child who had white skin, that the laws of her country would never protect or defend her from racial hatred, and that she was expected to accept a life of poverty and racial discrimination. As I listened, my heart, as my southern-born mom would say, went out to her.

Living in Paris, Josephine felt the heavy weight of racism lifted and replaced by the healing lightness of acceptance and equality. In France, she was treated neither better nor worse, but equal to everyone else. She wanted all Negroes who were suffering racial discrimination in America to know this wonderful lightness.

“Children can easily be taught to love others, but white children in Missouri and all over America,” she lamented, “are being taught that to hate and to mistreat Negroes is acceptable.” Josephine was teaching her Rainbow Tribe to love each other, and every day she enjoyed watching them work and play together.

“I see beauty in each of them and, I often tell them so. I teach them to love and respect themselves, and to reach out to people who are different from them with kindness and love. They know that their complexions are beautiful, from the lightest to the darkest. When they leave Les Milandes, I fear that the world will not treat them as equals. So, we have much work to do.”

Josephine was grateful to France for giving her the freedom to create her family and her wonderful life. She was grateful to her fellow French citizens for loving and accepting her.

“I was born in a country that did not want me, that told me every day where I could not go, what I could not do, and who I could not be.” She knew, she said, that as a French citizen she would be free to create the multiethnic, multiracial family that she dreamed of. “America,” she added, “gave me nothing!” The choice to become French was an easy one.

Josephine was, she said, proud, during World War II, to fight in the Resistance to free France from Nazi occupation. She said that she had no choice. She had to risk her life, if necessary, to help free the country that had freed her from the sad, limited life that America offered her. She said that she would always love and defend France and was simply doing her duty.

Josephine Baker did not mentioned that for simply doing her duty, France had awarded her the prestigious Croix de Guerre, and the Médaille de la Résistance or that General Charles De Gaulle had personally made her a Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur, awarding her France’s highest military honor.

With great emotion in her voice, she went on. “That war has ended, but, there is another war that rages on. It’s a war against us. Against you, against me, against all Negroes in America. I learned as a child that the cruel treatment of Negroes did not end with slavery. No amount of education, wealth, or success that we’ve achieved has changed that.”

“There are many kind and wonderful people everywhere in this world, but there are also those who wake up every morning harboring hatred they’ve been taught from childhood, and dedicated to finding ways to prevent Negroes from succeeding no matter how hard we work or how deserving we may be. And, we must fight back! We cannot let them win. We cannot let them win.”

I was moved by Josephine's words and the pain that I saw in her eyes and heard in her voice.

"Some of us," she continued, "are privileged in this life to find a crack in the walls of racism and to squeeze through. But in America we're never allowed to feel truly free. We have been treated as objects to be bought and sold; as children, never allowed to enjoy the responsibility or respect of adulthood; as clowns, put on earth to amuse others. We are much more than that. We are human beings. We deserve to be appreciated for all that we have contributed. My children show me every day that we are one race and that we can live together in peace if we choose to. This is the message that the world needs to hear."

"Time passes so quickly. Memories are short. I've grown old. People no longer visit Les Milandes. It's normal. You are young. You are educated. I'm asking you to join me in the fight against racial hatred. I need your help to spread messages of unity and love. I cannot fight this battle alone!"

Josephine turned to the table covered with stacks of pastel colored flyers, gathered twenty flyers from each stack and handed them to me, saying I would know best how to distribute them in America. On each flyer, a simple message printed in bold, black ink promoted love and unity. *All We Need is Love, We Learn to Love By Loving, Teach Love Not Hate, There is Only One Race, the Human Race.*

Josephine urged me to stay in France when the semester ended. She asked me to return to Castelnaud-la-Chapelle to work with her to fight racism internationally and to help her promote love and peace. She had, she said, learned that in 1966, the war against hatred and racism was best fought with the pen. She needed my help, she said, to recruit an army of educated, young activists like me to join her in her fight against racism. One race. Love not hate. Such simple messages. These flyers were the only tools she had.

