



Famed boogie-woogie pianist embroiders her performances with her own hand-crafted art

Description

Caroline Dahl has never forgotten the glamorous, red-haired woman in a sequined dress she saw at a fancy new restaurant in Louisville, Kentucky, where her Great Aunt May was treating her to a meal. Dahl was five at the time. The woman was playing the piano.



Dahl playing at the Motor City Blues & Boogie-woogie Festival in 2003. (Photo courtesy of Caroline Dahl)

“I was thunderstruck when I looked up at the stage,” recalled [Dahl](#), now 74. “I think that tapped into something in me — a desire to play the piano and perform.”

Dahl began piano lessons at 12. As an adult, she earned wide recognition as performer of [boogie-woogie](#), rhythm and blues, zydeco and cajun on local and international festival circuits. And she has her

own distinctive style of dress. At performances, like the annual “Flower Piano” at the Botanical Garden in Golden Gate Park, she often wears one of five “boogie-woogie” jackets that she’s hand-embroidered “as colorful as the surrounding blooms.

In what became something of a dual career, she also can claim fame as the creator of intricate, [embroidered works of art](#) that have won her awards in the fiber arts community. A profusion of detail and color, they also display Dahl’s satirical sense of humor, as in her “Covid 19 Terror Sampler” and “Welcome to Hell: Here’s Your Playlist.” Though small, they sell for from \$800 to \$3,500 and have been shown in galleries and purchased by museums. She also sells their images as greeting cards.



Caroline Dahl, in one of her signature embroidered jackets, playing at the Headlands Center for The Arts Annual Benefit Art Auction in 2024. (Photo by Ravas for Drew Altizer Photography)



Dahl in her Russian Hill condo with one of her framed embroideries resting on her piano. Below, three of her four CDs, whose covers are her embroidery works. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

Sheâ??s still making embroideries, sometimes two at a time. â??I like embroidery because of its lush texture and color, because it doesnâ??t require many tools, or any machines,â?• she said. And the small frame fits her hands â??so I can work anywhere.â?•

Sheâ??s also still performing and has four CDs of her boogie-woogie piano. â??I will continue playing professionally until the wheels come off,â?• she said.



Her website lists [23 gigs](#) since April around the Bay Area with local music scene veterans [Tom Rigney and Flambeau](#), and numerous solo performances across the country. Upcoming shows in California include the [Yerba Buena Gardens Festival](#), with Rigney's band, on Sept. 11th and the [Flower Piano 10th Anniversary](#) on Sept. 21.

Dahl was raised in the bluegrass state, known for its bourbon and the Kentucky Derby, where her father was a chemist and manager for Seagram's and her mother an attorney. She maintains her lilting drawl even though she's lived in San Francisco for more than 40 years, 34 of them in her condo in lower Russian Hill. She lives alone but has a partner of 30 years. She met Jamie Garner, a lawyer and amateur musician, at a Kentucky Derby party in Occidental, California.

A teenage passion

She studied classical piano from age 12 through 14 and played flute in her junior high band. She remembers her excitement watching musical greats on television: Leonard Bernstein and his young people's concerts and Liberace on the piano. But soon enough a passion for rock and roll steamrolled classical.



“Welcome to Hell: Here’s Your Playlist,” one of Dahl’s embroidered pieces.
Photo courtesy of Caroline Dahl)

“I came to boogie-woogie music by first listening in my teens to rock ‘n roll on my little transistor radio I always had pressed to my ear,” she said. “I realized later that my favorite musicians, like Fats Domino, Ray Charles and Jerry Lee Lewis, to name a few, learned from the great boogie-woogie masters of the ‘30s and ‘40s.”

At the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Dahl went to concerts, smoked pot, she said, and made friends from all over the country, expanding her experiences. By this time, she had become good enough at piano to earn an income teaching at Lexington’s adult education program.



