

By Jessica English

She's Got Rhythm

Wherever Carolyn plays, it seems she's always pushing the envelope.

Carolyn Koebel sees herself as a co-creator. As a percussionist for such diverse groups as Fonn Mor, BLuE DaHLia, Brothers Kalamazov and Dunuya Drum & Dance, she helps create rhythm and inspiring performances. As a hospice music therapist, she helps to create a peaceful, meaningful space in the last days of life. As a program facilitator for Red Tent/Girls in the Wild, she helps create a space where teen girls can nurture their true selves and find the strength to be confident and courageous. And those activities only scratch the surface—there's much more to Carolyn Koebel.

Known for her passion for world music and her commitment to volunteerism, co-creator Carolyn has become a fixture of the Kalamazoo music scene, a sort of go-to percussionist for everything from last-minute gigs to rousing kids' events and community drumming circles. "I play music because it fills my heart with joy, and I want to share that with others, and invite them into this same experience," she said. If you're talking about music and drumming in Kalamazoo, you've got to know Carolyn Koebel.

Developing Her Musical Talent

Carolyn's interest in percussion started around age 7, when she went to see her sister perform in a band

concert. Her sister played clarinet, but Carolyn wasn't particularly interested in what her sister was playing. It was the drums that captured her attention.

"I couldn't take my eyes off the drummers; they had all these cool drums and got to play tons of different instruments," Carolyn said. "I was one of those kids who was always fiercely determined, and I immediately fixated on the drums. I begged for a drum for Christmas."

The drum arrived under the tree.

Carolyn had already been playing guitar, so she knew how to read music and understood the basic concepts of rhythm. Private drum lessons soon followed, although that instructor moved away a few years later. As she moved through elementary and high school in her hometown of Three Oaks, Mich., Carolyn played in the band and became involved in some regional honors groups and camps.

As she neared graduation, Carolyn started thinking through her career options. She'd had surgery a few years prior for scoliosis, and she toyed with the idea of pursuing physical or occupational therapy. In researching her options, she stumbled across music therapy.

"I thought this might be the best of both worlds," Carolyn recalls. "I signed up to be a music-therapy major, sort of sight unseen. But as I started to learn more about the field, it turned out to be an excellent match."

As she moved through the music therapy program at Western Michigan University, Carolyn also started to learn more about world music, an interest sparked by an amazing performance she'd seen by renowned

Carolyn Koebel (right), Nazanin Maghsoodi, and Tom Machowicz perform a frame drum trio at the Kalamazoo College Percussion Collage Concert.





percussionist and frame drummer Glen Velez. She'd found over the years that orchestral music didn't really speak to her soul. But this music—this music with its simple elegance and ancient voice—this music called to her.

After finishing her bachelor's degree in music therapy at WMU in 1997, Carolyn decided to take a year off to work and travel. She had put herself through school as a waitress, and now that work remained pivotal to create a cash flow that allowed her to travel around the country and study with some of the top world musicians.

"I'd identify people that I wanted to take lessons from, really accomplished masters," she said. "I'd call them up and say that I was going to be in their city, and could I come for a lesson? Everyone was so receptive and absolutely willing to share."

Those generous musicians included a master in Arabic percussion in San Francisco, a renowned Afro-Cuban drummer in New York, and an Indian percussion teacher in Chicago.

That year solidified Carolyn's passion for world music and led her to the graduate program at Michigan State University where she felt like she could explore a more medical and improvisational model of music therapy and also get more exposure to world music.

At MSU she connected with master drummers in residence from West Africa and Cuba. Carolyn became very involved in those two styles of drumming, and also struck up a friendship with a fellow student, an Indian drummer who was willing to share his tradition with her as well. And there was also the classmate with a background in Brazilian samba music with whom she started a samba band.

"A lot of times I was the only white, American woman in my classes," Carolyn recalled. "I was surrounded by these peers from countries around the world who were bringing all these different perspectives from their cultures. And I was starting to develop this unique identity as a music therapist who was also a skilled percussionist. That's not a really common combination. Graduate school became the culmination of all these things I had wanted to find, in one place."

An Eclectic Career

If Carolyn's musical tastes can be considered eclectic, you could apply the same adjective to her career. Since earning her master's degree from MSU in 2001, her endeavors might be divided into three main categories: teaching, music therapy and performance.

Immediately after earning her master's degree, Carolyn returned to Western Michigan University as

an adjunct professor of music therapy. She enjoys working with young men and women in that formative stage in their lives, remembering what that journey was like for her, too, not so long ago. In addition, for the past three years she has also worked at Kalamazoo College as the director of international percussion.

Over the years Carolyn has used her music-therapy skills in a variety of settings, including working with people with autism and developmental disabilities and at-risk youth. But what has really captured her heart in the past five years has been her work with Hospice Care of Southwest Michigan. Carolyn shares music with people who are dying and talks with them about the music that has touched their lives. The hospice work has prompted her to learn more about the music of the 1920s, '30s and '40s, genres she says she might not have otherwise explored so in-depth.

"This was the time of the Rat Pack and all of those wonderful crooners and glorious big bands and beautiful, complicated melodies," Carolyn said. "It's not simple, by any means, to recreate that

sound and feeling as one person with a guitar.

"But it's so amazing when you really put the time in and can craft the music so you can play it with the respect that it's due. You get to the place where the person receives it with joy and acceptance, and that's a great feeling, knowing that this may be one of the last musical experiences this person has in this life."

The memories of those songs recall, for her clients, that first kiss, or a dance or other precious memories that weave together the tapestry of a lifetime. She'd never been a big fan of American music, but her work at hospice has brought her to a new appreciation for early-American folk and Southern gospel.

