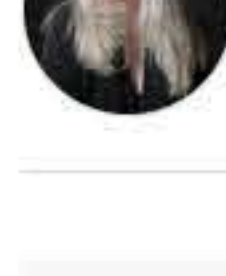


ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

When legends collaborate with locals



BY JANA MARCUS February 23, 2026

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A new concert series pairs Santa Cruz County musicians with iconic artists such as Lol Tolhurst of The Cure and David J of Bauhaus and Love and Rockets for collaboration, mentorship and a shared stage.

Opportunities are the quiet currency of any arts community, and for many local musicians, they have become increasingly scarce. Santa Cruz County has never lacked talent, but in a shifting cultural landscape marked by a shrinking number of venues and fewer clear pathways upward, even the most dedicated artists can find themselves treading water.

Enter Matthew Swinnerton, founder of [Event Santa Cruz](#). He's testing a different model. "Legends: Live and Local" aims to address that gap by offering something rare: access not just to a stage, but to collaboration and mentorship with iconic musicians who have built long, sustainable careers.

At a time when many music events lean heavily on nostalgia or spectacle, "Legends: Live and Local" takes a different tack. Rather than presenting a tribute or traditional headliner, the series places local musicians at the center of the experience, pairing them with internationally known artists for a full day of rehearsal, conversation and creative exchange, followed by a shared live performance. The emphasis isn't celebrity proximity. It's process, access and what musicians gain when careers briefly overlap.

For more than a decade, Swinnerton has been connecting people in Santa Cruz County through initiatives such as the [Midtown Friday summer block parties](#), the NEXTies awards, and New Music January. Each grew from the same impulse: to spotlight creative work happening in the community and give it room to grow, breathe, and be recognized.

What sets Swinnerton apart is not just the scale of what he produces, but the way he produces it. In a culture that often rewards self-promotion, Swinnerton operates differently. He listens, connects dots and creates conditions where other people get to shine. It's a style of leadership that feels increasingly rare these days.



Matthew Swinnerton of Event Santa Cruz at the 2024 NEXTies awards show. Credit: Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz.

Early Event Santa Cruz programs like the PhotoBomb speaker series, often described as a TED-style talk series for Santa Cruz, initially focused on entrepreneurs. Over time, that focus shifted organically toward the local music scene.

"In many ways, musicians are the ultimate entrepreneurs," Swinnerton said. "They produce their music, they promote it, they do every single aspect of their work."

That philosophy shapes "Legends: Live and Local." Developed with Swinnerton's creative partner [Jennifer Otter Bickerdike](#), a local who spent much of her career as a marketing director at Interscope Geffen A&M Records, the series draws on her experience working with artists including Nirvana, No Doubt, Rage Against the Machine and Pearl Jam.

If you go

What: "Legends: Live and Local"
When: Friday, Feb. 27 – 6 p.m. meet & greet/Q&A; 8:30 p.m. – live performance
Where: Hwy17 Studios, 831 Almar Ave., Santa Cruz
Tickets and info: [Click here](#)
Want to audition for a "Live and Local" mentorship? [Email Matthew Swinnerton](#)

"Jennifer knows so many musicians," Swinnerton said. "We could have easily just produced shows with celebrity headliners, but what drives this project is using those connections to help local musicians."

Santa Cruz got an early glimpse of the idea last summer when Jane Wiedlin, a founding member of The Go-Go's and a key figure in early alternative pop, performed to a sold-out crowd at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History alongside local musicians. The event served as a proof of concept and revealed unexpected possibilities.

For that show, Event Santa Cruz selected 10 local bands whose work demonstrated commitment and growth, and whose musical sensibilities aligned with Wiedlin's. Swinnerton sent videos to Wiedlin, who chose a collaborator. Rather than selecting a single band, Wiedlin surprised the organizers by hand-picking individual musicians from several groups.

"She picked a drummer from one band, a guitarist from another," Swinnerton recalled. "She basically assembled a Santa Cruz all-star band."



Jane Wiedlin of The Go-Go's performing with local musicians at the July 2025 "Legends: Live and Local" event at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History. Credit: Event Santa Cruz

Those musicians received Wiedlin's set list in advance and rehearsed independently. When the artist arrived, they spent the entire day together rehearsing and talking. "The locals were a bit nervous at first," Swinnerton said. "But within 15 minutes, they were making music together in a very natural way."

Intentionally avoiding a teacher-student dynamic, Swinnerton designed the mentorship day around connection rather than instruction.

"I didn't want it to feel like a workshop where someone stands at the front of the room," he said. "This is about just being together, sharing meals and making music."

That day culminated in a public performance that included a question-and-answer session and a shared musical set, giving audiences a chance to witness collaboration rather than a polished, prepackaged show.

The success of last summer's event informed the structure for a full "Legends: Live and Local" series in 2026. The first event takes place Friday, Feb. 27, and brings together two true legends of alternative music: Lol Tolhurst of The Cure and David J of Bauhaus and Love and Rockets.

Emerging from the post-punk movement of the late 1970s and early '80s, The Cure, Bauhaus and Love and Rockets reshaped alternative music by pushing punk's raw energy toward atmosphere, introspection, and emotional depth. Together, they helped define post-punk, gothic rock, and early alternative, opening space for experimentation that continues to ripple through contemporary music.

Tolhurst and David J will perform six of their most recognizable songs in collaboration with local band Trestles and vocalist Swan Porter, both chosen for the mentorship.

"Tolhurst and David J were drawn to Trestles' energy and enthusiasm," Swinnerton said. "Their sound is atmospheric and intense, and that really resonated with David J, who sees them as a strong fit for the concert's surprise finale."

Friday's public event will include storytelling, a Q&A and the collaborative set. And that surprise finale? Let's just say a celebrity guest or two might make an appearance.

The evening will also feature a pre-show event with local artists, vendors and food trucks at [Highway17 Studios](#) on Santa Cruz's Westside.

For Swinnerton, the larger meaning of the series matters as much as the performance itself.

"There's meaning behind everything we do at Event Santa Cruz," he says. "Midtown Fridays started as a way to support local businesses after COVID. The NEXTies became a way to recognize people doing meaningful work in town. With this series, we have an opportunity to give local artists a moment that genuinely helps move their careers forward. That's what gives this real purpose."

At its core, he said, "Legends: Live and Local" creates space. Space for conversation, collaboration and possibility. With a full 2026 lineup ahead, it's not just a concert series. It's an investment in what comes next.