



HER VOICE: BLACK WOMEN FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TO THE SCREEN

# Siren of the Tropics

*Siren of the Tropics* may feature one of America's greatest stars, but it's a film that could never have been made in America at the time, or for decades later. In the silent era,

Anna May Wong set sail for Europe to play romantic leads, escaping Hollywood's prohibition on what it called miscegenation. In the classical Hollywood musical, Black performers from The Nicholas Brothers to Lena Horne were seen only as 'featured players' with no connection to the story – so their show-stopping sequences could be excised from the film for exhibition in the South.

In *Siren of the Tropics*, Josephine Baker isn't just the star of the film, she is giving a career-defining star performance. Not least because this film fictionalises the creation of her star persona. It's the story of a young woman from the Caribbean who falls in love with a white man and follows him to Paris. While searching for him, she is scouted by nightclub impresarios and becomes the toast of the city. Finally reunited with her love, she sees that they can never be together and she makes a sacrifice for him before sailing away to America to start a new life.

It's a complete fiction, but one that hits on all the aspects of Baker's persona that would have been familiar to her audience. It's her *A Star is Born*. Baker's character, Papitou, displays natural dance talent at home in the fictional Caribbean mining colony of Monte Puebla, grooving on the sand with her friends. She eventually travels to Paris where she becomes feted on the nightclub circuit with an act that involves her both performing an eccentric dance in the torn blouse and satin rompers of her famous plantation routine and also bringing the house down in sequins, lace and feathers as she twirls her limbs in the Charleston: two of her signature moves. Although Papitou is a dancer, not also a comedienne, the film supplies plenty of set-pieces for Baker to prove her skills in both disciplines. At the end of the film Papitou travels to Baker's actual birthplace, the US.

Of course, that's not how it really happened for Baker. She had a tough upbringing in St Louis, Missouri, the daughter of a single mother and the granddaughter of former slaves. She learned her trade dancing in the chorus of revues such as *Shuffle Along* in Harlem before moving to Europe and finding success in Paris. There, she was presented to audiences, not as a Black American, but an exotic daughter of Africa, a 'siren of the tropics' you could say, who starred at La Revue Nègre and who famously performed half-naked, with a skirt made out of bananas at the Folies Bergère. According to press reports, the men in the audience were driven wild with lust (Louise Brooks said they roared like zoo animals scenting meat), and the chic women of Paris bought pomade to slick down their hair, and walnut oil to darken their skin in imitation of La Baker.

It may have been a lie, but it was the mythos that made Baker a star and *Siren of the Tropics* is another version of the story. This exoticism, and the success it brought her, was just more palatable than the out-and-out racism and colourism that Baker had faced on the American stage. 'I became famous first in France in the twenties,' she told the *Guardian*. 'I just couldn't stand America and I was one of the first coloured Americans to move to

Paris.’ Baker stayed in France, working on stage and screen. She made three more films, *Zouzou* (1934), *Princesse Tam Tam* (1935) and *Fausse Alerte* (1940), and although she did return to the States, she was never as well-known or popular in dance in the US as in Europe until after the war. In 1937 she became a French citizen, after marrying her third husband Jean Lion.

Those of us watching with 21st-century hindsight will note that Papitou’s character is also defined by a righteous defiance of authority that we associate with Baker’s own later contribution to the civil rights movement and her work with the French Resistance in the Second World War: she informs on a slave-owner, bringing about his downfall, and shoots the man who has plotted the downfall of the man she loves. Not least, Papitou shares the determination and the resilience we know that Baker displayed in building her career despite the structural racism of American and European show-business. However, her character arc also involves a painful amount of self-sacrifice, which means that Papitou is denied the romantic conclusion that a white character would have been granted.

This is a comedy though, and despite all the moral weight on Papitou’s shoulders, Baker’s is a comic performance. Baker proves here that if you can dance, you can do slapstick. And vice versa. She moves faster than light, and the camera tries to keep up with her, while her mobile legs and arms sell each gag to perfection. When Papitou first dresses up in western clothes, she arranges herself to look like a twisted doll, limbs at all the wrong angles. Baker essays all the vigorous innocence of Chaplin’s *The Little Tramp*, or for that matter a character played by Clara Bow or Alice Howell, as she clambers and scrapes her way around a world she only partly understands, in pursuit of her heart’s true desire. She’s the innocent abroad, especially when she leaves her home Monte Puebla for the bright lights of Paris.

Like most heroes of slapstick, *The Tramp* included, Papitou is an underdog. She only partially understands the world around her, she has no money and speaks broken, third-person French in the intertitle dialogue. She doesn’t understand queues and the social niceties. Because she’s so innocent, and low-status, but most specifically because she is Black, the men in the narrative use her as a pawn or exploit her financially. Papitou’s Blackness is central to this film: from the scenes in Monte Puebla where she dances with her friends to the fish-out-of-water sequences when she arrives in Paris.

