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At WFMU, Loyal Fans Step in to Save the Day

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

From a little brick building in Jersey City, amid a mess of cultural detritus including an Andy Williams album cover affixed with googly eyes and a series of kitschy black "Velvet Republicans" paintings from Mexico, beams the signal of the eccentric radio station WFMU. Active on the airwaves since 1958, nothing about it seems the least bit tuned to convention.

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Claudio Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal

Jersey City's WFMU is hosting a benefit in Brooklyn this weekend.

on the wall by a devoted listener who mails in drawings every week with fantastical creatures and abundant entrails on display.

Messrs. Williams and Freedman were on duty a few days before a big weekend for WFMU, which on Sunday will host a benefit concert and a scaled-back version of its annual record fair at the Bell House in Brooklyn. Fundraisers are typical for the proudly listener-supported station—as is the record fair, a near-religious experience for the area's analog audiophiles—but this one is uncommon for its cause: \$250,000 in losses from damage incurred as a result of Hurricane Sandy.

The storm silenced WFMU, which is housed just two blocks from the Hudson River, but not for long. When power went out in the studio building, the station's music obsessives went to work from other locations. On the morning of the storm, Mr. Freedman, a 53-year-old lifer who started at WFMU as a DJ in 1983, conceived a "playlist" of songs to be contemplated, if not actually heard, while broadcasting capacity was down. (Taking silence and negation as a theme, selections included a famous piece by John Cage and "Nothing" by the anarchic 1960s New York folk band the Fugs.) He was able to post the playlist on the station's website, which

"That's a dinosaur bone," DJ Scott Williams said, pointing across the studio in which he was broadcasting music for his weekly free-form show. "Just another thing that found its way in here, like this ray gun."

He shot invisible lasers while station general manager Ken Freedman walked over to inspect the curio in the booth. "Alas, it's a papier-mâche bone," he said, before shifting attention to art



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remained active thanks to a fortuitous decision two months prior to move its operations to the online "cloud."

"Even though both transmitters and the studio were knocked out, our listeners stayed on the site, where they were able to chat with one another," Mr. Freedman said.



Enlarge Image

Giuliano Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal

Ken Freedman, general manager of WFMU, in the record library at the Jersey City radio station.

By noon that day, another DJ tapped into the station's server remotely and reactivated its radio signal at 91.1 FM —opening the airwaves to WFMU's spirited eclecticism once again. All the while, as station workers scurried to broadcast from makeshift setups during and after the storm, loyal listeners flooded the website with pledges for a recovery not even yet under way.

"Over night, before we realized what was happening, \$10,000 was donated by our listeners without us even asking," Mr. Freedman said. "We immediately started fixing things."

The building avoided the flooding that afflicted much of Jersey City, as it has the good fortune to sit on a four-block "island" that the waters failed to reach. But power remained out for five days, and electrical aberrations in the area destroyed much of its equipment.

"I have so many insurance policies for weird, arcane things because we're a radio station and are also very active on the web," Mr. Freedman said. "We have a policy for everything—or so I thought."

Damages were estimated at \$250,000, an imposing sum for a famously idiosyncratic operation run largely by volunteers. But WFMU righted itself, all things considered, with alacrity. Thanks to its listener-supported culture, borne from a tradition of pledge drives aided by vaunted local bands (Yo La Tengo, Sonic Youth) and talk-radio-friendly comedians (Tom Scharpling, Patton Oswalt), the station raised the money it needed most urgently online in just three weeks.

Next come the funds to be raised on Sunday, which will help offset losses owing to the cancellation of the station's annual record fair, which was originally to be held in Manhattan in early November. The fair will be followed at the Bell House by a concert featuring raucous revival-rock band the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, revved-up gospel group the Relatives and the Dot Wiggin Band, led by a member of the notoriously misbegotten '60s girl-group the Shaggs. (On Friday, the Bell House will host another benefit show for a local music-scene stalwart, Norton Records, whose Red Hook warehouse was decimated by the storm.)

"FMU is a fantastic, beautiful radio station, one of the best in the country if not the world," said Jon Spencer, whose band performed on-air at the station just days before Sandy. "We need more stations like FMU, which has turned me on to all sorts of crazy ideas and sounds and new things."

That sense of community has carried over to every aspect of the enterprise. "Insurance didn't give us any money and all these other institutions that we hoped might give us nothing, but it was hard to be angry when so many I wasn't expecting did," Mr. Freeman said. "It was our community that came through. It was the only thing we had."

A version of this article appeared January 11, 2013, on page A15 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: *Riding Its Devotees to Safety*.

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