

Gypsy woman

KATHY ROBERTS BEGAN PLAYING THE DRUM FOR BELLY DANCERS, AND NOW HEADS A FUSION BAND THAT FEATURES A FASCINATING (IF UNNAMED) SOUND. BY ANTON WISHIK

Kathy Roberts shakes her head with a small laugh when asked to identify the genre of her new music, which started with her playing the Egyptian tabla for West Michigan belly dancers and now includes flute, saxophone and guitar - decidedly non-Middle Eastern instruments.

She has been asked this question many a time in the past two years, and is hearing it even more now that her group has released its first CD, the self-titled "Ensemble Al-Asdeka."

As she ponders the question she perches on a stool in the recording studio of Robyn Robins, who used to play keyboards

in Bob Seger's Silver Bullet Band and now records musicians who fly in from all over the world - most notably the acclaimed albums "Celtic Woman I" and "Celtic Woman II." While Roberts considers her answer, Robins is playing around at his million-dollar recording console, preparing to demonstrate some of the tricks of his trade.

"Well ...," Roberts begins, and then she ticks off a list of just a few of the monikers for her music: "Ethno folkjazz, world folk jazz, Middle Eastern fusion, psyche-folk, psyche-belly dance - that's 'psyche' as in psychedelic, not psychology."

"Really it's Chaldean," says Robins, who, it turns out, has

been searching for the name on the Internet rather than playing with his recording devices. "That's the proper way to describe your music: alternative Chaldean."

Which provides an answer only to the few who know that Chaldea is an ancient term for ancient Babylon, and the name now refers to the music played by Assyrians - Assyria also being a country that no longer exists, though Chaldean is used to describe an ethnic group whose origins lie in what today is Iraq, Iran, Syria - and Turkey.

Roberts tries to explain: "So many bands play Middle Eastern music in a traditional way. We use jazz riffs. It's traditional music reworked, but the arrangements are totally original."

The jazz riffs started about three years ago when she went from a solo drummer to playing with jazz guitarist D. Adam Estner. "He's an unusual guitarist, played Brazilian style and studied at Berklee (College of Music in Boston)," Roberts says. "He's not the standard

Jazz guy." The two were playing at an open mike at Billy's when a thin guy with long hair came up and said he liked



Ensemble Al-Asdeka

CATEGORY: Umm ... see story.

HISTORY: Current lineup formed in 2006; "Ensemble Al-Asdeka" released Dec. 24, 2007.

GEOGRAPHY: Hailing from Grand Rapids. **PARITY:** For fans of Baba

Zula, the Mermen, Dick Dale; Santana meets Lawrence of Arabia, or Rodrigo y Gabriela for belly dance.

CURIOSITY: "Ensemble Al-Asdeka" is available at Schuler Books & Music and cdbaby.com, where it is an editor's pick.

CONTACT: al-asdeka.com or enter alasdeka at Myspace.

their sound. Recalls Roberts: "Adam said to me, 'Do you know who that is?' Jocko! Grab him.'

Jocko would be Dan Giacobazzi, considered by many local musicians to be the best sax and flute player around these parts.

"And he agreed to play with us!" Roberts exclaimed.

Thus was Ensemble Al-Asdeka born, also including violinist Natalie Beverslius, who is on the CD but no longer with the band.

Al-Asdeka - which means "of friends" in Arabic - is now getting airplay on radio stations in about 30 countries, including Argentina, Australia, the Central African Republic, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Macedonia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland and Turkey.

Roberts - who when she first contacted Robins described her band as "just nobody" - seems genuinely surprised that she attracts musicians like Estner and Giacobazzi and record producers like Robins. But they are not at all surprised.

"I'm always looking for somebody innovative - art," Robins says. "I like the idea of taking a guitar and emulating a sitar or mandolin. And the sax, flute, fiddle ... with Egyptian drums? I've never done this combination before."

The band still accompanies belly dancers but is not playing the typical bar circuit, instead booking gigs at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Haven Seafood and Oyster Bar, and Celebration on the Grand Sept. 7. (That's a lot of "grands.")

Roberts first took up the tabla and other Middle Eastern drums while living in North Africa - Algeria with her family. She already played piano. "I heard a lot of music and cut my teeth on the Arabic scale," she says.

She returned to the States to go to college - she has chemistry and math degrees from Aquinas - and to raise a family, but she also sought out some of the best tabla teachers in the U.S., learning to master the single drum which "can get about a drum set's worth of tones."

"It takes hours and hours before you teach this drum to play itself," she

says, explaining that "there's not a lot of

muscular thought; it just comes out of the hand."

Roberts now works at Gentex as a research chemist, but in promoting her music takes a tongue-in-cheek dig at her profession and the rest of the burgeoning life sciences industry in West Michigan: "We want to let people know

there's more to this area than the medical field."

Robins, whose hands are always going on his recording console, chimes in again:

"That's it!" he exclaims. "This chick's a chemist and she does Chaldean! During the day she's a chemist - and at night she is a mad gypsy woman! " **GR**