

Baby Jane Dexter, cabaret singer who brought tortured poignancy to torch songs, dies at 72

By [Matt Schudel](#)

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Baby Jane Dexter, a cabaret singer who overwhelmed audiences with her robust vocal style and eclectic repertoire and who brought a tortured sense of poignancy to torch songs, died May 21 at a retirement facility for entertainers in Englewood, N.J. She was 72.

She had diabetes, heart ailments and an infection, said a sister, Dallas-Lee Brower.

Ms. Dexter first gained acclaim in the 1970s, when she appeared in New York nightclubs as a bluesy singer with a powerful voice and presence.

She dropped out of show business for a decade before returning to the stage in the 1990s, using elements from her personal life — her size, her experience of sexual assault and depression — to heighten the emotional intensity of her performances, which were often so intimate that they seemed to be exercises in group therapy.

“Baby Jane Dexter wields an eerie power and glory rarely found on a cabaret stage,” critic John Hoggland wrote in *Back Stage East* in 2006. “She has the uncanny ability to unearth new meaning in evergreens and to personalize torchy ballads with a sense of hope. There are few people in cabaret capable of expressing such depth of feeling.”

Ms. Dexter once appeared in the Broadway production of “Hair” and, early in her career, sang in rock and blues bands as a would-be Janis Joplin. After turning to cabaret, she drew on material from across the musical universe, not just Broadway show tunes. She seamlessly blended songs associated with Bessie Smith, Frank Sinatra, Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, [Abbey Lincoln](#), the Beatles, Stephen Sondheim, Tom Waits, Rufus Wainwright and the Four Tops.

“What I’m about is not a particular category,” Ms. Dexter told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1993. “To me, the music is what comes first. I don’t look for any particular kinds of tunes, I look for songs that say something to me, and then I try to find the way that I can do them — musically and lyrically.”

She developed a new show each year, but audiences came to recognize her signature songs as slowed-down, introspective readings of Bob Dylan’s “Forever Young” and R.E.M.’s “Everybody Hurts”:

When you’re sure you’ve had enough

Of this life

Well hang on

Don’t let yourself go

Cause everybody cries

And everybody hurts sometimes

“She had a real commitment to storytelling,” her longtime pianist, Ross Patterson, said Wednesday in an interview. “She chose songs that spoke to her lyrically. There was something she needed to say in those lyrics.”

After restarting her career in 1991, Ms. Dexter headlined at cabaret and jazz clubs in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Washington. She released several albums and was, *Billboard* magazine noted, “a perfect example of raw talent on the verge of becoming a star.”

Beyond the world of cabaret, the stardom never came. Increasingly beset by health problems, financial worries and emotional turmoil, Ms. Dexter nonetheless managed to channel those anxieties into her raw, painfully honest performances.

“She was angry, emotionally fragile, yet onstage she was this force of nature,” James Gavin, author of “Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret,” said in an interview. “She had been through such tremendous personal struggle. Singing is what saved her.”

Jane Nesbitt Dexter — who always gave her age as “timeless” — was born Aug. 4, 1946, in Baltimore. She grew up mostly in Garden City, N.Y., where her father was a dermatologist and her mother a physical education teacher and actress.

Ms. Dexter had a flair for music and acting “out of the womb,” her sister said. Because her mother, also named Jane Dexter, was part of the actors’ union, she had to get a different stage name, ultimately settling on Baby Jane Dexter.

During her teens, she was sexually assaulted and also sustained what her family later recognized as an undiagnosed brain injury from a motorcycle accident. While trying to get established in cabaret in the 1970s, she drove a taxicab and held other jobs. Through the 1980s, she had a long, abusive relationship with a heroin addict and gained an immense amount of weight.

“I got lost. I got derailed, depressed,” she told the *Los Angeles Times*. “I had that thing where you lie there and you know that all you have to do is stand up and put one foot in front of the other to get moving again. But I couldn’t stop staring at the ceiling long enough to stand up.”

At the urging of friends, she broke free of the relationship and returned to performing. During her cabaret shows, her banter with her audiences often turned confessional. She also led music therapy and counseling programs for at-risk teens around the country.

Survivors include two sisters, Dallas-Lee Brower of Barrow, Alaska, and Kim-Tucker Archer of Round Hill, Va.; and a brother, Scott Dexter of Garden City.

To Ms. Dexter, the years of depression and bad relationships were not entirely futile.

“Every amount of wasted time,” she told the *New York Daily News* in 1996, “every poor choice, every mistake, every single thing that happened to me went into making me understand who I am and what I am. That’s why I came

back to singing again. It was really about moving forward.”

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Matt Schudel has been an obituary writer at The Washington Post since 2004. He previously worked for publications in Washington, New York, North Carolina and Florida. [Follow](#) 
