



PROFILE: ROCKIN' RABBI ROBBI

RABBI-CANTOR ROBBI SHERWIN

STORY BY DAWNE BELLOISE | PHOTOS BY LYDIA STERN



She's onstage slamming on a blue mandolin while the guitarist picks off tasty riffs and the rest of her band sets a steady Americana rock groove. And yes, the crowd appears to go wild. With five CDs released, two of those solo, three with the band and a fourth band CD in the works, Cantor Robbi Sherwin is somewhat of a legend and certainly a rock star in the Jewish music world.

In an installation ceremony last week, Rabbi Robbi's now also the very first female rabbi of Crested Butte and the B'nai Butte congregation, where she's been their spiritual leader for seven years. Although she doesn't live here full-time, Rabbi Robbi is an integral part of this community, flying in from Austin every month, on high holidays and special events. Her band is Sababa, which means cool or awesome in Israeli/Arabic vernacular.

"I play guitar and mandolin," she says and explains further, "The reason I have a part-time pulpit in Crested Butte is because the band is a crucial part of my identity as a spiritual and spirited Jew. I've been writing songs since I was 12." She notes that she taught herself to play the instruments. Today, she's one of the top published female Jewish songwriters in the country. "My one thing that I do really well is that I can sing harmony to anything. Sababa is known as the Jewish Crosby, Stills and Nash. "This was a dream for me. We play in front of thousands of people. We sing in Hebrew, English and Spanish," she says with joy.

Robbi grew up with an Air Force dad, who, she jokes, was a rare Jewish officer who wasn't in one of those typical professions of doctor or lawyer. The family was stationed all over the country and the four siblings were usually the only Jews in the schools they attended in the 1960s. "We took our holidays off even though the schools wouldn't recognize our religion." She recalls her parents having to take the matter of their practice all the way to school board.

She tells of schoolmates who didn't understand the religion. They endured ridicule, harassment and even bricks thrown through their windows, but Robbi strongly feels, "I do not define my childhood by the negative things that happened. I had a very 1960s stay-at-home mom and dad was in Vietnam when I was in sixth grade.

"That time was scary. I was aware of the anti-war protests and when he returned he was hated," she says of those trying times. She considered her father a hero and so did the United States, as he was awarded multiple honors, including the Medal of Honor for service in Vietnam as the navigator of the historically storied aircraft, Patches.