OBERLIN, OH (May 4, 2012) — The cornfields of northern Ohio may seem an unlikely destination for the biggest names in modern jazz — about as likely, you might expect, as college students leading the organizations that book them. Oberlin, however, has a history of defying expectations.

"We bring the jazz club to Oberlin," Will Miller ’12 says. "We can bring whoever we want, and when we do, they're the best."

Miller, a trumpeter in the Oberlin Conservatory’s jazz studies program, is also president of the Oberlin Jazz Society, an all-student group that has organized and sponsored half a dozen performances and master classes with iconic jazz performers since rechartering in 2010.

"And," Miller adds, "the shows don't cost a lot. You see as much music here as you would see in the big city, because in the big city you have to pay a lot for it. You go out to a club in New York and you're paying $25 to see Robert Glasper. It was $4 when he came here. Thundercat was $3. Steve Lehman was free. I see a show at least once a week – a really good show."

Miller revived the Jazz Society after a period of inactivity that stretched back to the 1990s, he says, and for its first event, in April 2011, brought in Ambrose Akinmusire, the winner of the 2007 Thelonius Monk International Jazz Competition.

Since, the society has organized appearances by Wallace Roney, Stephen "Thundercat" Bruner (with Austin Peralta and Justin Brown), Steve Lehman, and indierock/jazz-fusion outfit Kneebody. It was also closely involved with Robert Glasper’s visit in March 2012.

"It’s important that incoming students know about these organizations," says Sam Brown ’14, treasurer of the also-student-run Black Music Guild. “They have roles beyond bringing artists to just perform. They serve as outlets for students to express their creative interests, to see those creative interests come to fruition, and to meet their favorite artists."

“I actually was able to talk with Justin Brown,” she adds. "You get a chance to develop professional relationships with them, even, if you choose to take it to that level. I have with Thundercat."
Brown was the primary organizer of Bruner's appearance in February 2012. The visit, she says, required months of planning, conducted through frequent telephone meetings with Bruner, Brown, and Peralta.

The Oberlin Jazz Society and Oberlin College Black Music Guild (OCBMG) are just two of a host of student groups which, in addition to producing large events, such as a 2011 hip hop festival featuring Ahmir Khalib "?uestlove" Thompson, regularly bring such notable performers as the Punch Brothers and KRS-One.

"Each time someone comes," Miller adds, "they usually do a master class."

Most, including Program Board, Hip Hop 101, the Modern Music Guild, the Jazz Society, and OCBMG, are completely student run, from finance to administration. A few, such as the Student Assemblies Committee, which was responsible for Robert Glasper’s visit, are a mix of students, faculty, and administrative staff.

With the ample endowment of the Student Activities Fund and all the resources of one of the nation’s top conservatories at their disposal, Brown says, "the sky's the limit" to what these groups can do.

"What other schools have that?" Miller asks. "Do the students get a say about what artists come in and give master classes? If that's important to you, you can come here and be in charge, as long as you're willing to organize it. It empowers the jazz student."

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