

Lifestyle | Features

SOWETO'S VETERAN ICE-CREAM TRUCK KEEPS GENERATIONS SMILING



The owner of an ice cream truck, Sipho Mtshali, sits in his truck in Soweto.



A customer buys ice cream from Sipho Mtshali's ice cream truck in Soweto.

The melody of Sipho Mtshali's ice-cream van has drawn hoards of Soweto children since South Africa's violent apartheid years, running over for creamy soft servings. Decades later, it still is going. He has worked "Monday to Monday" for the past 45 years, driving through the hilly township that was once home to South Africa's first black president Nelson Mandela.

Even during the violent liberation struggle that rocked Soweto during the 1970s, he sold icecream. Only the winter weather occasionally stops him. "If it's cold, you get the rest," said Mtshali, a 63-year-old father born and raised in Soweto, where students once rose against white-minority rule in 1976. But politics have never been his thing. "I have seen people grow from the ice-cream car," he said, remembering that prices were lower during apartheid, which officially ended in 1994.

Today he charges eight rand (\$0.50) for a swirly serving of strawberry or vanilla. Add a couple of rand for a sprinkle of hundreds-and-thousands or

another crunchy topping. Mtshali fondly recalls the round baby faces of his first customers, now adults, who today send their children to his van, coins in hand. "They were young when we started," he said, serving some people directly into their cars as they ride past.

Under a bright summer sun, Mtshali drives slowly past small identical brick and iron-roofed houses built for black laborers on the outskirts of Johannesburg during apartheid. He has to cut the engine to switch on his Italian ice-cream machine. "Can't do both at the same time," he muttered, blades churning in the background. A small technical glitch that does not impact his passion for the smiles he brings. "As long as I'm alive I'm gonna do it," he said. "Everybody is happy with ice-cream." —AFP



Sipho Mtshali sells ice cream to customers in Soweto. —AFP photos

Pantheon: Resting place of France's great and good



In this file photo, French US-born dancer and singer Josephine Baker poses during the automobile elegance contest at the Bois de Boulogne waterfall, near Paris. —AFP



This undated file photo shows French US-born dancer and singer Josephine Baker in her property at Les Milandes Castle, Dordogne. —AFP



Josephine Baker, the French-American dancer and singer who fought in the French Resistance and later battled racism, will become the first black woman to enter the Pantheon, France's most hallowed resting place, on Tuesday. The domed mausoleum in the heart of Paris, modeled on the Pantheon in Rome, holds the remains of legendary figures in France's history from the worlds of politics, culture and science. Seventy men including the philosophers Voltaire and

Jean-Jacques Rousseau lie next to literary luminaries such as Alexandre Dumas, Emile Zola and Victor Hugo. Only five women before Baker were allowed through its grand portals, which are crowned with an inscription proclaiming: "To great men from a grateful nation."

Camus refusal

The declaration has long been a red rag to feminists,

who see it as deeply sexist and regularly protest to have it changed. Simone Veil, a former French minister who survived the Holocaust and fought for abortion rights, was the last woman to be admitted in 2018. She joined the scientist Marie Curie, Resistance heroes Genevieve de Gaulle-Anthonioz, Germaine Tillion and Sophie Berthelot, who was buried alongside her chemist husband Marcellin Berthelot.

The French president decides who has the right to be

laid to rest there. President Emmanuel Macron rejected a campaign earlier this year to rebury the French poet Arthur Rimbaud there, both to honor his work as a poet and his newfound fame as a gay icon. However, descendants can overrule the president, as happened when the family of existentialist writer Albert Camus thwarted a bid in 2009 by then-president Nicolas Sarkozy to move his remains to the Pantheon. Veil's admission prompted a sharp rise in visitors to 860,000 a year, but a far cry from the millions who flock to the Eiffel Tower. —AFP

Josephine Baker to be first black woman immortalized in Pantheon

Josephine Baker, the French-American dancer, singer and actress who mesmerized France with performances mocking colonialism and later joined the French Resistance, will become the first black woman to be immortalized in France's Pantheon mausoleum Tuesday. Baker will be just the sixth woman to join the around 80 great national figures of French history in the secular temple on Paris's Left Bank.

