

# The New York Times

## Reimagining Josephine Baker's Music in the Era of Black Lives Matter

By Zachary Woolfe | August 22, 2016



Josephine Baker looms in the cultural imagination for her Gay Paree sexiness and nostalgic appeal, her slinky gowns and charismatic flair for dancing the Charleston. But for “Josephine Baker: A Personal Portrait,” an evening of Baker songs newly arranged by the young avant-jazz composer and musician Tyshawn Sorey and sung by the radiant soprano Julia Bullock, the tempo has been slowed and the mood hushed to unsettled melancholy. It’s a ritual of mourning, a reminder of Baker’s racial struggles and civil rights activism, and of the era of police brutality and Black Lives Matter in which we currently live.

After a premiere in June at the Ojai Music Festival in California, organized by the director Peter Sellars, the program, featuring a small group of players from the International Contemporary Ensemble [ICE], arrives at

Lincoln Center’s Mostly Mozart Festival for an intimate late-night performance at the Kaplan Penthouse on Wednesday. Ms. Bullock and Mr. Sorey recently spoke via Skype — she from western Massachusetts, he from Banff, Canada — about the project. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

**JULIA BULLOCK** I had been wanting to sing her songs since college, which was the first time that anyone compared me to Baker. So I was just trying to find the right opportunity, the right person to arrange them, and the right context.

I performed a group of her songs in my New York debut recital, and Peter’s producer caught wind of it. And Peter said that if I would be interested in it, he was hooking up with Claire Chase [the International Contemporary Ensemble’s founder], and they brought Tyshawn on board and Claudia Rankine to write poetry. There was a part of me that didn’t know how much I wanted a white man grandfathering all this. But I think one of Peter’s great strengths is he brings together artists that seem to have a unique perspective and purpose.

**TYSHAWN SOREY** I didn’t want to compose some nostalgic sort of thing, doing similar arrangements to the French ones by Jo Bouillon or others. Julia and I met at a diner in New York and just sat and listened for hours and talked about the lyrical content of the songs, and I identified more with that than with the French arrangements. I identified more with Baker as a figure of the civil rights movement, with the lyrical and emotional content. I wanted to recompose the music so that it would match that. I spent maybe four months of only listening to

Baker songs, fully immersing myself in that music.

Photo

**BULLOCK** I honestly wasn't familiar with Tyshawn's work at all. I wasn't sure how he was going to internalize and metabolize these French musical tunes. But I relinquished control over the situation. I just had to trust. And when we had our first rehearsal, I was just so moved because it was very clear that Tyshawn had taken the time to just sit with the repertoire.

**How did you handle your physical presence in the piece, especially in that amazing stylized dance near the end?**

**BULLOCK** I did not want to give any kind of impersonation, or imitate her in any way. But her craft and career were initially dictated by movement and her body. So Peter said, in his wonderful way, "We need a deconstructed Charleston." And it was so smart. It was the same method we were using with the music. It was a foot-focused dance, not about the hips and trying to be hypersexual. When you watch Baker, even when she's practically nude doing the Charleston, you're not thinking, "Look at this naked woman." It's actually just deeply physical — sensual, of course — but she's embodying a lot of energy and joy. It wasn't about arousal so much.

**How much of the score is improvised?**

**SOREY** It's kind of a mix-up of composition and spontaneous composition, which is how I usually work. Even though there's a lot of information that's written out for Julia, ICE and myself, the element of spontaneity is going to be in every performance. The question of how much, it varies from performance to performance. I wanted everyone to have the freedom, the liberty to do whatever they wanted to do with the music.

**BULLOCK** It's very hard, especially coming from a musical world where everything is rehearsed quite a bit. I prep for months ahead of time, and they're wanting the same — not the exact same delivery, but it's a polished experience. That's not the jazz world though, and keeping myself open to that has been very liberating.

**Were you, are you, thinking about current events?**

**BULLOCK** These issues, they're always on my mind. When [Michael Brown](#) was killed, that happened 20 minutes from my home in St. Louis. All these issues are things I live with and think about daily. Yes, I understood the timeliness of what we were writing. Hearing her sing "[Si J'Étais Blanche](#)" ["If I Were White"] in 1925 is just as relevant as singing it now.

I'm half-white, and I thought it was really important as a performer to talk about my complex feelings about going into an industry predominately run by white people. Issues with exoticism still come up. Objectification still comes up. To have an opportunity to speak about that in music was great. I need to say those things right now, and the world needs to hear how I think. And to be given a platform to do it, it's a gift both Tyshawn and I have been given.

**SOREY** The music that we make is comprised solely of our life experiences. The police brutality that we're experiencing right now, it's been happening for a very long time. I was born and raised in Newark, and police brutality and shootings happened near my block. The difference between then and now is that the media is talking about it.

To do a reimagination of the Baker songs to me — even though the music per se might sound a particular way for a particular time — the lyrical content is timeless, and I wanted to create something musically to reflect what we're experiencing now.

**Is it still changing?**

**BULLOCK** We're all trying to share and experience and re-evaluate. So I can't say when we're going to have a finished product on this. I think everyone was in agreement that the first third of it, even though the music was amazing, needed to kind of get it going. So we've talked about establishing the relationship between Tyshawn and I, and having a more playful element to open it, creating a more welcoming space. And we're always talking about what new songs to do.

**You're adding?**

**SOREY** It's a living project, for sure.