

ENTERTAINMENT

Blazing bluegrass. Stark County native Hunter Skeens puts fiery twist on classic genre



[Ed Balint](#) Canton Repository

Key Points

- Massillon area native Hunter Skeens is a budding bluegrass talent.
- Hunter Skeens and The Forerunners will be releasing a debut album later this year.
- The band got rave reviews for its cover of the Warrant song, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," featured on a Jani Lane tribute album.



Stark County native Hunter Skeens rehearses a bluegrass song at the home of a bandmate in Copley. Skeens, 22, is a budding musician in the bluegrass scene. *Ed Balint*

Hunter 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.

"They are some of the best people I've ever worked with," said Skeens, a Stark County native. "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."

"We've got a place on the album," Feist said. "But with our record release (later this year), it's hard to get time in the studio. It's a possibility but it may not happen."



From left are John Feist, Hunter Skeens, Andy Pastor and Mitch Kozub, members of bluegrass band Hunter Skeens and The Forerunners. *Ed Balint*

Baptized by bluegrass

Skeens 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," said Skeens, who grew up in the Massillon and North Lawrence areas. "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."



Bluegrass musician and Stark County native Hunter Skeens rehearses with his band The Forerunners. *Ed Balint*

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

"I had a breakthrough moment," said Skeens, who lives in Cuyahoga Falls. "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."

Feist said Skeens has evolved into a promising talent.

"He really honed his craft and that hard work emanates into his personality and obviously shines in his God-given talent," he said.



Hunter Skeens and the Forerunners, an Akron-Canton area bluegrass band, rehearses recently. Led by Skeens, a Stark County native, the band has live shows scheduled in the area in March. *Ed Balint*

'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.'"



Lori Feist sings with Hunter Skeens during a rehearsal as John Feist (background) plays along. They are members of the bluegrass group Hunter Skeens and The Forerunners. *Ed Balint*

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

Skeens eagerly struts straight into the crowd while performing at smaller venues. He also encourages Pastor to do the same "and absolutely shred fiddle in someone's face."

"I'm a young dude ... and they're trying to put me into the spotlight," Skeens said of the band. "So it's nice to have that. When it comes to the show, we try to put as much energy as we can into it, and that's genuine energy. We don't do any drugs, we don't drink on stage or smoke.

"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."



Hunter Skeens and The Forerunners is a bluegrass band with members from the Akron-Canton area. From left are Andy Pastor, Skeens, John and Lori Feist, and Mitch Kozub. *Ed Balint*

'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.

"Uncle Tom's Cabin" was a popular rock song from Warrant's "Cherry Pie" album in an era when hair bands ruled MTV and saturated commercial radio.

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.



Massillon area native Hunter Skeens performs with his bluegrass band The Forerunners. The group plans to release its debut album this year. *Provided By Hunter Skeens And The Forerunners*

"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.

Skeens put it this way: "It changes every day," he said with a laugh. "We have a bluegrass sound, but it has almost rock 'n' roll and '80s hair metal and pumped up or punk bluegrass."

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.



Hunter Skeens rehearses recently with his bluegrass band the Forerunners. Skeens, 23, is from the Massillon area. *Ed Balint*

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.

Skeens made an immediate impression.

"It's the fact that he can pick that guitar, and he taught himself, which is impressive for that alone," Pastor said. "Even with his songwriting, no two of his songs sound like they're the same pattern or same melody or even in the same genre almost."

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.

"I still feel gifted to talk to him and jam with him," Skeens said of Mayfield. "I connected with him. He has so many other great players with him like [Steven Moore](#). I couldn't believe I would be jamming with him, and with open arms. He's so accepting to me, and all the players are."



John Feist, bass player for Hunter Skeens and the Forerunners, rehearses recently. The Akron-Canton area bluegrass band has a single release party concert Saturday at Rialto Theatre in Akron. *Ed Balint*

'Those guys are my heroes.'

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

Success in bluegrass is measured differently than mainstream music, he said.

"The music business can be pretty hard on everybody," Skeens said. "There's a lot of ups and downs about it. You shouldn't expect too much and get your hopes up."

"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."



Andy Pastor, fiddle player for Hunter Skeens and the Forerunners, rehearses recently at the home of a bandmate in Copley. Led by Skeens, a Stark County native, the band plays festivals and other live shows. *Ed Balint*

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If you go

Who – Hunter Skeens and The Forerunners

What – Single release party at Rialto Theatre in Akron, featuring special guest The Howling Mob, a honky-tonk band from Pittsburgh.

When – 7:30 to 11 p.m. Saturday. Doors open at 7 p.m.

Where – Rialto Theatre, 1000 Kenmore Blvd., Akron.

Tickets – \$12 [presale](#) at <https://www.therialtotheatre.com/> and \$15 at the door.