

JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON

It can be a long, hard road from dives to record deals

BY OAKLAND CHILDERS
U. OF DELAWARE

THE THRONG OF sweaty collegians swarms a smoke-filled fraternity basement, desperately trying to hear and be heard over roaring guitars and pounding drums.

An especially tipsy party-goer strays from the keg and stumbles toward the makeshift stage at the rear of the tiny room. Through the haze, a familiar face materializes, then another. "Is that R.E.M.?" asks the plastered partier in disbelief.

Not likely. But had this happened 15 years ago in Athens, Ga., the scenario would sound less like a beer-addled fantasy and more like a foggy recollection of an average weekend.

From playing the pizza parlors and abandoned churches of Athens to recording the staples of American college rock, R.E.M. introduced a genre all its own.

The quartet — Michael Stipe, Mike Mills, Peter Buck and Bill Barry — soon had an established fan base growing exponentially out of its own back yard. R.E.M. became not just the prototypical college band but the yardstick by which all after it would be measured.

College towns are to the music industry what minor league teams are to professional baseball. There's no guarantee that any band will raise the eyebrow of some major-label scout and score a 10-record deal, but it's always a possibility. That keeps the already vibrant college genre teeming with zealous young musicians — musicians hoping to become the next R.E.M.

Paying your dues

Today, college bands seeking more than an occasional gig at the local bar or frat house should take note — the path to stardom is a long one.

Five years of hard times are starting to pay off for the New Jersey band From Good Homes. Friends

who grew up together in Sparta, N.J., the band recently released its major-label debut, *Open Up the Sky*.

"It was hard financially," says the band's front man, Todd Sheaffer. "I lived for three years in a place with no hot water and no kitchen." But a faithful following of local fans made the years before its record deal much easier on the group. "We've always had fans giving us encouragement and appreciating what we do," Sheaffer says. "Those people kept us going. I think in a way they kind of see it like they succeeded, too."

The now famous Dave Matthews Band came from similar beginnings. "We took every gig from debutante parties to fraternities," violinist Boyd Tinsley says of the band's early days. "We just played all the time. Along the way, you pick up a few extra fans."

In a little more than four years, the band has gone from playing U. of Virginia parties in Charlottesville to getting heavy play on both college radio and MTV.

But success has done little to change the lives of the Dave Matthews Band, save a few thousand new fans. "The main thing I see is just the road and the stage," Tinsley says. "It's just like the stages have gotten bigger."

The band may seem to have come from nowhere, but Tinsley is quick to dispel that notion. "It's not like we just made an album and got on MTV," he says. "We were play-

ing hard all over the place for four years before MTV or any of that stuff came along."

Many paths to stardom

Getting to the top is usually a laborious process for college bands. But not all groups follow the typical formula — playing live shows in local dives for years before scoring the Holy Grail of the record industry, a major-label recording contract.

The Ocean Blue, friends from their middle-school days in Hershey, Pa., played live shows only after signing such a contract and cutting their first record.

"It wasn't until we contacted a manager about getting a record deal that we started playing out," vocalist David Schelzel says. "When we first got the band together, we played in each other's basements. There was no place to play in Central Pennsylvania."

But as the band's notoriety grew, so did the size of the venues it played.

"We now do proper concerts, where people come to see the band, and they are familiar with the music, whereas before, we could be walking into the lions' den," Schelzel says. "You could be playing for people who could care less that you are up there — who aren't interested in your music. It can be a terrible atmosphere."

Buffalo Tom, out of Amherst, Mass., have followed a more tradi-

tional road to success. The band got together while attending the U. of Massachusetts and soon began playing at local bars and at the school. The Buffalo Tom following grew gradually, culminating in their opening for Live last summer.

Fruitful gardens

Amherst is one of many college towns, like Athens, Ga., that seem to breed talented musicians. Bands like Dinosaur Jr. and Sebadoh are just two of the acts making big careers from meager beginnings there.

Burlington, Vt., home to the U. of Vermont and hippie rockers Phish, is another town trying to add its name to that list.

"There are a lot of great bands here," says Paul Jaffe of Pure Pop Records, a music store catering to the local talent. "I've been to a lot of places in the country, and there is more talent here."

But as each college band makes it big, another is left wondering when its turn will come.

"A lot of the bands that we've known over the years and have been friends with are now doing very well," says From Good Homes' Sheaffer. "People in our band see that, and it creates a bit of pressure. It's like, 'Look at them. What about us?'"

Oakland Childers is a sophomore at the U. of Delaware and the keeper of two pigs. Susan Elizabeth and Golda Meir.



Superstardom isn't always automatic for the people.

They Came From Neptune

Sure, every campus has its weekend pickers and grinders, its dreaming drummers, its virtual virtuosos. Most local musicians fail to graduate beyond just that — playing the local scene. But there's a handful of college towns across the country responsible for producing more than their fair share of noted bands. Here are just a few:

- Amherst, Mass. — Dinosaur Jr., Sebadoh, Buffalo Tom
- Athens, Ga. — R.E.M., The B-52s, Pylon, Widespread Panic
- Austin, Texas — Butthole Surfers, Eric Johnson, Timbuk3, Jesus Lizard, Scratch Acid, Daniel Johnston, Sincola
- Boston, Mass. — The Breeders, Belly, The Pixies, Throwing Muses, Blake Babies (Juliana Hatfield, Antennae), Letters to Cleo, Hum
- Chapel Hill, N.C. — Superchunk, Archers of Loaf, Jennyanykind, Spatula



No longer dreaming under the table.