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Singing Saw's Christmastime Tour

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GET ALL OF WSJ.COM: [SUBSCRIBE NOW - GET 8 WEEKS FREE](#)By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

Julian Koster first experienced the splendors of the singing saw as a child in New York. "I saw an old man playing one in Central Park," he said. "It was like magic. I couldn't comprehend it—I couldn't believe it was real."



Enlarge Image

Ramsay de Givie for The Wall Street Journal

The Music Tapes brought their show to a home in Bushwick on Friday.

Since then, Mr. Koster has made the singing saw a tool of art. His own work on saw—a usually toothless but otherwise ordinary metal handsaw that issues otherworldly sounds when bowed—has graced the songs of the iconic indie rock band Neutral Milk Hotel. It also served as the impetus for an unusual enterprise that found him leading a fantastical music troupe around Brooklyn on Friday night, one open home at a time.

The occasion was the Music Tapes Holiday Caroling Tour, for which Mr. Koster, 39 years old, currently of Tivoli, N.Y., ventures across the country to perform in houses, apartments, barns—anywhere to which an invitation is extended during an open call announced a few weeks in advance. Part of the program includes seasonal songs he recast for a magisterial album called "The Singing Saw at Christmastime," but the repertoire boasts much more.

Mr. Koster's touring companions this year include Robbie Cucchiaro, 37, and Ian Ludders, 33, fellow Music Tapes bandmates who play a share of idiosyncratic instruments—trombone, euphonium, toy piano—between them. Other members of the ensemble include an organ-grinding robot, an orchestra made up of mechanical mice and a singing plastic snowman that illuminates on cue.

Ten days into the itinerary, the first New York stop on Friday was at a cramped apartment in Bushwick, where the Music Tapes squeezed into a corner of the living room. "One of the best parts of this trip is you get to play in such different places," Mr. Koster said. "Sometimes you play for senior citizens and sometimes you go to Arkansas and play to dads in track suits."

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His audience in Bushwick comprised about a dozen curious onlookers who were friends of Max Kyburz, a 22-year-old who grew up revering Neutral Milk Hotel and whose apartment walls granted pride of placement to a movie poster for "The Big Lebowski." Later, after an hour-long performance that mingled music with spells of surrealist storytelling, Mr. Kyburz said, "That was the best Christmas present I could get. I felt just like a kid."

The next stop for the night was in Midwood, at a spacious standalone house filled with around 40 older attendees and set up with a potluck dinner and offerings of mulled wine. Addressing the crowd, Mr. Koster said, "I come from a mixed background: Romanian gypsies, Russian Jews, followers of various strains of Christianity. I don't believe in reality, but I do believe in belief."

Among the stories he told was an only partly scrutable tale tracing the roots of a favorite song to Billie Holiday, Cary Grant and a bowl of oatmeal allegedly made to levitate and assume new form as a moon. That song, Mr. Koster said, was "The First Noel," which he and Mr. Ludders proceeded to perform as a stirring singing-saw duet.

From there, the Music Tapes were back in the van to make their way to the night's last stop. "We always have to be careful with our expectations for the next place, because we never know what it will be like until we get there," said Mr. Cucchiaro.

He had not imagined anything like the night's final destination: a monumental mansion completed in 1898 and home now to the president of Pratt Institute in Clinton Hill. A few students who board in a different part of the house had clandestinely arranged to host the caroling tour in the basement, so the Music Tapes once again loaded in and set up their performance array. The show was similar to the evening's earlier incarnations, but the crowd of 30 or so art-school students proved especially amenable. At one point, Mr. Koster introduced the singing snowman, a giant figurine placed in front of a microphone and illuminated when vocal parts came up in a recording of an old Hawaiian Christmas song. At another point, the band paused to grant time to a collection of animatronic mice programmed to play bells.

"It turned out so much better than I imagined it could," said Olivia Russin, 20, one of the hosts of the show. "Everyone left completely elated."

After eight hours of performing, the Music Tapes appeared tired but ready to continue on the next day, first to a couple of stops upstate and later into New England.

"Folks invite us into their homes and we get to meet their friends and see into different worlds," Mr. Koster said, his singing saw stowed in its sheath in the van. "It creates this really big feeling that we get to travel through."

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