



Bluegrass musician and Stark County native Hunter Skeens rehearses with his band The Forerunners. ED BALINT/THE REPOSITORY

# BAPTIZED BY bluegrass

## Hunter Skeens destined for ‘something bigger’

Ed Balint Canton Repository | USA TODAY NETWORK

**H**unter Skeens strummed his guitar aggressively, tilted his head back and cut loose with a bluegrass howl tinged with rock 'n' roll. • Jamming with the 23-year-old Skeens were members of his band The Forerunners - John Feist, Andy Pastor and Mitch Kozub. The group blazed through a song in the living room of Feist's home in Copley. • Playing guitar and singing lead vocals, Skeens was clearly the band's engine. And his senior bandmates each admitted it without a hint of envy. **See SKEENS, Page 3D**

# Skeens

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"They are some of the best people I've ever worked with," said Skeens, of Cuyahoga Falls. "And I've never really got to know people deep down inside, but these guys are my brothers, and when I think about them, I praise them because everyone's like, 'Oh, you're so young and you're playing with these older guys.' And I think that's the best."

Band elders foresee big things for Skeens in the niche genre of bluegrass. Releasing their debut album later this year, Hunter Skeens and The Forerunners play festivals as well as smaller venues.

"I have a 23-year-old son, and I can't really picture him doing what Hunter is doing," said Pastor, 57, of North Royalton. "It's a unique skill, and Hunter, I think absolutely he's going to do something bigger. There's no doubt about it, and I think all of us would be happy to know we were part of helping him along on his journey."

The band made a splash by recording a cover of the Warrant glam rock 1990 classic, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" on a tribute album for the multi-platinum band and late frontman Jani Lane, who grew up in the Akron area.

It was so well received that the band is considering an offer to cover "Shame Shame Shame" on a tribute album for the 1980s metal band, "Ratt."



Hunter Skeens and The Forerunners is a bluegrass band with members from the Akron-Canton area. Skeens, 22, is a Tuslaw High School graduate and Stark County native. ED BALINT/THE REPOSITORY

## Baptized by bluegrass

Skeens, who grew up in the Massillon and North Lawrence areas, was introduced to rock music at a young age.

"My dad's best friend... got me a little Squier Stratocaster guitar... when I was 10 or 11," he recalled. "I learned 'Iron Man' by Black Sabbath and 'Seven Nation Army' by The White Stripes and that kind of thing."

Music provided him with an outlet and direction, especially after struggling through high school at Tuslaw and missing scores of days each year. A skin condition also contributed to frequent absences.

"I never really took it too serious," Skeens said. "It got to the point where actually the last couple of years of high school, they would have to have the sheriff come to my house and get me to school. I was just never really into it."

Sparking his interest in bluegrass was the music of Grammy winner Billy Strings.

"I had a breakthrough moment," Skeens said. "I used to make fun of this music when I listened to it when I was younger. The entire time, all I wanted to do was put on a country accent and slap my knee."

"But (Strings) got me super into picking and really passionate about it."

## 'This music is pretty cool'

Music is Skeens' full-time pursuit, although he helps trim trees part-time.

Songs are crafted whenever he's inspired. Sometimes swapping a pillow for his guitar, and climbing into his car and playing into the wee hours.

"It was something that I knew once I got good at... that I wouldn't have to worry about what other people think as long as I stay true to myself," he said of his love for bluegrass. "It was a matter of showing the world that yeah, 'This music is pretty cool.'"

## Skeens the showman

Live performances are blazing. Skeens is a pure showman - shuffling, smiling and stomping. The band plays both originals and "twisted covers," including "Behind Blue Eyes" by The Who; "Sixteen Tons" by Merle Travis; "House of the Rising Sun" by The Animals; and "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)" by The Beatles.

Past gigs have included Paolino's Sports Pub & Grub in Canal Fulton, where the band has a show at 7 p.m. - March 14. Last summer, the band played in the Grassfire music festival at Nelson Saturday, 03/08/2025 Page .D03

Ledges Quarry Park, as well as the Mohican Bluegrass Festival.

"We focus to really engage the audience visually," he said. "So I always say, if you go to a show and you close your eyes and you feel like you're missing something, then that's probably a pretty darn good show. I'd say sound and musicianship is half the battle, but a live show, (it's about) making sure your bandmates are having fun, so people can see that and really feed off the energy of other people."

## 'I know a secret down at Uncle Tom's Cabin'

The band's fiery and improvisational brand of bluegrass is front and center on the Warrant tune.

Elevating the track is the signature guitar intro by Eric Oswald, Jani Lane's brother. Feist was friends with Lane, and also has known Oswald for years through the Akron-area music scene. Also featured is National Bluegrass Banjo Championship winner Steven Moore.

"All I knew was, 'She's my cherry pie,'" Skeens said of Warrant before breaking into the chorus with a laugh. "But I did my homework. I listened to all the albums. I'm a geek like that."

Rave reviews poured in for the bluegrass version of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which highlighted the 2023 release, "Song & Dance Man: A Tribute to Warrant & Jani Lane" by FnA Records.

"Jani Lane's daughter loved it," Skeens said. "She was just happy that also (Jani's brother) was on it. We haven't done it live yet but we will once we get situated."

## 'A rock 'n' roll band with a bluegrass problem'

Asked to describe the sound of their forthcoming album, the 62-year-old

Feist grinned before summing it up: "We're a rock 'n' roll band with a bluegrass problem."

"It's a little higher energy with some soulful stuff as well," Feist added.

The band has a mix of influences, including Pastor, whose background is in Irish and Americana music.

"I feel like I'm putting more of a rock 'n' roll edge on it because I'm using an electric fiddle," he said. "It's definitely not traditional bluegrass."

Feist was in bands in the '80s in Akron's punk and alternative rock scene. He's a member of the worship band at Freshwater Community Church in Wadsworth.

During their recent living room rehearsal, the foursome ripped through a song inspired by Skeens' tree-cutting side hustle titled, "I Got A Saw." Adding background vocals was Feist's wife, Lori, who performs with the band live.

Chemistry traces to when band members jammed at G.A.R. Hall in Peninsula. Mutual acquaintances also brought them together.

"It's like an incubator for anybody who is anybody in Northeast Ohio in the bluegrass scene," Feist said of G.A.R.

The Grammy-nominated David Mayfield of The David Mayfield Parade is producing their album, which showcases all original material and has been recorded in the basement studio of Feist's home.

Where this all ends up, Skeens doesn't know.

"Everybody is always saying, 'I want to make it big,'" he said. "My whole goal is all I want to do is play with great players... because those guys are my heroes."

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