

# Finding their sound

*The Ragbirds bring world-beat-folk-rock to the Mendel*

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**  
Sight & Sound Editor

**BENTON HARBOR** — When asked about the evolution of her music, Erin Zindle, the front woman of The Ragbirds, struggles to even say the word.

“I don’t want to say it, but it’s almost ... pop,” Zindle says by telephone while traveling to Ann Arbor from a show in St. Louis. “I think what I mean by that is it’s just more accessible than ever. We’re focussing on strong melodies more than before. It’s a reflection of all of our traveling and is just much more rooted. The songwriting feels a lot like coming home.”

When the Ann Arbor-based world-beat-folk-rockers make a tour stop Friday at Lake Michigan College’s Mendel Center to open the Hanson Theatre Living Room Series, they’ll showcase their evolving sound as well as a handful of new tunes from the forthcoming album, “The Threshold & The Hearth,” due in early 2016.

It’s the first album of new music since the birth of Aviva Alice Moore, the now 2-year-old daughter of Zindle and percussionist Randall Moore, who travels with the band.

“She’s been on tour with us since she was 5 weeks old,” Zindle says “She’s now 2 and it just gets better. She’s hilarious. She’s extremely verbal and extremely social. I feel like she deepens our connection with people everywhere we go. It enriches all of our experiences. There’s definitely challenges but the beauty of it outweighs any of the challenges.”

The band has always been a bit of a family affair. In addition to Zindle and Moore, The Ragbirds features Zindle’s brother, guitarist TJ Zindle, bassist Dan Jones and drummer Jon Brown. The band formed in 2005, not long after Zindle met Moore through an African drum circle.

“When we first started dating, we would go busk in the street,” Zindle says. “I’d play Irish and Celtic fiddle and he would back me up with a tambourine, or doumbek and tabla.”

It’s Zindle’s affinity for world music, as



Photo provided

**The Ragbirds, featuring, from left, Randall Moore, Dan Jones, Erin Zindle, Jon Brown and T.J. Zindle, open the Hanson Theatre Living Room Series on Friday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center.**

well as her ability as a vocalist and songwriter who can play everything from the violin and mandolin to the accordion and banjo, that is the musical heart of this ensemble.

Her interest in world music began with her own roots. With two Irish grandmothers, the young violinist first discovered Celtic fiddling as a teenager growing up in suburban Buffalo, N.Y. At this same time, she became entranced by the world musical sounds from artists such as Paul Simon, Rusted Root and Peter Gabriel.

“I was classically trained on violin and piano,” Zindle says. “But I was drawn to those sounds as a young songwriter that I tried to incorporate them into my own music.”

After meeting Moore, the couple gathered a band and began to record her original songs.

The first was The Ragbirds’ 2005 debut album “Yes Nearby.” The 2007 travel-themed “Wanderlove”; 2009’s “Finally

Almost Ready,” with the single “Book of Matches”; and 2012’s “Travelin’ Machine” followed.

Last year, the band released the live album, “We Belong to the Love,” and in March, the band spent two weeks in Big Sky Recording Studios making their fifth studio album with Grammy Award-nominated producer Jamie Candiloro (Ryan Adams & The Cardinals, R.E.M., Willie Nelson).

“It was a really transformative experience,” Zindle says. “He did everything I hoped a producer would do for an album. He really challenged us and pushed us to do things better, but at the same time I didn’t feel pushed in the stylistic choices we made. He was very respectful of the songwriting process and just helped expose the weak spots and improve them. In the recording process he just brought great performances out of us by just knowing what to say.”

One of the main differences is the story Zindle says runs through the album.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** The Ragbirds

**When:** 7 p.m. Friday

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

**How much:** \$15, \$10 for students, seniors and Mainstage Series members

**Contact:** 927-1221 or [www.themendelcenter.com](http://www.themendelcenter.com)

**Artist info:** [www.theragbirds.com](http://www.theragbirds.com)

“The theme of the album is unlike anything I’ve done before,” she says. “There’s a thread that weaves throughout and it’s the story of these two lovers. I’ve named them Betty and Bill. The album follows them through the process of first meeting and through a very long relationship, sticking together through some very difficult circumstances where their love is tested and tried. But there’s a sense that they’re always working it out, and on this journey together. There’s some upbeat, danceable songs in there and there are some songs that bring to life some of those troubles, too.”

Fan favorite “The Lemon Grove,” which Zindle describes as a “simple musical arrangement with more complex lyrics about accepting the sour things that come in life,” opens the album. Another highlight is the song, “Cosmos.”

“It’s about when Betty and Bill first meet,” Zindle says. “Betty is a cosmetologist and Bill is a cosmologist. They of course find that ironic. It’s about seeing the world so differently and yet finding some commonality.”

The same can be said for The Ragbirds sound.

“It’s hard to take a song from the new album and say that sounds like a tango or that sounds South African, or that it sounds Irish,” Zindle says. “There’s a sense that the musicians are inspired by different cultures but it’s not as easy to pin down a region specifically. In a way this has always kind of been what I’m aiming for. I feel like I’m finally finding my own sound.”

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