

Making it big

By: Anna Turner

For The Miami Student

Run date: 10 Oct. 2008

It's 2:00 a.m.

The clientele of uptown's club scene is trickling out of various bars. Some are stumbling, some are crying and some are not sure what state they're in. The DJs are spinning the last track, bartenders are serving the last drink and bouncers are kicking out the last doorstop.

Another vivacious Oxford night has drawn to a close.

At the same time, another disgruntled band is left playing their final song to the faint applause of a few close friends who stayed throughout the whole concert.

For Byron Lewis, a Miami University sophomore and lead singer of the student-created band Portocal, this scene is nothing out of the ordinary.

"I don't think people even realize live music is an option," Lewis said. "They don't realize that there's something besides DJs and dance clubs. They don't know that they could go see a live band who writes their own music."

Portocal is a prime example of one such band.

The band originated in 2006 when then first-years Sam Hendricks, Eric Sunray and Ryan Stevenson realized their common interest in music could amount to more than good dinner conversation. Stevenson, now a junior, said the creation of Portocal flowed smoothly.

"We knew we had something good," Stevenson said, "but we couldn't get anywhere without a singer."

After finding a vocalist in the form of Lewis, Hendricks, Sunray and Stevenson—drums, guitar and bass, respectively—launched a campaign to complete their first EP, or extended play, named such because it does not have enough tracks to be an album and it has too many tracks to be a single.

In August 2008, Portocal recorded six original songs at Group Effort Studios in Covington, KY, and compiled them into the EP, titled *Regression*.

Despite having completed their first CD, Portocal faces the dilemma of branching out in Oxford's underdeveloped independent music scene.

According to Stevenson, Portocal has fallen victim to the DJ trend, a lack of student support and a decreasing opportunity to perform and hear live music in Oxford.

While Portocal may have something good, Stevenson said, to make it in Oxford, a band needs more than just talent.

Jason McMahan, CEO of Substream Music Press, a magazine that works to expose up-and-coming bands, says that to become a successful band, a good product needs to be something unique and professional—like *Regression*.

With tracks recorded, Hendricks said the next step for Portocal is to book gigs with local bars.

"Now that we have the EP we can send it to bars," Hendricks said. "The plan is simple: send it to bars and get gigs."

While the plan might appear to be simple, Matt Hughes, owner of Stadium Bar and Grill, said bar owners are looking to book bands that will bring in crowds—and revenue. Bands can pocket anywhere from \$100 to \$700 a gig and the more people they bring in, the better they do fiscally.

"It's really hard for me to take a risk on someone who is completely unproven," Hughes said.

To Lewis, Portocal must be entertaining to draw a crowd, with good stage presence and a fun environment to lure people to the bars to hear their music.

As a member of a fellow student band looking to hit the big times, junior TJ Slattery of Sex Kitchen Love Cooks said drawing a crowd is the key to booking future gigs and making a name for a band in Oxford.

“If you have a great energy and a great performance then the crowd will love you,” Slattery said. “Club owners will take note of this.”

However, in the past few years, Hughes said crowds have been less receptive of live music. According to Hughes, he and other bar owners have noticed the overriding popularity of DJs in comparison to live music.

“One reason for the decline in live music is that there are very few bars in town that actually do live music,” Hughes said. “What really hurts the bands is the lack of opportunity to play somewhere. Most venues now have switched solely to DJ.”

Chris Skaggs, bassist of Sex Kitchen Love Cooks, said he believes the lack of interest in live music at uptown venues is a direct result of students’ fear of the unknown.

“Everybody wants a DJ so that they can hear music they know,” Skaggs said. “They don’t want to pay to hear a band that they aren’t familiar with and might not like when they can pay to hear a DJ who will play songs they know and enjoy.”

Echoing Skaggs, Hendricks said Miami students want to hear music that is familiar to them, so they end up going to clubs and listening to dance music instead of discovering a new band.

Sunray, too, agreed that a desire for popular dance music drowns out the allure of a student indie band.

“There isn’t enough interest in diversifying what people listen to,” Sunray said. “It’s a shame because there is a lot of good music out there, and unfortunately the students are missing out on it right now.”

And therein lays the tragedy of student interest in the independent music scene: They either do not know about it, or do not want to know about it. For students to become aware of the music scene, bands need to get exposure by starting small—house parties and philanthropy events—and working their way up to shows at bars and clubs, suggests SKLC. “If you get more exposure, you get more student support.”

While student support factors into what is considered a successful show, Portocal knows that it is not just about the crowd. “A show can be a success on multiple levels,” Sunray said. “A show is a success if we play our best with good energy and presence, regardless of how large the crowd is.”

If the band does play their best, a fan base will follow, as will more shows, and the band will establish itself as part of the music scene. But if they want to *stay* a part of the music scene, the band has to bring something new to the table. If a student band wants to be known by name and not as “a student band,” they need to be not only unique, but talented in all aspects of creating and performing original music.

According to Mary Schatz, account representative for Ivy Hill Cinram, the world’s largest CD and DVD manufacturer, in a college music scene, you run the risk of having clone bands playing the same covers every night.

“There’s always going to be imitators who jump on the bandwagon,” Schatz said. “The bands that are successful right now are not compromising themselves; they are not trying to fit into a mold. And of course they have to be talented.”

Sara Reynolds, a Sophomore zoology major, says, “People won’t go to a concert unless the band is actually good. If a band doesn’t have talent, then they will not get anywhere, whether it be here at Miami or wherever.”

So, a quick recap: Bands need to be talented. If they are talented, they need to work on getting a good product. The product needs to be enhanced by a great live performance. A great live performance draws a crowd and club owners like this. BUT, club owners also like that DJs draw an even bigger crowd because students choose dance music over live music, and now the bands have to change the students' minds. The more exposure a band gets the more student support they receive, and, in time, they are part of Miami's music scene and to stay in the scene, they need to be original. They can be original if they have talent.

Portocal is jumping into the above Circle of Life headfirst, ready to introduce their music to people at Miami and hopefully beyond. Their recently released EP can be previewed at www.myspace.com/portocal (you can also look at photos, find show dates, and learn more about the band) and purchased at any of Portocal's upcoming shows (see inset calendar). "We're confident in our craft, and we think we have a good thing going," Sunray says. "And yeah, we're frustrated with the music scene, but we feel like it has so much potential."

And as soon as that potential breaks free from its confines under Miami's current music scene, that same disgruntled band from before will be playing to a packed bar, their music drowned out by a cacophony of hysterical fans, both close friends and complete strangers, that stayed out until 2:00 a.m. in Oxford.



**All materials copyright and
exclusively owned by Anna
Turner and Snobster Media
LLC.**

**Our Media is Better Than
Your Media.**