"My clients have become my teachers," she said.

Carolyn has also taken her music-therapy work to the national stage, working with a team of four other percussionists who are also music therapists. They've created "Music Therapy Drumming," a curriculum that teaches music therapists to effectively use drums, percussion instruments, and traditional

rhythms within the music-therapy setting. The program is offered several times a year at national conferences and other locations.

While the music therapy and teaching work might be enough to fill an average musician's docket, Carolyn is also an active performer both regionally and nationally, with a handful of bands. Among other projects, she's a founding member of BLuE DaHLia, a world fusion group that writes and performs music to accompany silent films.

Wherever Carolyn plays, it seems she's always pushing the envelope. As a percussionist with Fonn Mor, an Irish world-beat dance band, she helps to recreate today's Celtic music, which she feels took a wrong turn when it was popularized with basic rock beats.

"Why would you do that to such great music?" Carolyn asked. "These Celtic melodies and tunes deserve some really happening West African and Arabic rhythms. That rock beat is really familiar to Western audiences, but I'd rather challenge the listener with something new. Some people are surprised by Fonn Mor's sound; they say, 'I've never heard percussion done like that with this kind of music. Why don't more people do it that way?'"

With Dunuya Drum & Dance, Carolyn and her fellow performers focus on the music of West Africa and Diaspora, which includes Cuba, the Caribbean, North Africa and Brazil. The group has a big focus on community and audience interaction. Audience members aren't just observers, they are likely to be singing, dancing, or playing instruments right alongside the performers.

A Commitment to Community

That community focus has been key for Carolyn throughout her career. She wants people not just to listen to music, but to experience it in their own bodies, in a deep and meaningful way.

She's especially drawn to working with children, and she has led performances and open-drum events at the

Carolyn stops for a mango shake in Dangriga, Belize, with Maroon Creole drum master Emmett Young (left) and her longtime Dunya Drum & Dance collaborator, Calvin Ruff.



Kalamazoo Valley Museum and with Dunuya Drum & Dance at the Kzoo Baby & Family Expo, the Kalamazoo Psychiatric Hospital's Summer Fest, and the Red Tent/Girls in the Wild program. In addition, Carolyn has used her drumming skills at MRC Industries with adults who have developmental disabilities.

Another manifestation of that community spirit has been the community drum and dance jams that Carolyn has hosted for the past 10 years. The Kalamazoo Open Drum and Dance Jam is held monthly at Fire! on Portage Road. People of all ages and abilities can come with their own instruments or use Carolyn's drums. The intent is to simply share in the beauty of making music together. And while Carolyn does ask for a small donation to help fund other programs at Fire!, no one is ever turned away.

The connection of music to money has been a complex issue for Carolyn. Certainly, she needs and appreciates money to live, but she also wants to offer great musical experiences to those who don't have financial resources. To reconcile that conflict, she hosts programs like the community drum jam, and encourages the groups she works with to take on occasional free or very low-paying gigs when it's clear that they serve the community.

"Some performers become self-absorbed and they don't have much soft-heartedness for the rest of humanity," she said. "I don't want to be one of those performers who can't be bothered, or who would rather stay home than play a gig that doesn't meet the minimum pay requirements."

Satisfying Her Creative Muse

Similar criteria guide Carolyn's decision-making process about which bands to play with, or what kind of music to choose. Some colleagues have opted to audition for big touring acts, or play with groups that specialize in cover songs in dark bars. She's done those kinds of gigs in her life, but finds they just don't stir her soul.

"Once it feels like a job with a defined role, once the creativity is gone, I start to question how a project is feeding me in positive ways," she said. "It's a cost-benefit analysis. At a certain point, if there aren't enough of those returns coming in, it's not a project I'm going to pursue."

Carolyn seeks out those projects that feed her creativity, but to keep that energy flowing she also tries to connect with other musicians who inspire her. It's not always easy to nurture a love of world music in Southwest Michigan, so Carolyn takes periodic trips around the world to learn from masters and hone her skills. Shortly after earning her master's degree from Michigan State, she studied and traveled with a former professor in Ghana, West Africa, and in 2005 she made a study trip to Salvador, Brazil. Two years later, she traveled to Belize with her Dunuya Drum & Dance cohort, Calvin Ruff. There, Carolyn studied with drumming master Emmett Young, who was the keeper of a local drum tradition in a small, rural village.

"Emmett is like the village drum shaman for this Maroon Creole culture,"

The music therapy drumming trainers, Michael Marcionetti, Kalani, Carolyn Koebel, and Bill Matney, pose after an opening night gala performance at the American Music Therapy Association Conference in San Diego last fall.



Carolyn noted.

And just this year, Carolyn traveled to Turkey to research an ancient tradition of music therapy in Istanbul, study with a variety of percussion masters, and explore a number of different musical and cultural celebrations.

Looking at the breadth and depth of Carolyn's work, one might wonder how she could possibly find the time to do so much. But when you build a life around doing what you love, she said, it's energizing.

"I don't like watching TV, and I'm not big on going to the movies, but there's always music," she said. "It's not just true for me; a lot of musicians I know are really immersed in their craft, and music is just what feels right—it's the thing you crave to be doing."

"Playing music is really like breathing for me. It's life."

Try your hand at the drums with Carolyn Koebel. No experience needed! Come at any time throughout the evening of Sunday, April 11 and May 2, during Kalamazoo Open Drum and Dance family hour from 7–8 p.m. or during general open-drum time, from 8–10 p.m., at Fire, 1249 Portage Rd. A donation of \$3–5 per person or \$10 per family would be appreciated. ☐