

The Sound of COMMUNITY

BY DEBRA
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From Sergeantsville to Cape May to Jersey City, independent radio stations are amplifying local voices while preserving culture, creativity and connection

Maggie Hertz and Clay Pigeon of WFMU.

Photo by Greg Harrison



The initial ho-hum impression you might have of a community radio station is that of a hobbyist sitting in a small home studio with a microphone and turntable discussing a historical happening, issuing an alert for a missing pet, or applauding the abundant crop at the local farm, while in-between spinning records.

Well, you would be somewhat correct in that assertion but boring it is not.

Basically, this is what community radio is today — homey, yet quite bold in its programming and free of commercials, political talk, or news that is typical of a large private or for-profit radio station.

“For a lot of people, it’s kind of a sanctuary,” said Walter Haake, operations and development coordinator at WDVR 89.7 FM, which is housed in an old blacksmith shop in Sergeantsville. “We’re kind of a voice for doing good. We have to look out for ourselves as a community.”

So, while it means having a public service obligation to report emergency management updates such as road closures during a hurricane as area listeners tune in on their hand cranked or battery powered radios, community radio is also known for some very entertaining on-air stuff.

Nearly every hour sets a different tone regularly interspersed with talk about goings-on in the community or light conversations with listeners through call-ins or email messaging. Unpaid devoted disc jockeys bring their personal brand of banter and musical styles to these eclectic grassroots stations to engage listeners with varied daily around-the-clock programming.

At WDVR, DJ Kathleen Connally receives 75 to 100 emails during her Monday Road Runner drive time music show — and answers all of them — while simultaneously handling the broadcasting equipment for her two-hour program during which she also announces community events.

“You just don’t get that kind of personal vibe anywhere else except, what we say, left of the dial on the FM radio band,” Connally said. “WDVR is a jewel in terms of bringing people in for those reasons. Being approachable, being real people makes you relevant against a culture that’s being anonymized.”

Anne Walsh, station manager for WCFA in Cape May, 101.5 FM, which operates in the historic Franklin Street School, stresses the value of community within a shore area that serves residents and millions of visitors each summer.

Prince Rama Live at WFMU's Monty Hall.



Photo by John Dalton ↑

Photo courtesy of WDVR ↓



WDVR hosts Mike Ehn, left, and Walter Haake.

WDVR hosts Radio Rita, left, and Barb Zentner.



↑ Photo courtesy of WDVR

↓ Photo courtesy of WCFA



WCFA hosts Barbara Groark and Jerry Ruane.

"Importantly, we help bridge the digital divide by offering this free, accessible programming, bringing people together through events, partnerships, and experiences," said Walsh, who hosts *It's All Good*. "We play a role in preserving local history and culture, and that's big in Cape May."

Supported by nonprofit entities, underwriting, fundraising efforts, and a cadre of volunteer DJs and engineers, these independent broadcasters are committed to their craft as they compete with podcasts, streaming, and the internet.

"We really exist because of volunteers and the people who dedicate thousands of annual hours to keep us on the air," Walsh said. "This year, we celebrate 20 years on the air, and we're going to continue to provide a platform for the community expression, creative programming, and the important local partnerships that we have to serve our local community with that volunteer passion."

The freeform format is the accepted norm for community radio DJs. During the course of a week, you might never hear the same on-air personality or programming twice — so varied are the schedules.

"We offer shows featuring interviews, poetry, literature, spoken word programming. So, each program is driven by the passion, creativity of our volunteers," Walsh explained. "We don't follow a rigid playlist or corporate format. Our hosts have the freedom to shape their own shows, which creates a more personal, enjoyable and predictable listening experience."

In Jersey City, WFMU 91.1 FM is the longest running freeform radio station in the country. It began in 1958 at Upsala College in East Orange but now broadcasts from a former egg processing facility with extra space to host local talent in their Monty Hall. Its current programming across several frequencies and livestreams is described on the website as "flat-out uncategorizable strangeness."

"We wanted to compete with ourselves," explained Ken Freedman, station manager/program director and co-host of *Well Dressed Fancy Dandies* about the extra channels. "The idea being that as a freeform station we're so diverse and so unpredictable that there's no question that sometimes people are not going to like what they hear so we wanted to give people other options they could listen to and remain under the WFMU tent. As the years have progressed since the late 60s, we've evolved to being more of an alternative to other alternative stations."

And so it is that unique community radio programs beget unique program titles.

WFMU radiocasts include Music to Spazz By, Sinner's Crossroads, Out Here in the Field, and the "21" Lounge.

Off the Wall, Teens of the Hour, The Ripple Effect, and Pausing for Poetry are programs on WCFA.

WDVR features Bluegrass Horizon, Kickin' Country, Hot Wax, and Left Bank.

Just think, it all began during the "Golden Age of Radio" in the 1920s and 1930s when families discovered radio and gathered around "the box" to get news bulletins, listen to dramas and comedy shows, hear an agricultural report, enjoy live music, and catch sports play-by-plays.

Today, the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB) helps these nonprofit stations by providing guidance, education, advocacy,

technology, and other resources to help with sustainability in this burgeoning digital age.

"What (stations) don't typically expect from their membership is the camaraderie, unwavering peer support, and the actual human beings answering their every call and replying to their every email," wrote Serah Mead, NFCB director of Member Engagement, in an email. "Being part of NFCB is being part of a vibrant web of sister stations all over the country, who share realities, hardships, successes, and passion for nonprofit community broadcasting."

Community radio offers live streaming and program schedules on their websites for listeners around the world who are seeking a distinctive auditory experience. Some even offer opportunities for individuals to get on the air with a new programming idea. ❖

Dennis Flannigan, left, and Steve Scheff, hosts of WCFA's The Ripple Effect.



Photo courtesy of WCFA ↗