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Lester Biggs and the Robber Barons: homegrown rock and roll

by Nathaniel Livingston '14
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT CONTRIBUTOR

You are standing outside of the Sadove Student Center. It is a cold and unforgiving November evening in the middle of upstate New York, where the wind blows with a vengeance over the cusp of College Hill, where the small liberal arts college that you attend resides. It's a Thursday night and you aren't expecting a night unlike any others, nothing out of the ordinary, just a drink or two in the ELS basement where the women's field hockey team and the men's baseball team decided to have a party.

But once you descend those dungeon-like stairs, you become aware of a sound you are not used to on campus: live music. No, it is not the sterile sounds of "Levels" by Avicii or the autotuned croon of Kesha you are hearing, it's much too *alive* to be anything emanating from a speaker box. This is amplifier music. This is the sound of a voice through a microphone. This is the sound of Lester Biggs and the Robber Barons playing music. Live music.

The music is best described as rock & roll. The band has been known to cover standards such as "The Weight," "You Can't Always Get What You Want," and "Johnny B Goode." And with such an eclectic and talented line up, every song they do is explored to its full potential. Ravi Jariwala '13 will turn those metal strings into electric



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN KNISHKOWY '13

Frontman Dan Knishkowsky leads Lester Biggs and the Robber Barons through rock gems at a Babbitt Pavilion gig.

tentacles of ecstasy, and Bret Turner '13's smooth responds with a solo tinged with passion and the E Street Band flavor. A sharp wailing wheeze indicates that Matt Sherman has started breathing into his harmonica. Dan Knishkowsky '13 is the band's leader and main singer. The energy he brings keeps the whole band together and his vocals emanate straight from the soul. It's almost as if The Tallest Man on Earth went and started a rock band. And when Chelsea Wahl

'13 joins her beautiful voice to the chorus, the band reaches its full potential. Beneath it all, drummer Dave Schwartz '13 keeps the beat, accentuating the movement of the music with cymbals and tom rolls, while Ian Rothenberg '16 provides the pulsating rhythm of the bass.

Lester Biggs and the Robber Barons aren't about making a name for the band. There are no aspirations or pretensions to stardom. The eclectic nature of the band allows each member

to perform outside of his or her usual musical context. Three of the members are in Jazz band, Dan is a solo musician, Chelsea is the musical coordinator for Special K, and Dave Schwartz is also a DJ. Each member brings their own expertise to the table.

The band is ultimately out there to have a good time and provide the College with something it needs—live music performed by student musicians. It's music that is fun—live music you don't come see to get credit for class.

It is this kind of student initiative that adds life and originality to any late night event, inspiring the audience with music.

This Friday, Nov. 30, the band will be playing in the Woolcott Co-op basement at 11 p.m. Not as dark and strange as the ELS basement, the Co-op basement is a great, intimate space to experience the band. If you have never heard the band before, consider what a dose of live music could do for your typical weekend experience.

IMF bringing indie hip-hop sensation Danny Brown to Barn

by Jack McManus '13
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

Continuing their mission to attract the most exciting up-and-coming musical acts to our snowy rural campus, the Independent Music Fund just announced rapper Danny Brown as the headliner for their first event of the year, taking place the evening of Saturday, Dec. 8 in the rave-tested Fillius Events Barn. Hailing from Detroit, Brown's alternative sensibilities and unconventional style have established him as a leader amongst today's crop of blog-approved hip hop innovators, and he's reached mass audiences recently on high-profile tours with Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino, A\$AP Rocky, Das Racist, Schoolboy Q and many others. Chip Sinton '13 will make his Barn debut DJing as F-CK+YR+AESTHETICSII to open the show.

After achieving moderate, local success with his group Rese'vor Dogs in the early 2000s, Brown released his first mixtape *Detroit State of Mind* in 2007 and his first full length album *The Hybrid* in 2010. This album first sparked the 31-year-old rapper's run in the spotlight, as DJs and hardcore hip-



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Danny Brown, performing December 8th in the Barn, reps his labelmates Duck Sauce.

hop fans were intrigued by his frantic flow and unconventional whiny, high-pitched vocals. Many music critics have spoken out in favor of Brown's unusual sound as well, commending him for having the courage to embrace his weirdness rather than try to change himself to fit hip hop's often rigid conventions. This resistance to norms has become one of Brown's trademarks—in 2010 he missed out on a record deal with 50 Cent's G-Unit records simply because he refused to stop wearing skin-

ny jeans and vintage t-shirts on stage.

In hindsight, Brown's partnership with G-Unit probably wouldn't have worked out. With his asymmetrical haircut, tight clothing and purposefully bizarre attitude, he doesn't fit the gangsta mold at all. After self-releasing *The Hybrid*, Brown found a musical home on the well-known DJ A-Trak's Fools Gold label, joining the company of dance wizards Chromeo, Laidback Luke, Trackademics and Duck Sauce, as well

as Fool's Gold-related rappers like Lil B, Kid Sister and Kid Cudi. In this new creative environment Brown has been able to develop his musical taste for British Grime, prog-rock inspired mindset and caustic humor with full support from his label and growing audience. His new connections have also opened the doors for high-profile collaborations, as he's appeared on tracks with Raekwon, Pusha T, Big Sean, Childish Gambino, El-P, Mr. Muthafckin' eXquire, Flosstradamus,

CyHi the Prynce, J. Dilla and label boss A-Trak.

In the summer of 2011 Brown released his second official album *XXX*, offering it as a free download on his website before re-releasing it this past March on iTunes with three extra tracks. The album was acclaimed by critics like his earlier work, with the music magazine *Spin* naming it the top hip-hop album of 2011 and *Pitchfork* ranking it at No. 19 on their top albums of the year list. Brown also made a surprise appearance during Childish Gambino's anticipated performance at this year's Coachella Music Festival, spitting a verse on a remix of Gambino's "You Know Me" alongside Kendrick Lamar.

With his career still young and his stock rising, the IMF show next weekend may be our last chance to catch Danny Brown in such an intimate environment before he moves on to larger venues like former IMF acts Band of Horses, Yeasayer, Beach House and The New Pornographers have since appearing on campus. It also may be the only time you'll hear the word "swag" used in its appropriate context all year, so that's not to be missed.