

TWANG-HAPPY FOURSOME



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Ward Hayden, foreground, with, from left, Chris Hesch, electric guitar; Paul Dilley, bass; and J. Ellis Kiggans, drums.

# Girls Guns and Glory

## Roots 'n' roll darlings at The Kate Friday

6/27/15

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**OLD SAYBROOK** » This is the story of a series of flukes that made Ward Hayden among the most transcendent vocalists on the alt-country circuit.

If, for example, the car radio of the beat-up Oldsmobile he was driving back to college in 1999 hadn't died, the frontman of Girls Guns and Glory, the critically-acclaimed retro rockabilly band that will appear at The Kate on Friday, wouldn't have borrowed some classic country music from his mother to play on the tape deck.

As the 20-year-old tooled along the open highway, he wouldn't have heard Johnny Cash's mournful warble or the high, lonesome howl of Hank Williams.

And though he'd just had his heart broken, it's likely that the usual pop radio wouldn't have resonated in the same way as the sound of those country music icons.

"Here were these guys who were able to convey sorrow and pain in an intense and very deep way in a three-minute song, who were able to boil down to simple words exactly what I was feeling," said the down-to-earth singer-songwriter in a telephone interview from his home in Boston.

The Scituate, Mass. native had grown up in a household with country western on an endless loop on the family stereo; his parents were fans of Buddy Holly, Merle Haggard, and Johnny Cash, among others. But he'd tuned it out, dismissing it as "a bunch of twangy gibberish."

Aside from listening to



Chris Hesch, left, Ward Hayden, J. Ellis Kiggans, and Paul Dilley.

punk and reggae, the 2013 Boston Music Awards Male Vocalist of the Year had never sung or studied a musical instrument. He had no music aspirations — least of all, to be the leader of a band, he said. At the time he was studying socio-cultural anthropology.

Until that drive back to college, that is. Four years later, after "listening voraciously to all of the country giants," he said, he bought his first guitar — a Gibson J-45. He'd never written a song before, but lyrics and music came pouring forth.

"It was one of the only things in my life that I ever felt a true calling to do," the 33-year-old recalled.

Then there was his natural singing voice, "deep and guttural... with the hint of tragic love and matters beyond our control," as the Patriot Ledger later put it, and favorably compared to crooners like Chris Isaak and Lyle Lovett by Digital Journal.

Even so, without another stroke of luck, there would be no Girls Guns and Glory, "named, tongue in cheek, for everything representative of the country music I was listen-

build a song and make compositions work. Still, Hayden described the nine-song CD they patched together with the help of sessions musicians as "so rough and raw it could almost be a glorified demo."

Two years and two albums later, with bigger labels showing interest and feeling ill-equipped to engage in negotiations, the band named Loyot its manager.

Since then, the Boston-based quartet, which now includes Paul Dilley on bass, J. Ellis Kiggans on drums, and Chris Hesch as lead guitarist, has been on the road 250 days a year, wheeling from honky tonk and Americana originals to the unchecked power and energy of early rock 'n' roll.

The group was honored as Independent Artist of the Year at the French Country Music Awards and as the Boston Phoenix Awards' Roots Act of the Year twice. And just last year, Rolling Stone Magazine billed the band as one of "10 new artists you need to know."

Fittingly, the twang-happy foursome released a Hank Williams Tribute album this past February.

For Hayden, it was a long time coming. "Hank's music has had a huge impact on the way I view music and songwriting and the emotional honesty that can get put into a song," he said.

All because of that broken car radio.

Girls Guns and Glory will appear at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center at 8 p.m. on Friday June 26, 300 Main St. Old Saybrook. For tickets and information, visit [katharinehepburntheater.org](http://katharinehepburntheater.org) or call 877-503-1286.



Do you feel lucky? Album art for Girls Guns and Glory.

ing to," he said.

In 2005, Hayden, who was working construction to pay the bills, got a job re-shingling a house and staining a deck. His client: Rob Loyot, a former member of Martha's Vineyard group Entrain and founder of Noise in the Attic studios in Scituate. The two bartered a deal where they traded work for studio time.

The group that would go on to be recognized by the Boston Globe for its "mastery of moods and roots styles" learned from Loyot how to