

# AthFest Cancelled for Second Consecutive Year, September Days Fest Steps Up In Its Place

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*(Photo Courtesy/ Minsong Kim)*

*Lighthearted band members (from left to right) Gracie Huffman, Win Cawthorne, Eliza Huffman, and Toni Hunlo posing for a group photo.*

Twin sisters Gracie and Eliza Huffman grew up playing music with one another in their hometown of Marietta, Georgia. At the University of Georgia, on a YoungLife retreat, they met Win Cawthorne and Toni Hunlo. The four bonded over their love for music. Shortly after meeting one another they decided to form a band. Their band, Lighthearted, is one of many bands who have planted their roots in Athens, Georgia.

**Why it's Newsworthy: While more live events are taking place as vaccines roll out, there still remains strict protocol in place to ensure the safety of attendees. These protocols are based on local COVID statistics, making live events subject to cancellations at any time.**

Lighthearted is one of the many local bands that have had to take a year off of live performances around Athens. Their big music festival debut was set to happen at AthFest, until it was cancelled.

The band formed in the fall of 2019 and played its first show at 1000 Faces Coffee that October ). Andrew Blooms was running sound and asked to record the band because he found something unique about their music. By December, they were recording their first EP "Asking for a Friend" which was released May 15, 2020.

"When our band was getting its feet off the ground, the pandemic hit. We were set to play the Georgia Theatre in April of 2020 which was postponed then eventually cancelled because of the pandemic," Gracie Huffman, songwriter and lead vocalist, said. "We were supposed to co-headline the 40 Watt, and we have not played either of those venues because they've been on lock down."

What should have been an exciting year for the young band quickly turned into a year-long hiatus from live performances. They were forced to turn to their digital platform to grow their audience and establish themselves in the Athens music scene.

When the number of COVID cases began to slow and live performance spaces began to reopen, Lighthearted was presented with what Huffman referred to as a goal she never thought would be achievable.

"We got an email that was an offer for (playing) AthFest," Huffman said. "Personally it was a huge victory, and even though it's not happening, which is just really heartbreaking, it's cool to know the value that other people place in our music in order to place us on a roster that is that acclaimed and has that much history backing it."



*(Photo Courtesy/ Minsong Kim)*

*The young band was set to make its big return to live performances at AthFest. AthFest is a three day music and art festival that has been running in the Athens community for 25 years.*

## AthFest : 25 Years of Music from Athens

AthFest is a three day music and art festival that has been running in the Athens community for 25 years. The festival is free for its audience, and 100% of the proceeds from the event are donated to AthFest Educates, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that supports music and art education for the local youth in the Athens schools and community.

The festival was unable to run in 2020 due to the rising COVID cases in Athens-Clarke County. However, on May 11, 2021 AthFest Educates put out a statement notifying the community the festival would return in the fall of 2021.

Rachel Allen, the media representative for AthFest Educates, said the planning for the 2021 AthFest had been going on since last March.

“They (the AthFest board) decided to move forward when COVID case rates were slowing down. Everybody kind of thought it would be safer, closer to the fall, to give time for everybody to get vaccinated and that the numbers would have been fine in June, but they are not fine now,” Allen said.

On September 9, 2021 AthFest officially cancelled the festival because the Athens-Clarke County government would not issue the festival’s final permit.

## By the Numbers

Jeff Montgomery, a Public Information Officer for the Athens Clarke County Unified Government, explained AthFest falls under a special event and was therefore handled under special circumstances.

The ACC government put in place a special event policy in April 2021 to approve each event that uses public city property. The policy requires an initial provisional approval where the event organizers pitch the idea and precautions it will put in place to mitigate any risk factors.

The event would later need a final approval to be granted based on the numbers of positive PCR (polymerase chain reaction) cases per 100,000 in the area. This means how many people test positive for COVID per 100,000 people in the Athens-Clarke County area.

The final approval is measured by three different thresholds of positive PCR cases throughout a 42- day period. There is a check of positive PCR cases 42 days before the event, 28 days before the event, and finally seven to 14 days before the event.

“The final approval threshold for seven to 14 days is 300 or fewer positive PCR cases per 100,000 people over a rolling 14- day period,” Montgomery said. On September 9, 2021 the [Georgia Department of Health](#) had reported 1,003 cases per 100,000 people over a 14- day period in Athens-Clarke County.

The AthFest organization informed their artists of the cancellation prior to the public announcement regarding the fate of the festival.

Allen said the team behind AthFest was hoping the numbers would be low enough for the final permit to be issued.

“We knew we would find out whether or not the final permit would be issued and it would be based on COVID numbers so we were crossing our fingers that those numbers would be going down and be in a safe zone and then they weren't,” Allen said.

The disappointment of a second cancellation is felt by all those [involved](#). In the official announcement of the festival’s cancellation, AthFest Educates said they will reassess the situation in January 2022.

## A Second Shot at a First Chance

A silver lining presented itself, however, in the form of a new festival announcement. On September 13, Southern Brewing Company announced the brand new September Days Fest, produced by Aubrey Entertainment. The festival was held on the same days AthFest was set to, September 24 through the 26, still donating to AthFest Educates and Lighthearted was able to perform.

Huffman said after all the time they’ve had off to grow and solidify as a band, they are ready to get back to performing in front of a live audience.

“It’s honestly been a bit of a blessing because I don’t know that we would have been able to utilize the platform of those bigger venues being as early on in our career as we were when we first started. We’re now better musicians and have grown together as friends and as people.”