

News Release



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The August Wilson Center for African American Culture Presents “Imani Winds,” April 21 & 22

Concerts mark the World Premiere of new concert program, “Josephine Baker: A Life of Le Jazz Hot”

PITTSBURGH, PA – In celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the birth of Josephine Baker, *Imani Winds*, the Grammy-nominated woodwind quintet unveils its latest project, “Josephine Baker: A Life of Le Jazz Hot.” The World Premiere takes place in Pittsburgh on **April 21st & 22nd, 8:00pm at the Kelly-Strayhorn Theater in East Liberty**, and features renowned jazz vocalist and composer, René Marie. These performances are presented by The August Wilson Center for African American Culture, and sponsored by PNC Financial Services Group.

Imani Winds’ visit is also an opportunity to welcome home Pittsburgh natives, Monica Ellis, the bassoonist for the quintet, and Bobbi Leann Williams, the director of “Josephine Baker: A Life of Le Jazz Hot.”

“A Life of Le Jazz Hot” pays tribute to the legacy of Josephine Baker, one of the most important, vibrant and controversial African American performers in history. Her impact on the world – from her electrifying dance style to her dedication to the French Underground Resistance to her compassion for all the world’s children – are all celebrated in this unique performance odyssey. Inspired by Ms. Baker’s pioneer spirit and fearsome fire, *Imani Winds* conceptualized this three-act, multi-media presentation in part as a reflection of its own uphill journey as an African-American/Latino wind quintet in the predominantly Euro-Asian classical music world.

The multi-faceted program reflects the areas of Ms. Baker’s own artistry, including music, dance and drama. “A Life of Le Jazz Hot” features American and French repertoire of Josephine Baker’s era, with René Marie singing signature works of Josephine Baker as well as her own compositions. Additional original music by Valerie Coleman accompanies a solo dance work, performed by Rachael Ashley, and choreographed by the award-winning Christopher Huggins. Jeff Scott’s original scores will accompany film footage of Ms. Baker herself.

Tickets for Imani Winds are on sale now, and can be purchased by calling 412-394-3353 or online at www.proartstickets.org. Tickets are \$20 for adults and \$15 for students. The Kelly-Strayhorn Theater is located at 5941 Penn Avenue in East Liberty.

As part of *Imani Winds*’ Pittsburgh engagement, The August Wilson Center for African American Culture will hold a film screening of “Princess Tam Tam,” starring Josephine Baker, **Wednesday, April 19th, 7 to 9pm at the Kelly-Strayhorn Theater**. The free screening will be followed by a discussion facilitated

by Stephanie Batiste, PhD, Assistant Professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University and will feature members of **Imani Winds**. The event is open to the public.

The following day, **Thursday, April 20th, Imani Winds will hold a free student performance for 3rd through 12th grade students, from noon to 1pm at the Kelly-Strayhorn Theater**. Space is limited, and registration is required. Interested participants can contact The August Wilson Center for African American Culture to register. Call 412.258.2700 or info@africanaculture.org.

About Imani Winds

The five accomplished musicians of *Imani Winds* – Valerie Coleman, flute; Toyin Spellman-Diaz, oboe; Mariam Adam, clarinet; Jeff Scott, French horn; and Monica Ellis, bassoon – joined forces in 1997 to expand the boundaries of the traditional wind quintet and explore the links between European, African and American music traditions. The name *Imani*, which means "faith" in Swahili, embodies this mission. This young ensemble of African/Latin American heritage has established a distinct presence in the classical music world for dynamic playing, innovative programming, and inspirational outreach programs, which they have brought to communities throughout the country.

Imani Winds' breakthrough recording *The Classical Underground* (Koch International Classics) successfully introduced their unique style of classical music; one that's infused with cultural references, effortless elegance and profound honesty. In 2006, *The Classical Underground* was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Classical Crossover Album.

About René Marie

René Marie's live performances can only be described as a transformation. The soft-spoken artist takes to the stage and turns it into a voodoo possession with her band. Her burning rhythms and tonal density make each song an experience beyond the typical jazz presentation. She swoops, yodels, seduces and conjures notes that leave the audience emotionally drained and satisfied. René Marie is a formidable artist at a time when the jazz world is desperately trying to decide who will be the "new leaders" of jazz.

About Josephine Baker

Born Freda Josephine McDonald in St. Louis, Missouri, on June 3, 1906, Josephine Baker grew to be one of the most important African American performers of all time. Famous for barely-there dresses and no-holds-barred dance routines, her exotic beauty generated nicknames "Black Venus," "Black Pearl" and "Creole Goddess." Her career thrived in the integrated Paris society; her jaw-dropping performance in *La Folie du Jour*, including a costume of 16 bananas strung into a skirt, cemented her celebrity status.

Due to her civil rights activism in the United States during the 50s and 60s, the NAACP named May 20 Josephine Baker Day in honor of her efforts. It was also during this time that she began adopting children, forming a family she often referred

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to as "The Rainbow Tribe." When Ms. Baker died in 1975, more than 20,000 people crowded the streets of Paris to watch the funeral procession. The French government honored her with a 21-gun salute, making Josephine Baker the first American woman buried in France with military honors.

About The August Wilson Center for African American Culture

The August Wilson Center for African American Culture presents, interprets and preserves the art, culture and history of African Americans in Pittsburgh and of people of African descent throughout the world. The Center realizes its mission with an engaging schedule of visual and performing arts programs as well as educational and public programs. The programs of the Center's 2005-2006 season are supported by lead gifts from The Heinz Endowments, The Pittsburgh Foundation and The PNC Financial Services Group. More information is available at www.augustwilsoncenter.org.

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