

by Daniel Sutphin
October 4, 2020



Survey says: People want the arts back in Southwest Florida



Principal Bass, Christopher Riley, warms up before a Punta Gorda Symphony performance. Photo by Jerry Beard.

PUNTA GORDA — Finding live music and other performing arts in Southwest Florida was never a problem before coronavirus.

Music festivals, concerts, opera and comedy troupes, solo performers and more filled area event calendars on a monthly basis.

But then the lights went dark on stages around the country.

It's too soon to tell how Gov. Ron DeSantis's recent executive order to reopen the state will affect live shows in the area, but a recent survey in Charlotte County showed that people want them back.

The Punta Gorda Symphony sent out a survey in July that garnered 219 respondents, and 70% said they would be likely to attend an outdoor concert, and 95% are willing to comply with a mask requirement.

At the time of the survey, the Punta Gorda Symphony opted to move their entire 2020-2021 season of events to 2021-2022.

How that will change now could not be determined.

Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce President John Wright said they'll feel the hit when it comes to local festivals being shut down.

"The Minda Abair Festival in November is the only one we operate and promote that is postponed currently," Wright said. "Over 1,000 (people) attend our Minda event so the impact on restaurants, hotels, gas stations and retail, although not exactly quantified, will be significant."

Wright went on to say that their annual Wine & Jazz festival in February is currently under review.

Punta Gorda staff have been backed up with event permits — from October 2020 through next year — because of coronavirus regulations.

At a Sept. 3 meeting, the City Council voted to move forward with processing those permits as long as promoters present their plans for maintaining public safety and social distancing.

Council members also voted to lift attendance restrictions for upcoming events.

Both decisions were made in light of the governor's executive order.

The Gulfshore Opera, a performing arts production group out of Naples, conducted a survey of their patrons which spanned Lee, Collier and Charlotte counties.

“(We had an) overwhelming response to having open air outdoor events for the majority of our events through Christmas (2020),” said general director Steffanie Pearce.

“Big picture is we surveyed our patrons about comfort level over the next few months (and we had an) overwhelming response to having open air outdoor events for the majority of our events through Christmas,” Pearce said.

Pearce said everyone is taking it a step at a time to see how it goes.

“I’m sensing that although we are dealing with a lot of people in the vulnerable age group (here),” Pearce said, “they are starved for some social contact. They really are feeling very isolated. It’s depressing and they want to stay safe but they really want to get out and see friends and enjoy activities. That’s the type of environment we are trying to create.”

In Sarasota, Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall also conducted a survey of its patrons.

“The results indicated that the majority of our patrons can’t wait to return and enjoy live entertainment as soon as it is safe,” said Van Wezel spokesperson Natasha Herrera.

“We know that live entertainment will make a triumphant comeback when the time is right,” Herrera continued, “and we can’t wait to see everyone when that day comes.”