

BREAKOUT SESSION - *Josephine Baker Returns to St. Louis: Music as a Primary Source*

Excerpt of Josephine Baker's Homecoming Show speech, Kiel Auditorium, St. Louis, MO, February 3, 1952

My being here in St. Louis brings me back thirty five years. I never dreamed that I would return to St. Louis as an entertainer. A year ago when I decided to come to North America, I had it put in my contract that I would not appear in any city where my people could not come to see me, and at each time that there has been an approach to my coming to St. Louis I have always refused. Oh, I have had several fantastic offers in the first class theaters and nightclubs, but when the question arrived about my people coming to see me, immediately there was a silence.

It was not until Mr. Woods and Attorney Grant came to Chicago to speak to me about the need of money for our schools that I decided to come...My people needed me, that was enough to make me decide.

Ladies and gentlemen believe me when I say that it makes me profoundly happy...it makes my heart swell with pride to see in this beautiful audience tonight, salt and pepper...I mean by that colored and white brothers mingling. This brings tears to my eyes and I...I want to get on my knees to thank God for letting me see this sight today. Friends and brothers, God is good...powerful...understanding. And now I have hope that St. Louis will not be the last city to join in with the other American cities that are so strongly fighting against discrimination for all Americans.

Strange, it seems just like yesterday that I ran away from home, not because I lived in poverty or that I was living in the slums for I have never been ashamed of my childhood surroundings. On the contrary, I have been very proud of my start, because it has made me remain human, and in that way understand my fellow brothers of misery. Friends, did not our Lord Jesus Christ live in poverty? Did he not? Then I believe it a great privilege to have suffered during my childhood.

I ran away from home. I ran away from St. Louis, and then I ran away from the United States of America, because of that terror of discrimination, that horrible beast which paralyzes one's very soul and body. Those in this audience that felt discrimination know what I am talking about and those who understand human beings understand what I am talking about too.

The hate directed against the colored people here in St. Louis has always given me a sad feeling because when I was a little girl I remember the horror of the East St. Louis race riot.

I was very tiny but the horror of the whole thing impressed me so that here today at the age of forty five years I can still see myself standing on the west bank of the Mississippi looking over into East St. Louis and watching the glow of the burning of Negro homes lighting the sky. We children stood huddled together in bewilderment, not being able to understand the horrible madness of mob violence but here we were 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 as their worldly belongings. Friends, to me for years St. Louis represented a city of fear...humiliation...misery and terror...A city where in the eyes of the white man a Negro should know his place and had better stay in it.

So with this vision I ran and ran and ran. I wanted to find freedom of soul and spirit. I wanted to do things to help freedom come to my people. I was ready to fight, if necessary to obtain it. I wanted to feel that I was a human being and that we were all human beings. I got on my knees asking God, in whom I profoundly believe, to show me the light...to give me the power to help my people...to put me in a position where the sunshine that

BREAKOUT SESSION - *Josephine Baker Returns to St. Louis: Music as a Primary Source*

I bring would serve to enlighten the whites of the existence of colored?people throughout the world in which there are over 600 million.

I wanted to get far away from those who believed in cruelty, so then I went to France, a land of true freedom, democracy, equality and fraternity. There my soul was at ease but after a certain time I started to wonder why it was that in St. Louis which, was at one time, a French colony that the colored people of St. Louis have no equal rights...wherein Paris we are loved and respected as human beings and both cities where the population is preponderantly white. I tried to understand why this was...I asked various people...sometimes Americans of the white race. Oh, we had interesting conversations on that subject but never were they able to give a plausible reason.

This problem became an incurable disease and between my great triumphs throughout France and Europe I could not feel satisfied. The race situation kept gnawing at my heart, paralyzing my brain...I could not stop thinking of the suffering of my people here in America. I was continually unhappy, no one could understand why I should be because at that time I was considered the greatest success in Europe but that glow in the sky of burning houses, the screams, the terror, the tears of the unfortunate children that had lost their parents - this kept coming before me on the stage, in the streets, in my sleep. [...]

-Excerpted from UMSL Black History Project (1980 - 1983) Western Historical Manuscript Collection/State Historical Society of Missouri

Minneapolis Spokesman

MINNEAPOLIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Midway 8340

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 1952

Midway 8340

St. Louis Will Spread Royal Carpet For Jo Baker

St. Louis, Mo. — (ANP) — A royal St. Louis welcome is due the legendary Josephine Baker Feb. 3 that could make the New Orleans Mardi Gras pale in comparison. The fabulous star, for the first time since 1925, will make a professional appearance in her hometown.

The "sensational entertainer of three continents who put the real meaning into the word-sensational will live at the Park Plaza hotel, marking the



Jo Baker

first time that the hotel has accepted Negro guests.

Appearing at Kiel Auditorium in behalf of the "bitter struggle" Negroes are waging against the St. Louis public school system for equal facilities and integrated schools, Josephine Baker will receive a proclamation issued by the Mayor designating that day as "Josephine Baker Homecoming Day."