

Things starting to open up for Steelecounty

Local country band showing what it can do

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Country music fans are the greatest. Just ask Sterling Stead, whose band Steelecounty has been received wholeheartedly by the cowboy hat-wearin', toe-stompin', line-dancin' crowds who've heard them play so far.

"I believe strongly that there's nothing better than country music fans," he said. "They seem to embrace you for who you are." That was certainly no different at two recent performances that may just catapult Steelecounty to new heights. With barely enough time to recover and catch their breath from those recent opportunities, the six-man Steelecounty is now getting ready to take part in a major competition in Wisconsin. It seems they're on a roll. "I just feel blessed... I feel like things are opening up for us," Stead said.

Steelecounty was formed two years ago by five musicians -- three from Milton -- who felt they could offer something unique to the country music scene.

At its core were Sterling -- a former Campbellville resident -- and his son Ryan, a long-time Miltonian, who are no strangers to performing together.

To say music is in their blood is putting it mildly. Ryan is a sixth-generation musician, with country music infused into the family.

Although Ryan found himself playing in a rock band in high school, it wasn't his niche.

"I realized it wasn't for me. Country is a lot more real to me. The words I'm singing are a lot more heartfelt," said Steelecounty's lead vocalist.

Completing the band are Milton brothers Brandon and Kevin Sommerville, Tom Graham and newcomer Pete Allison.

For the past couple of years, the group has been in the basement, honing their skills, writing songs and even learning new instruments.

Now they're ready to show what they can do -- and they're well on their way.

In the summer, Steelecounty entered a competition to play at the Havelock Country Jamboree, recognized as one of the top five country music festivals in Canada.

Competing against 20 other bands, Steelecounty won, despite some frazzled nerves and even a lack of confidence.

"We knew we had a lot to offer, but not everyone sees things the way we do," Ryan said.

Performing at the August 17 jamboree was a thrill, since it meant opening for the likes of country legends Connie Smith and Earl Scruggs.

"For us, it was pretty incredible -- going from playing clubs to playing a massive show like that," Ryan said, adding he took his two sons along to the show, which had a definite family atmosphere.

The second big event of the summer came about when they decided to enter the 27th annual Colgate Country Showdown in the U.S. The showdown begins with hundreds of local talent contests sponsored by radio stations. Steelecounty competed and won a local round in Wisconsin.

Next weekend, they'll head back to Wisconsin for the state finals, which take place Saturday, Sept. 20. If they win that, it'll be on to the regional round and then the national competition. The band has quite a few of their own songs banked -- written mostly by Ryan and Sterling -- and this competition allows them to showcase their songwriting abilities. Something that sets the band apart from others is its versatility, Ryan said, with the six members playing about a dozen instruments between them in addition to singing.

On top of being lead vocalist, Ryan plays banjo and slide guitar; Sterling is on the fiddle, piano, organ, saxophone and guitar; Brandon plays bass; Kevin is on the drums; Graham is lead guitarist and peddle steel; and Allison takes care of lead guitar and dobro. One of the reasons it's important to have a wide range of instruments at their disposal is to be able to perform a variety of styles, Ryan said, tailoring the sound to the venue they're at. While younger crowds at the clubs might prefer a more pop/rock-infused type of "new" country, festivals usually attract a slightly older crowd with a liking for the more traditional country sound, Ryan said. Looking forward, Ryan and Sterling both agree they hope to get signed to a record label before releasing a full-length album.

How does Sterling feel about playing with his son once again?

"It never gets old. I look over and see this man singing and I have to pinch myself to remind myself it's my son." He said he's glad he was able to pass along to Ryan what his parents gave to him.

"The greatest gift my parents ever gave me was the gift of music."

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