



Ann Arborite Robin Robinson

From Broadway to teaching toddlers

by [Susan Todoroff](#)

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In the Dakota building on West Stadium, nine-month-old twins Alexander and Sadi Jacobson sit, wide-eyed, on their parents' laps, while mom and dad sway enthusiastically from side to side and belt out a song about driving in the car. A dozen other parents, also holding babies and toddlers, do the same, all keeping their eye on the leader, Robin Robinson. Tall and thin, red-haired and freckled, Robinson, arms constantly in motion, croons at the top of her lungs.

This is "Robinsongs for Kids"--a class created by the former New York singer to hook the preschool set on music. Too often, Robinson believes, "We just consume music at home by putting on an iPod or watching it on TV or listening to it in the car.

"The child picks up their disposition towards music from the parents. So if they are engaged and having fun, the child is more likely to do the same."

Now forty-four, Robinson graduated from the intense and competitive U-M musical theater program in 1987. She moved to New York, pounded the pavement, and after a year and a half landed a small part as a "Hollywood blonde" in the 1989 revival of *Gypsy*. "I cried all the way home on the subway, and I walked in the door and my sister was there," she recalls. "At first she looked terrified because I was crying...I said, 'No, it's good--I'm going to be on Broadway!' "

After *Gypsy*, she worked in many smaller regional productions and did a six-month gig in Germany in the musical *My One and Only*. Robinson also started a

band and eventually began teaching music to kids, using materials from a curriculum called Music Together, which emphasizes parental involvement.

Two decades after she arrived in Manhattan as an eager ingenue, Robinson began experiencing middle-age burnout. "As time went on, the rejections wore on me," she recalls. "There were some shows that I was really right for, that I auditioned for a lot, and I got

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really, really close--and that was hard," she says. "The rejection was harder as it went along." The crunch of big city life also got to her--being "smushed in with people like sardines in the subway." She stayed as long as she did mainly because of her friends and her rent-stabilized apartment in the now trendy Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, not far from Central Park.

Since she knew music, she decided to open her own children's program, under the guidelines of Music Together, teaching kids ages five and under. Robinson returned to Ann Arbor in 2008, and Robinsongs for Kids was born. Targeted for parents and kids from babies to kindergartners, the classes run for twelve weeks and cost \$220, with reduced prices for siblings.

Babies may seem too young to be learning music, but "it's amazing to watch them develop in the class," says Mark Jacobson, father of the awestruck twins and programming manager for the University Musical Society. "We've seen them become more alert and engaged, and Robin is amazing. She brings enthusiasm every single week."

Robinson recalls a one-year-old girl who for weeks would just stare at all the older kids, thumb securely in mouth. "Just recently she took her thumb out of her mouth and started playing the instruments and actually trying to do the movements," she says. "It's like all of a sudden they think, 'I can do this stuff!'"

For the parents, it helps that Robinsongs' music is nothing like the singsong Barney tunes that make so many grownups cringe. The music conjures up African beats, Latin rhythms, and Indian music, keeping it sophisticated enough to engage adults. "We use five/four key signatures, different tonalities, and different rhythms that are not typical," says Robinson.

Robinson, single with no children, is in her element leading the group. As a preamble to a song about a sad little puppy, she howls like a dog, face to the sky. She gestures wildly during a song, "Stick Dance,"

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that's done in an unusual rhythm pattern. But she manages to be silly without being condescending. "Kids know phoniness," she says, "and I cannot do that, because it's not authentic." Most songs are sung a capella and the energy is nonstop, with one song merging right into the next.

When Robinson announces "dance time," an up-tempo Rihanna song gets the adults moving unabashedly across the dance floor. Parents hold tight to their little ones, while the toddlers try to emulate their parents, and song time morphs into a wild dance party.

For the grand finale, Robinson brings out colorful percussion instruments for everyone to bang on. Even the babies hold them. Robinson encourages the kids to find their own beat rather than follow hers. A rhythm free-for-all ensues, with toddlers bouncing around to the noise.

Lullaby time ends the class. Lights dimmed, parents and kids lie down while Robinson plays her acoustic guitar and sings a song called "Sleepyhead."

"It's a lot of stimulus," says Robinson. "Some of them are exhausted afterwards." Indeed, by the end of class, at least one baby has fallen fast asleep in his stroller.