

The Bulletin

Campus Culture Unites Four Musicians

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It would be a gross understatement to say that Oberlin is known for its music. Oberlin has a world-renowned conservatory that is the oldest continually operating conservatory in the country. Not only does it bring hundreds of musicians to campus, it attracts a lot of students who want to be around those musicians. From professional musicians to self-taught ones, drummers to fiddlers, Conservatory to College students, there is a huge community of people that come here for the music. I am one of them, and as I've begun to find places to participate in the music scene, I've met a bunch of amazing people, three of whom I think are perfect examples of musicians at Oberlin: all with different backgrounds and different levels of experience, all three of them coming together to make a band.

An aggressively excited singer and a couple logistical errors brought these three together. Meet College first-years Charlotte Praver and Sebastian Dalisay-Hockett and double-degree first-year Alma Francez. A couple of weeks ago, I, the aggressively excited singer, said, "Can we please sign up to play at the WOBC Band-A-Thon?" The three of them agreed, and we became four.

Charlotte is from Fairfield, CT, and she plays the guitar. She's my roommate, and since the first week of school we've played songs together in our room or in the stairwell. She started playing the guitar during the COVID-19 pandemic and is entirely self-taught. She found herself with extra time and a number of unused guitars in her house. Charlotte used guitar tabs and YouTube videos to start, and as she got better, she started learning songs by ear.

Charlotte said that music wasn't the reason she came to Oberlin, but it was definitely a reason she was staying. Charlotte has never performed in front of an audience. This group is the largest she's played with, so she is nervous, but very excited to be performing at Band-A-Thon.

Sebastian is from New York, and he plays the guitar and bass. Sebastian had been playing guitar since he was five years old, but it wasn't until he did a summer program at Berklee College of Music three years ago that he realized he wanted to take music more seriously. He started practicing a lot more, picked up the bass, and began writing songs.

"I was actually a prolific writer from the age of three, but then the second I gained ... self-consciousness as a preteen, I stopped writing," Sebastian said. "Through my teenage years, that was my biggest downfall as a musician. I couldn't write original songs."

Around the age 14, Sebastian was able to get out of his songwriting rut and he's been writing ever since.

Music was a huge part of why Sebastian ended up at Oberlin. He's enrolled in the College but participates actively in Oberlin's cross-departmental music scene.

"[I've been playing with the] folk club. I've been going to the song swaps. I love the folk scene. It's amazing. It's something new for me," Sebastian said. "I was honored to have started a little trio with Alma and Jake, and we and we play my original songs... I honestly just as many new can."

Alma Francez is from Chicago and she plays the drums. She is a double-degree student studying Jazz Performance with a concentration in jazz percussion. Alma started playing the drums in middle school band, while taking drum lessons.

Alma explained that she really got into jazz drumming during the pandemic.

"My dad was always really into jazz. Like, huge. He knows everything. So he really got me into that world. And then it's kind of because of him that I started listening. And then in high school, I was like, I want to do this ... and that's when I really started to play."

While Alma's focus is jazz, outside of her conservatory work she spends a lot of time playing a mix of genres with her friends. She plays a lot with Sebastian and College first-year Nico DiMaria, both of whom she jams with and collaborates on original songs.

"I think most of the student body here is really open to playing," Alma said. "And also, I've found that having my own drum practice room is really good for jamming, because a lot of people want to jam and they have to sign up for the Gear Cop and it's confusing. So, I've lured a lot of people into my practice room through access to equipment."

In talking with Alma, Sebastian, and Charlotte, I've realized that I am a fourth type of Oberlin musician. Of course, there are many more than just four types of musicians, but that would be a much longer article.

I went to an arts high school where I studied voice. A large part of our performances were collaborations with the band students, specifically jazz kids, who I quickly learned to fear. Although the school I went to had robust music programs across departments, there was a clear gap in technical musical knowledge between the jazz musicians and the singers. I had just started reading music in high school, like a lot of the singers in my program, while the instrumentalists had been doing so since they first picked up their instruments.

In high school, the jazz kids hated us singers, in part because people seemed to lose interest seven minutes into their trumpet solos, and performance attendance increased one of us in front of them, even if they

didn't let us sing. There were a number of shows I did where counting the band in was the most stressful part of the performance because I was awaiting a series of eye rolls that I was sure would ensue at the slightest unsatisfactory tap of my foot.

I was in a singing group my senior year with two other singers from my program. We wrote some songs and did a few performances, but our musical growth was limited by our lasting fear of people who played real instruments. Unsurprisingly, our band didn't get very far with no instruments.

All of this to say, I am sometimes overly cautious when working with instrumentalists. But my experience with Alma, Charlotte, and Sebastian has been incredible. In general, despite encountering more serious musicians, I've found Oberlin to be a much more welcoming environment. There are always skill gaps and differing levels of experience, especially for us singers, that can make finding a good group challenging. But that hasn't been a problem at Oberlin.

"I've had experiences where I've been in all-district bands, and the entire rhythm section is men, and they didn't speak a single word to me in the entire six hour rehearsal," Alma said when recounting experiences she's had before Oberlin.

"There's only three of us [female drummers] right now. It's me, Dempsey, and Ruby," said Alma. "It's lovely. [We're] definitely a minority, but it doesn't really register as a thing."

Oberlin brings musicians from all over the country to one small town where musical collaboration thrives. Oberlin's music scene extends beyond the Conservatory and a small piece of it can be found in just about every student.

So are they excited to be playing at WOBC Band-A-Thon?

Sebastian says, "Of course! Is that even a question?"

Photos courtesy of
Tilly Smith