She will also be the first showbiz figure to be honored with a symbolic spot in the secular sanctuary, final resting place of a long list of luminaries from the worlds of politics, culture and science, including Victor Hugo, Emile Zola and Marie Curie. The "pantheonisation" of the world's first black female superstar, who campaigned for civil rights alongside Martin Luther King, caps years of campaigning by her family and a group of intellectuals for her to be given the rare posthumous honor.

French President Emmanuel Macron in August finally granted the request "because she's a woman who was born black and American in a closed society... who became the incarnation of the Enlightenment values of the French Republic throughout her life," his office explained this week. "She's a woman whose whole life was dedicated to the twin quest for liberty and justice," an official at the presidency added.

'France made me'

Born Freda Josephine McDonald into extreme poverty in Missouri in 1906, Baker left school at 13. After two failed marriages - she took the name Baker from her second husband - she managed to land herself a place in one of the first all-black musicals on Broadway in 1921. Like many black American artists at the time, she moved to France to escape racial segregation back home.

The woman nicknamed the "Black Venus" took



In this file photo, US-born dancer and singer Josephine Baker performs during her show for the French-US gala at Versailles Castle, outside Paris. —AFP

Paris by storm with her exuberant dance performances, which captured the energy of the Jazz Age. One of the defining moments of her career came when she danced the Charleston at the Folies-Bergere cabaret hall, wearing only a string of pearls and a skirt made of rubber bananas, in a sensational send-up of colonial fantasies about black women. A singer and actress as well as dancer, she adopted France wholeheartedly, taking French nationality upon her marriage to industrialist Jean Lion in 1937.

She would go on to divorce him and remarry twice more, adopting 12 children along the way. At the outbreak of World War II, she joined the French Resistance against Nazi Germany, becoming a lieutenant in the Free French air force's

female auxiliary corps. She became a spy for France's wartime leader-in-exile General Charles de Gaulle and used her people skills and contacts to get information on the plans of Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini. "France made me who I am," she said later. "Parisians gave me everything... I am prepared to give them my life."

'True anti-racist'

Throughout her life she fought discrimination, adopting children from different ethnic backgrounds to form a "rainbow" family at her chateau in southwest France. Pascal Bruckner, a novelist who campaigned for her to be given a coveted spot under the famous dome of the Pantheon, said Baker "is a symbol of a France that is not racist." "Josephine Baker is a true anti-racist, a true anti-fascist," he told AFP in an interview earlier this year. Baker died on April 12, 1975, aged 68, from a brain haemorrhage, days after a final smash-hit cabaret show in Paris celebrating her half-century on the stage.

She is the second woman to be inducted by Macron into the Pantheon after former minister Simone Veil, who survived the Holocaust to fight for abortion rights and European unity. Macron's former mentor and predecessor Francois Hollande had refused calls to immortalize Baker in the former church, which was transformed into a temple to "great men" after the French Revolution. "He thought it was a daft idea," one of Macron's advisors confided.

In a sign of the affection in which Baker is still held in France, there was no public criticism of the decision to honor her, including from far-right commentators that are generally scathing of anti-racism gestures. A symbolic tomb will be carried into the Pantheon by members of the French air force, a nod to her role in the wartime Free French air force. Baker's remains will however remain in Monaco, where she is buried. —AFP

Iran's militia unveils George Floyd game

Iran's Basij militia has unveiled a video game whose hero is George Floyd, the Black man who was murdered by a white police officer in the US last year. In the "Nejat-e-Azadi" (Defend Freedom) 3D game, developed by the Basij's IT department, the player must overcome obstacles and side-step enemies across 30 levels of difficulty.

Iran's Saheb News, which is close to the Basij — a volunteer Islamic militia loyal to the establishment — said the game was presented Tuesday during a digital production conference it held in Tehran. The killing of 46-year-old Floyd in May 2020 sparked America's biggest demonstrations for racial justice in decades. Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, a 45-year-old white man, was sentenced to more than 22 years in prison for killing Floyd by kneeling on his neck for nearly 10 minutes.

He and three colleagues had arrested Floyd on suspicion of having passed a fake \$20 bill in a store in Minneapolis. They handcuffed him and pinned him to the ground in the street. "Today, the only place where the United States can still present its defeats as victories is on the internet," Basij head Gholamreza Soleimani, who was present for the event, was quoted as saying. There are at least 32 million gamers among Iran's population of over 80 million, according to a report from the Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation. —AFP