

HARMONY IN FLIGHT

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PHOTO COURTESY OF: THE STRAY BIRDS

RIDING THE ENDLESS ROAD WITH FOLK BAND THE STRAY BIRDS.

It's a Friday night at Vaudeville Mews in Des Moines and the modern-day American family band is busy unpacking itself.

Charlie Muench, standing stage right, is nearly as tall as the stand-up bass he's just removed from a cumbersome black case he calls "The Coffin." He's tuning, twisting knobs and ironically singing Carole King's "You've Got A Friend" to an empty barroom. The other band members, Maya de Vitry and Oliver Craven, are erecting the trio's sole microphone, "Louise," at center stage.

The mic, like the sounds that will be funneled through it for the next 90 minutes, resembles something likely to be seen in grainy black-and-white film rolls.

The Stray Birds, though, aren't stuck in amber.

"My new thing is that I've been taking selfies of people taking selfies," Craven says, grinning.

The Stray Birds are an acoustic trio from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, whose music runs the vein of traditional folk, Americana, and bluegrass.

Their self-titled debut album was named one of NPR's "Top 10 Folk & Americana Albums of 2012." In the three years since, the band has performed at Nashville's Americana Festival, twice on NPR's Mountain Stage, and at dozens of shows across Europe, including a spot at the Cambridge Folk Festival in England.

Tonight is their first time in Des Moines, and the three are spending their few free minutes before the show turning back the odometer, trying to remember the name of their kindergarten teacher.

They aren't related, but like the family bands of old, their history is a shared one. Their parents are musical, and the three of them are all classically trained musicians. They've been playing music for a long time, and their stories reflect it.

Muench tells the tale of how he got his first bass, begging his parents to attend an instrument night at school with him. De Vitry shares a story about

getting to skip kindergarten after singing the Iris Dement song "Our Town" at show and tell.

"It's a song about burying your ma and pa, wrecking your first car, and going to the bar," she says. "They were like 'Alright, you get to move on to first grade.'"

Craven recalls an early memory of driving through the back roads of Pennsylvania with his family, harmonizing on "I've Been Working On The Railroad" after "some pot-pie circuit gig that my Lutheran minister dad had just led."

These memories

explain their pure comfort performing together on stage. They trade stringed instruments like playing cards in a game of hearts, weaving back and forth to step up to "Louise" ceaselessly throughout their 90-minute set at the Mews.

"It's what we've spent hours and hours honing out on the road and during all-night

festivals," de Vitry says.

They don't sing in the car, though, apart from harmonizing with the BBC theme song.

"We argue in the key of E," Craven deadpans.

This last year has seen them promoting their debut major-label release "Best Medicine," available last October. All three admit to the strain the road has had on them. They look to December like a far-away beacon, hoping for some much-needed "rest medicine," as de Vitry puts it. Then they head into a studio in upstate New York with famed producer and musician Larry Campbell.

It's the time shared with "Louise" that makes all-night hauls like tonight's up I-35 worth it.

"We get to drive around, listen to NPR, and play our songs at the end of the day," de Vitry says.

For the modern-day American family band, it's an idyllic image that upholds a storied past: three young, road-weary musicians chasing the muse along white lines in rental vans. And when they argue, even that has a harmony, based somewhere around the key of E.

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