To this day, Dahl favors bright colors, whether at home or performing. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in English in 1972, like many of her generation, she went to India. She traveled alone for four months, saturating herself in the country's colors, particularly on a stay on a moored houseboat on Dal Lake in Kashmir. "Waking up, the sun would hit the red brocade curtains and throw the dancing water images in red inside my bedroom."

Tragedy struck when Dahl returned home: Her mother got sick and died at 52. "Our relationship wasn't the best, so in order to create a balm for it, I decided to pursue sewing, as my mom had been

an expert tailor," she said. Using her mother's sewing machine, which she still has, she made clothes then became more interested in quilting and later embroidery.

"When I was a hippie, I had bought a lot of clothes from Mexico with spectacular embroidery and when In India I became enthralled with their vibrant fabrics," she said. "Everything came together, and I started making quilts, which I did for about the next five years."

Self-taught artist

Then she started teaching herself embroidery, using [The Encyclopedia of Needlework](#). After just one year, she entered her first juried show, hosted by the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, where she worked part-time on the information desk. Titled "The Trapeze Girl," a broadcasting company paid her \$500 for it in the early 70s.

"I was thrilled, and it made me feel I could make something of this," she said.

She sells most of her pieces at shows, both juried and self-produced, throughout the U.S. and Europe as well as on her [website](#), although all but two pieces have been sold. [Les Musees d'Angers](#), in France purchased one of her pieces for its permanent collection. This year, she won first and second prize in the fiber arts category at the California State Fair.



Dahl's "Uncle Pappy's Day" won first place in the fiber arts category at the California State Fair this year. (Photo courtesy of Caroline Dahl)

Her first embroidery sale, to the broadcasting company, coincided with her first break as a performing musician with the band Gee Whiz, which played originals, contemporary rock covers and a lot of Beatles music. "The manager had talked my mother into letting me join the band, and into fronting the cost for my Mighty Farfisa, a piano with kind of an organ honky-tonk sound," she said.



Dahl playing in 2015 in Clearwater, Florida. (Photo courtesy of Caroline Dahl)

Dahl persevered and caught more breaks. After moving to San Francisco in 1978, she got gigs with bands that played now-mostly defunct San Francisco clubs, like The Mabuhay Gardens, Julie's Supper Club, Grant on Green and Major Pond's. "Everyone played at The Saloon on Grant, still standing," she said.

From then on professional music was her main ambition. She was always clear about the things she didn't want to do. "I never had a full-time job," she said. "I only ever worked part-time day jobs until I could support myself as a professional musician."

She has supported herself playing the piano [since 1990](#).

"As anyone who has ever played in a band will tell you, the feeling you get when everyone in the band is on the same page, playing as a cohesive group for an enthusiastic audience, it's a feeling like no other," Dahl said.

Fans in Europe

Dahl took a sabbatical from San Francisco in the mid-80s to care for her ailing father in Louisville, making arrangements to play with [The Metropolitan Blues All-Stars](#). The band was headed by a Nick

Stump, a “still great friend,” from her college days. She played with them for two years in the Mid-West and South. Together, they put out three albums.



Dahl with Jean-Paul Amouroux, blues and boogie-woogie pianist and festival artistic director, at the 22nd International Boogie-woogie Festival in La Roquebrou, France, in 2022. (Photo courtesy of Caroline Dahl)

In 1989, she moved back to San Francisco, working full-time as a musician. She often played with the Bay Area bands [Rhythmtown-Jive](#), and [The Rhythm Sheiks](#). She also played a variety of solo gigs, including Sunday brunches for more than 25 years at the now-closed Mama’s Royal Café in Mill

Valley.

For the past 20 years, Dahl has played piano with Rigney's band, which specializes in Zydeco and Cajun, across the U.S. and internationally. She has also played solo at venues in the U.S. as well as boogie-woogie festivals in Belgium, France, Spain and Switzerland.

"Europeans go crazy for boogie-woogie because they didn't have that music originally," Dahl said.

Dahl still pinches herself at the career she's managed. "I grew up in an atmosphere that never suggested that I might end up doing something fun or rewarding for a living", she said.

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jrobbins

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