On the surface, Papitou is presented as a child of the Caribbean, who loves animals, children, sun and nature: a character constructed through the prism of primitivism, the trope that Black people are less sophisticated and more sensual than other ethnicities. This is a racist trope, the one that defined how Baker was staged and marketed in France – and it is a trope that the screenplay seems to be conscious of. In the story, the white people around Papitou immediately label her as primitive in a sexual way, as the sensual ‘siren of the tropics’ (is the title ironic, or just cynical marketing?), instead of the youthful clown and innocent dream the audience is privileged to meet. The dramatic climax of the film is based on the idea that when Papitou is discovered with a white man, she will falsely be assumed to be his mistress. Why else would she be there if not for sex? But Papitou’s primitivism embodies innocence. Her love for this man, André, is romantic, but not physical. She reaches out to him in her dreams but not in person, and she understands the gulf between them when she sees his white Parisian fiancé – more specifically, her western clothes. She pursues André, but she does not claim him, and her sacrifice is labelled ‘the purest source of joy’ in an intertitle.

But then the film falls into the trap it sets for its villains. There's a scene in which Papitou takes a bath that features more nudity than would be common for a white star at the time. This again is also a nod to her famed on-stage nudity.

That scene comes at the end of the film's most extended comic sequence. It's a chase scene on the ocean liner that Papitou has stowed away on. First Papitou falls into a coalpile, and covered by soot, she terrifies a white English passenger. Then she hides in a flour bin, and shrouded in white, she terrifies the same woman again – she thinks she's seen a ghost. It's only after her bath, returned to her natural skin colour, that the passengers and crew accept her, and the once-terrified woman offers her a job and pays her passage to Paris. It's a simple enough gag for black-and-white film, but a complex one for a Black performer, especially perhaps one who had light skin that made her feel like an outsider in her own family, growing up, but likely contributed to her popularity with white audiences – it allowed her to pass the colourist 'paper bag test' for *Shuffle Along* back in the early days, just about. It's also a gag that worries at what was particularly complex about Baker's persona: the 'Black Venus', who was also a European artiste, and an American icon of modernity and Jazz. To her audience, she was European, American and African all at once. Which meant that for many of them, no doubt, she was also both Black and white. The exotic Other, and also anything but that. The poet e e cummings described her appearance at La Revue Nègre in 1925 as 'a creature neither infra-human nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysterious unkillable Something, equally non-primitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense the emotion is beyond arithmetic.'

Like many of her peers, Baker had performed Blackface comedy routines back in New York. When you see Baker goofily grinning and crossing her eyes, that's a throwback to Blackface routines. According to the signifying codes of Black comedy at the time, the joke is in the double-meaning, to be a Black woman pretending to be a white person's idea of a Black character, whether lazy or foolish or with exaggerated gestures, and thereby commenting, with a wink, on the caricature mid-performance. It's an instructive way to look at *Siren of the Tropics*, where once again her performance is layered and complex.

Baker as Papitou is performing the primitive native girl from an exotic background, the sensual nightclub siren, but with such panache, such a sense of her talent, defiance and burgeoning fame, that we never lose sight of the real character she is playing. And that's Josephine Baker herself.

**Pamela Hutchinson, Silent London, [silentlondon.co.uk](http://silentlondon.co.uk), 4 March 2021**  
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**Siren of the Tropics**  
**(La sirène des tropiques)**  
*Directors:* Henri Etiévant, Mario Nalpas  
*Production Company:*  
Centrale Cinématographique  
*Assistant Director:* Luis Buñuel  
*Screenplay:* Maurice Dekobra  
*Photography:* Albert Duverger,  
Paul Cotteret, Maurice Hennebains  
*Art Director:* Jacques Natanson  
*Set Decorators:* Pierre Schildknecht, Eugène Carré  
*Studio:* Éclair (Paris)

**Cast**  
Joséphine Baker (*Papitou*)  
Pierre Batcheff (*André Berval*)  
Georges Melchior (*Marquis Sévéro*)  
Régina Dalthy (*Marquise Sévéro*)  
Kiranine (*Alvarez*)  
Adolphe Candé (*director*)  
Régina Thomas (*Denise*)  
Jean Borelli  
Joe Alex  
Pierre Hot  
Janine Borelli  
Colette Borelli  
France 1927  
86 mins

With recorded score

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Mon 17 May 18:10; Sat 29 May 15:15;  
Tue 8 Jun 18:10  
**Whitney: Can I Be Me**  
Tue 18 May 20:50; Sat 26 Jun 18:10  
**Siren of the Tropics**  
**(La sirène des tropiques)**  
Wed 19 May 18:10; Sat 5 Jun 12:20  
**Stormy Weather**  
Wed 19 May 20:40; Sat 5 Jun 16:00  
**Dreamgirls**  
Sat 22 May 17:50; Wed 23 Jun 20:30  
**Ella Fitzgerald: Just One of Those Things**  
Mon 24 May 18:10; Sat 19 Jun 15:20

**...But Then, She’s Betty Carter**  
Sat 29 May 12:10; Mon 7 Jun 18:00  
**Sparkle**  
Sun 30 May 18:40; Thu 10 Jun 20:35  
**Mavis!**  
Mon 31 May 16:10; Thu 17 Jun 20:40  
**Billie**  
Wed 2 Jun 18:00; Tue 15 Jun 20:40  
**What’s Love Got to Do with It**  
Fri 4 Jun 18:00; Sat 26 Jun 20:45  
**Twenty Feet from Stardom**  
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