

Lindsay Lou & The Flatbellys come into their own

Roots band to perform Friday at LMC's Hanson Theatre; new album due out Saturday

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
HP Features Writer

BENTON HARBOR — Lindsay Lou and Joshua Rilko, the husband-and-wife core of Lindsay Lou & The Flatbellys, were back-packing Central America's so-called Gringo Highway when they met a man who had the secret to love.

"He told Josh there were three steps to take," Lindsay Lou Rilko says by telephone from her new home in Nashville, Tenn. "The first one was when you're at home and you're making pizza and you have the dough and the flour, just throw a little flour on her. I don't remember the second rule, and Josh says the third rule is a secret that maybe he could tell me one day."

It was that encounter that inspired Rilko to jot down the verse *I met a man by the sea / and he told me the secret to love* that she sings on "Everything Changed," one of eight new songs on the band's 12-track album, "Ionia," due out Saturday — on Valentine's Day. The song also could serve as an



Photo provided

The Inaugural season of the Living Room Series concludes Friday when Lindsay Lou & The Flatbellys, featuring, from left, Joshua Rilko, P.J. George, Lindsay Lou Rilko and Mark Lavengood, perform at 7 p.m. in the Hanson Theatre of the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center. The former Michigan band, which recently relocated to Nashville, officially releases their new album, "Ionia," on Saturday.

anthem for a band that started as a bluegrass outfit in Lansing, and has since evolved into a well-traveled roots ensemble poised for stardom.

"We started as a group of friends in college who liked playing bluegrass music," says Rilko, who performs with her band Friday at Lake Michigan College's

Hanson Theatre in the season finale of its inaugural Living Room Series. "Over time we've come to find our own identity as you do in any craft you undertake."

IF YOU GO

Who: Lindsay Lou & The Flatbellys

When: 7 p.m. Friday

Where: Hanson Theatre, Lake Michigan College Mendel Center, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$15

Contact: 927-1221 or www.lmcmainstage.org

Artist info: www.lindsayloumusic.com

The band's story begins in 2008 when college friends Joshua Rilko and Spencer Cain formed the bluegrass band The Flatbellys, along with Joshua Brand and Jesse Myers. Then Lindsay Lou walked into an open mic at Dagwood's Tavern. The Flatbellys asked her to sing some harmonies, and Lindsay Lou & The Flatbellys was born. They added Keith Billik on the five-string banjo, and Mark Lavengood, a dobro player, followed in 2010.

Lindsay Lou and Joshua Rilko married in 2011 and "Release Your Shrouds" came a year later. Highlighted by the songs "Wonderful You Are" and "Lemon

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Squeazy,” the debut album reached No. 12 on the Folk DJ chart.

In between a relentless touring schedule, Lindsay Lou and Joshua Rilko recorded and released a 12-track duo album, “Time & Luck,” in December 2013. That same month, bassist P.J. George, known for his previous work with Nora Jane Struthers & The Party Line, replaced Billik and Cain. The new foursome of Lindsay Lou and Joshua Rilko, Lavengood and George rushed into The Record Company in Boston to record and release a four-song EP, “Here Between,” in January 2014. That EP features three originals – “The Fix,” “Into Words” and the title cut – as well as a cover of May Erlewine’s “The River Jordan.”

“We wanted to release the EP right away because we didn’t have anything with P.J.,” Rilko says. “P.J. added a lot because he’s such a musical force. Anything he lays his hands on he can play, and he’s a fabulous singer and harmonizes with the best of them. Having his hand on the music has definitely had an effect.”

It’s an effect that can be heard throughout “Ionia,” the first full-length album with George. It was recorded over four days in the dining room of the Rilkos’ then-residence in Ionia, Mich.

“I was inspired by Seth Bernard’s ‘Being This Being,’ which he recorded in a living room at a house in Lansing,” Rilko says. “The sound really moved me in a way that felt real. I’m naturally inclined to respond to music that speaks to realness and truth. So, for this record it was our goal and intention to dive into the soul and spirit of playing to-

gether because we feel like we’ve come into ourselves in a new way.”

They hired Sue Bibeau and Jeff Oehler of Beehive Productions, who traveled to Michigan from upstate New York to record the album.

“They specialize in field recordings so they brought all of their gear,” Rilko says. “They basically brought the studio to our house. We cleared out the dining room space and just played. We did every song live together.”

In addition to “Everything Changed,” the album features standouts such as the opening track, “Hot Hands,” which rabbits playfully between off meters and stop-and-go bass lines, and “Old Songs,” a spirited folk song originally written as a Kickstarter request. There’s also reworked versions of “The Fix,” “Here Between” and “The River Jordan.”

“‘Everything Changed’ we finished in rehearsals just before we recorded,” Rilko says. “Most of the band hadn’t even heard it until then. ‘Hot Hands’ and ‘Old Song’ we put together on tour before we recorded the record.”

While the melody for “Hot Hands” popped into Rilko’s head on that same

backpacking trip, it wasn’t until she was home that the lyrics began to take shape.

“I was talking with a friend of mine about her experiences of being newly in love,” Rilko says. “Josh and I have been together for six years and we’ve been married for three and a half years, but I could relate to everything she was saying. She talked about this look that he gives her when she starts talking about the future. He’s so happy that she’s talking about a future with him. It’s such an exciting thing being in love that I tried to capture.”

The Rilkos, who moved to Nashville three weeks ago, are equally excited about returning to Michigan for the album’s release. In addition to Friday’s show in Benton Harbor, the band’s album release concert is Saturday at Founders Brewing Company in Grand Rapids.

“I think they are all good songs, and they speak to the band’s narrative of what we promote in our identities and ideologies and musical stylings,” Rilko says. “It shows that we’re putting together songs that are fusing all of our influences, and that we have found the freedom to be ourselves.”

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