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AthFest Makes Musical Inroads to Local Schools

Forget afternoon cartoons—some lucky Athens kids now spend their after-school hours jamming to the music of artists like Johnny Cash, Bob Marley, and Pink Floyd as performed by local Athens musicians.

All thanks to the volunteers of AthFest. Athens' annual music festival has evolved into a bona fide patron of music education. In the past year, the organization has implemented several new educational programs designed to benefit students in the Clarke County School District.

Its foremost programs, AthFest AfterSchool and AthFest InSchool, bring local musicians into elementary schools for interactive music education. Musicians play songs and discuss everything from the mechanics of their instruments and how they produce sound to songwriting and the business of touring.

"We want to show kids that even local people can create music—it's not just on the radio," says AthFest director Jared Bailey. According to Bailey, the new programs are an effort to "farm" new talent in the industry while supporting current musicians by providing them with a living wage for their involvement in the program.

One participant is musician Don Chambers, who compares the experience of performing for kids to playing in a sort of upbeat prison in which all the inmates are unusually short.

"Having 150 kids beat their lunch boxes against the tables to the rhythm of "Jingle Bells" and screaming the lyrics at the top of their lungs is pretty rewarding. That's about as punk rock as it gets," says Chambers of his holiday performance last December.

Though Chambers has toured extensively, he describes the young audience of his cafeteria venue as "the best ever." Participating musicians work to expose the kids to as many different instruments and genres of music as possible. Carl Lindberg, in particular, runs the gamut, playing everything from "old-school" blues to bossa nova and reggae. Though primarily a bassist, Lindberg also enjoys demonstrating on the guitar, and has even introduced kids to the *cajon*, an Afro-Peruvian box drum.

"I love seeing them come in so jaded from a long day at school and then come alive with the music," says Lindberg. Jason Harwell of the Warm Fuzzies says he focuses on making the music fun and relatable to kids. "Yeah, I'll rap- I'm not afraid of that," he laughs. Harwell strongly encourages other musicians to get involved. "Being a musician in Athens can be depressing sometimes. You don't always feel like you're getting back what you put in, so it's great to be able to separate from that whole deal. It's inspired me because I get to be a big kid and remember why I enjoy music."

AthFest volunteers also run "Keys for Kids," an ongoing instrument drive to provide music equipment to kids who cannot afford them. For more information about donating or getting involved, contact Jared Bailey at (706) 548-1973 or director@athfest.com.