



Skeleton crew mural at WFMU studios, New Jersey

Live radio is striving to be a voice of the community amid the fragility of the locked-down world, says WFMU music director **Olivia Bradley-Skill**

The reality of Covid-19 hit WFMU right at the end of our fundraising marathon in early March. At that point, we decided to cancel our annual record fair, which occurs every April in Brooklyn, as well as all events at our performance venue Monty Hall in Jersey City. Shortly after, Station Manager Ken Freedman made the decision that only a small skeleton crew of seven people could come into the station from that point forward. The other 60 DJs on WFMU's main stream would broadcast from home, with the skeleton crew taking shifts to operate the studio and ensure that all the shows aired properly. We are now preparing ourselves for the possibility of not being able to return to normal operations for as long as a year.

On the one hand, Covid creates the perfect environment for radio – a global captive audience all experiencing the same crisis. But with hardly anyone allowed into the station, it's been a huge learning curve to get home studios up and running for so many housebound DJs. Luckily, we have had a history of live remote broadcasts at various events over the years, and our internet-only alternate streams have been able to help provide tutorials for those in need. However, even with the benefit of this expertise, it has been a challenge to navigate live remote broadcast

streaming at this scale. Preserving the art of live radio is no easy task over the internet. With live streaming, a lot is out of our control; a fragile internet connection can ruin everything. A couple of weekends ago, a tree went down in Hoboken, New Jersey, and took out internet service in the whole area, affecting the shows of two DJs who live there. After hours of successful tests for live broadcast, we were forced to air archive programs.

While live streaming has been extremely frustrating in some ways, the unpredictability of it all, as well as the precarious nature of new and varied DJ home set-ups, has added a new kind of intimacy and energy to our programming. It's exciting to hear DJs adapt to their new situations, and it creates an on-air vulnerability that many listeners find appealing, possibly since it reflects their own circumstances. The skeleton crew consists of the small paid staff. Our jobs have changed significantly to accommodate the new normal. For example, we've shifted our hours so that we can have someone behind the board 24/7. We try to keep it to only three skeletons in the building at one time. Everyone washes their hands as soon as they enter the building, and we disinfect the studio at the beginning of each new shift. Because

we are usually dependent on our volunteers after our fundraising marathon to mail out pledge rewards, we have had to make it work with far fewer people. As for me, I've been trying to figure out how best to share new music with DJs. In normal times, we keep a physical 'new bin' that DJs go through before their shows. Of course, this is inaccessible to most right now, and physical mail itself has been in a bit of crisis, as some labels are unable to access their warehouses.

Despite all these challenges, our commitment to keeping the station on the air gives us a sense of purpose. We've heard from so many listeners, new and old, who have told us how grateful they are that WFMU is still on the air. Our streaming and chat board traffic are the highest they've ever been. This has re-emphasised for us how crucial radio is for our listeners, especially in times of crisis, even if it just allows them an opportunity to escape for a little while. We are happy that we can continue to broadcast during this time, but this crisis has surely reminded us that WFMU is so much more to us than just music. It really is a community. I think this is something a lot of us are really missing right now, and we are counting down the days until we can get back to that. □

Mural: Daisy Freedman/Photography Olivia Bradley-Skill