Josephine Baker, of course, was not alone in her belief in humanity's one race. She had delivered a speech at the March on Washington in 1963 just before Martin Luther King delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech. She was well aware of Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks, and many others who espoused the same belief.

I had listened carefully to Josephine's emotional, heartfelt presentation and was moved. Her life in segregated Missouri contrasted greatly with my life in Northern California. I was born forty years after Josephine, at the end of World War II. Raised in a racially integrated community, I attended an integrated church and schools and had experienced, because of my educated, vigilant parents, few encounters with overt discrimination.

My life for the next two years was tightly scripted, full of exciting plans, the fruits of months of daily correspondence with my fiancé, Michael Selvin. I told Josephine all my plans: graduation, marriage, Peace Corps training and teaching in Ghana. I would return to California in the Fall of 1968. I promised to contact her then, to see how her campaign was progressing and if our lives might come together again.

My schoolmate stood up, looking at her watch, indicating that it was time to get back to the café. Josephine walked us down the spiral staircase and out of Les Milandes through the now empty kitchen. My friend whom Josephine had completely ignored, excused herself politely and left the castle. I thanked Josephine for the enlightening hour and told her that my parents, whom, as a child, I referred to as “refugees from Arkansas,” had made a pact. They agreed to never burden their children with tales of their painful experiences in the racist South. But, of course, no one like me, with brown skin in America, lives free of encounters with racism. I understood Josephine’s urgent request for me, a stranger, to forget all the plans I’d made for my life and to join her in fighting racial discrimination. Josephine said she understood my commitment to follow through on the plans I’d made, though I was not convinced that she did. My hour with Josephine Baker in her château in the Dordogne had been mesmerizing and left me with much to think about.

“Bisous or American hug?” I asked. A peck on both cheeks and a warm, memorable hug later, I left Josephine Baker and Les Milandes, hurrying down the road to meet the university’s bus to return to Bordeaux. I settled into my seat on the bus and looked out at the peaceful Dordogne River as we left Castelnaud-la-Chapelle. Still hugging Josephine’s pastel flyers close to my chest, I was sad that I could not help her.

Two years passed quickly. In 1968, as I was returning from Africa, I learned that Josephine had been evicted from her castle. I lost touch with her. So, I was thrilled, in 1970, while living in Guanajuato, Mexico, to see her on television in a pale pink satin ballgown and feather headdress, singing “J’ai Deux Amours.” When she lost Les Milandes, Josephine’s loyal friend, Princess Grace, gave Josephine and her children a comfortable home in Monaco, and together with Jacqueline Onassis helped her revive her singing career. Josephine Baker and I never met again. She died in 1975 after a triumphant comeback performance in Paris attended by her friend, Princess Grace. — A life well lived.

In July, 2021, I returned to les Milandes and met with Angélique de Saint-Exupéry, whose family bought Les Milandes after Josephine was evicted. Angélique has dedicated her

life and the Château Des Milandes, now a *Maison des Illustres*, to preserving Josephine's memory.

On hearing that Josephine had invited me to Les Milandes in 1966, Angélique gasped, "1966! That was a very bad year! Josephine and Jo Bouillon divorced, she had to sell off her furniture to live, and the castle was looted. She had no support from the government that she had supported. Unable to pay her taxes, Josephine faced eviction. She had no time for anything except trying to find funds to pay her debts and to feed her family."

I had met Josephine Baker at the worst time of her adult life!

I toured the beautifully restored castle and, once again, felt close to Josephine.

Two weeks after my return to Les Milandes, France's President Emmanuel Macron announced that France would honor Josephine Baker with burial in the Pantheon in Paris on November 30, 2021, an honor reserved for France's greatest national heroes. At the regal *Cérémonie de Panthéonisation de Joséphine Baker,* President Macron ended his eloquent speech with words that Josephine would have loved, « *Ma France, c'est Joséphine. »*

© *jselvin@comcast.net*

Josephine Baker,1974 *Johnny, 1966* *JBS and Angélique, 2021*

Le Château Des Milandes.