



Tip of the Hat

From classic caps to Kentucky Derby dazzlers, Polly Singer designs distinctive millinery couture to top off myriad outfits with the perfect finishing touch.

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Polly Singer is no stranger to wearing multiple hats—all while crafting and selling them. After years spent in jobs that spanned the music industry, nonprofit organizations, and other realms, the celebrated designer behind Polly Singer Couture Hats has found her calling in artful headwear, plus complementary ventures such as tea, etiquette, and travel.

It all started in the early '90s when the Kentucky native was working at a performance rights company in New York City. Craving a creative outlet, she began taking millinery classes at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) after a hair catastrophe led her to don an over-the-top hat that elicited unexpected raves.

“It was funny the way people reacted to the hat. They were like, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s so cool.’ It just hit me that hats are wearable sculptures,” recalls Polly, whose handiwork has since been displayed at Louisville’s KMAC Museum and New York City’s American Craft Museum. “They’re kind of a door opener. People will say, ‘I like your hat,’ and it’s a conversation starter.”

While at FIT, Polly interned with renowned hatter Patricia Underwood, assisting with designs for movies like *Austin Powers* and *Speed 2: Cruise Control*, before she launched her own small business. She returned to her home state in 1998, where the Kentucky Derby quickly made its mark on her company and vice versa.

Based in Georgetown, an hour from Louisville, Polly’s offerings for the event range from striking oversize hats and saucers to intricate fascinators and perchers, adorned with swaths of ribbon and veiling, boisterous feathers, bold florals, and beyond. While the Derby dominated her work for many years, the 2011 royal wedding upped interest in



British-style bridal headwear, and Polly’s recent addition of casual pieces—such as traditional upturned hats, chic fedoras, and cloches—has been a big hit.

“Over the years, [the Derby] was everything. March, April, and early May were crazy—16- to 18-hour days. Now, the casual [line] has really supplemented and taken over,” Polly says. “I’m busy year-round, and it’s more balanced. But the Derby is always fun. People will go all out in something really wild. Their fashion inhibitions just fly out the window.”

She often tailors standard designs to meet customers’ needs or creates

completely personalized orders using her 10-step Singer Method. “There are about 10 questions I ask to really get to know the client and their comfort level,” Polly explains. “Who’s their fashion icon? What are their favorite movies? Who’s their favorite designer? It’s almost like a personality assessment to find out as much as I can about them to make something they’ll feel very confident in.”

When designing, Polly factors in the Pantone color of the year and chooses a theme. During the pandemic and its travel restrictions, she’s channeled her wanderlust into seasonal collections influenced by Italy’s Amalfi Coast, the



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Scottish Highlands, and more. “I’ll travel through my hats,” she says with a laugh. A number of pieces are also inspired by and named for real women, from Aretha Franklin (who once complimented one of Polly’s creations) and Clara Barton to groundbreaking scientists and aviators as well as queens and empresses.

In the last couple of years, Polly has gotten to know her client base even better after becoming a certified etiquette consultant for afternoon tea and facilitating events like Tea with Polly classes via Zoom. “A lot of women like hats and want to be able to wear them,” says Polly, who just released a line of teas with names such as Earl Grey’s Top Hat. “Tea events give ladies a chance to wear their hats and connect—kind of an escape to dress up and meet new people.”

Fostering such a community is central to Polly’s passion, and she hopes to nurture it with efforts like her newest endeavor, Elite British Tours, where she plans to lead excursions to sites including Royal Ascot and *Downton Abbey’s* Highclere Castle. “It’s about the hats, but it’s also about the people,” she says. “When they wear one of my hats, I want them to feel beautiful—like a million dollars.”

For info, visit hatsandveils.net. To enter a giveaway featuring Polly’s new tea line, go to southernlady.com.