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Steel County takes talent show crown



Fiddle player Sterling Stead and his son Ryan are part of the Dundas band Steel County that won the sixth annual Country Music Showdown hosted by the Havelock Country Music Talent Show. Photo: Bill Freeman

By Bill Freeman

Havelock-Belmont-Methuen - Traditionalists Steel County topped a dazzling array of talent to take top prize at the Ontario Country Showdown hosted by the Havelock Country Music Talent Show.

The win earned the Dundas group a coveted spot on the Havelock Country Jamboree's big-time stage. They headed an outstanding field of six finalists in a day-long program featuring 22 performers.

Caledonia's soulful Ally Howatt was second with youngster Neil Wadhavna. Steel County, Sterling Stead, son Ryan, brothers Kevin and Brandon Somerville and Tom Gray, filled the Havelock Community Centre with blended harmonies winning over the four judges.

"This is fantastic," Sterling said. "We've spent two years in the basement going out once every six weeks. We've gradually exceeded our expectations."

The band has already won the first leg of the Coldgate Country Music Showdown in the United States, the largest talent search in the world.

"We don't feel that we've come anywhere near our potential yet. This is a work in progress. We're really just scratching the surface." Sterling says Steel County has been trying to get to Havelock for a long time. They're friends of South Mountain who were also on the Jamboree's Sunday program. "It's the mecca for traditional country music which we're very involved in," he says.

The band works hard on its fiddle, banjo, bass, pedal steel sound.

"We're building on the traditional instruments and going forward that way. We believe in the big harmonies sort of an Eagles, Dixie Chicks Doug and Slugs party thing. We need those solid harmonies. We want real songs that mean something but then with the fun and the instrumentation." "Had we not won Sunday we're back at rehearsal."

His son Ryan is a tenth generation musician and he's played with school buddies Kevin and Brandon in alternative rock bands. They've been together as Steel County for two years.

"We all bring our own style and personality to the group," Ryan says. "I like to think that it blends well together with all the different influences we bring to the group." The "next move" is the recording studio. They've saved enough money to get the first two songs done.

"We want to get to the point where money is the only thing in the way," says Sterling. "The songs are getting written, the act is polished. We're really excited, to be honest. We'll wait and see."

"We do it because we love it," adds Ryan. "It's not overnight success by any stretch."

And they weren't intimidated by the big Jamboree stage.

"We just finished the Fergus Truck Show and we were the surprise band [on just before Aaron Pritchett]," said Sterling.