OBERLIN, OH (May 4, 2012) — “Don’t underestimate the amount of opportunities you have in Oberlin,” Matt Adomeit ’13 says, as he bites into a caramel brownie a few feet from the stage in the Slow Train, a café and concert venue in Oberlin’s East College Street Project.

“You think that it’s such a small school, and such a small town, and you might not realize that there’s easily three or four concerts going on every night, and students are playing in almost all of them.”

Over his shoulder, I notice a blackboard filled from top to bottom with multi-colored chalk — the entertainment schedule. The Silverman/Myers duo plays tonight, it says, and there’s “Live Jazz” every Friday for the next two weeks.

In the bar down the street, The Feve, a house band plays every Sunday. Across the park, the Dionysus Discotech (the “Sco”) hosts jazz and jam sessions every Thursday, sometimes Friday, and regular dances with an all-student, 12-piece salsa band, Son de Oberlin.

“There are on-campus gigs, there’s no question,” says Bobby Ferrazza, Director of the Jazz Studies Department. “We have a handful of older, really industrious students that are playing every week or biweekly.”

Though Oberlin’s musical community is vibrant enough to rival a big city’s, students say, 40 minutes east on the freeway Cleveland offers bustling latin, swing, modern jazz, and rock scenes, among others.

“If people want to play latin music in Cleveland, there’s a plethora,” says Suny Tabler ’14, a drummer and percussionist. “For salsa gigs, there are so many opportunities for horn players and drummers.”

Tabler is one of several students that report working in Cleveland’s latin scene.

“There’s a big salsa music scene,” says Will Miller ’12, a trumpeter. “So if you’re a brass player or a horn player it’s pretty easy to start playing in the salsa bands.”

“There are a lot of jams, too,” Tabler adds. “When Dennis Reynold’s band plays at the Brothers’ Lounge, he’ll let you sit in and play, so that you can get a big band experience. After that they’ll usually have a jam session.”
Reynolds is the director of the Oberlin Jazz Ensemble, the Oberlin Conservatory’s big band; he has played with the orchestras of such artists as Count Basie, Buddy Rich, Dizzy Gillespie, and Illinois Jacquet.

While growing up in Cleveland, Tabler studied with the Oberlin Conservatory’s jazz faculty at Cuyahoga Community College, the host of Cleveland’s premier jazz festivals. She’s been performing in Cleveland since high school, and maintains that the city offers more opportunities than many Oberlin students realize.

“Tri-C has a jazz festival every April,” she says, “and people here get gigs through that — during jazz-fest week my group had 5. They also have the Summerfest, the fall festival, and an event during the winter.”

Whether in Cleveland or Oberlin, however, finding and securing these performance opportunities can be challenging, according to students. In general, they say, it helps to be entrepreneurial and to make the most of every opportunity — go to jam sessions; be willing to play any kind of music, at any venue; make a press kit and contact venues early in the season; hand out business cards and introduce yourself after performing; et cetera.

“It really helps having a car, too,” says Adomeit.

After that, success depends upon professional aptitude.

“You’ve got to know what you’re doing,” says Pete Manheim ’12, a drummer and percussionist. “You have to be on time, you have to know the repertoire — it’s a given that you know how to function on a gig.”

Though challenging, however, students add that performing in Cleveland is an achievable goal. Northeast Ohio’s market for live music is balanced between saturation and undersupply just enough that Oberlin’s most skilled and most experienced musicians — generally upperclassmen — are able to perform one or several times a week in the city.

“You kind of have to rise through the ranks,” Adomeit says, “but in general, the musicians at Oberlin are very competitive with most of the musicians in Cleveland. If you’re in a city like New York or Chicago, what gigs there are are so competitive, because there are thousands of people that are trying to get them. Here, it’s a much more even playing field, especially if you’re in college.”

“If people like the way you play,” Manheim says, “you’ll end up on a couple of gigs.”

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Conservatory Annex I 39 West College Street I Oberlin, Ohio 44074-1576 | [P] 440.775.8328 | [F] 440.775.5457