That amorphous swath of the Bay Area known as Silicon Valley conjures images of Facebook’s headquarters more than it does live music and art, but that’s not to say the South Bay doesn’t have a vibrant cultural landscape of its own.

Summer is a time when the valley’s creative spirit shines brightest. Typically dormant streets and parks spring to life, showcasing acts both local and global, and celebrating old and new traditions. With long-standing institutions and under-the-radar events, the South Bay offers a lot to explore. Here are our eight must-do summer activities.
11th Annual SubZERO Festival

June 1-2
SoFA District, San Jose.
More Information.

SubZERO's tagline is “a DIY, artistically bent, hi/lo-techno mashup where street meets geek,” and the festival has emerged as one of the most authentic platforms for San Jose’s creative community. After more than a decade, its only constant is how eclectic and weird the weekend can be. This June, Human Art Collective is back with body painting; Haptic Synapses craft live analog techno on the street; and the Santa Clara County poet laureate Mighty Mike McGee shares his work between musical acts on the main stage, which features Lumerians and Death Cheetah.

The Mumlers, led by vocalist Will Sprott (third from R), reunite on June 16.

The Mumlers
June 16
The Ritz, San Jose
More Information
San Jose’s rich skateboarding community unites for a good cause next month, culminating in a rare reunion of South Bay indie rock favorites the Mumlers. This will be only their second performance over the past decade. Bandleader Will Sprott says the band has been busy with other projects—Sprott himself has been writing solo material and working with Oakland garage rock revivalists Shannon and the Clams—but he says the Mumlers are “getting back together to help raise cash for a friend.” The performance is a fundraiser in support of beloved local skater Gerry Juan.

Music in the Park: Tony! Toni! Tone!

June 22.
Plaza de Cesar Chavez, San Jose

More Information

Music in the Park may no longer be free, but the San Jose Downtown Association still presents live music at modest prices throughout the summer ($15 in advance for general admission; $35 for VIP). Legendary R&B trio Tony! Toni! Tone! from Oakland kicks off this year’s festival series at Plaza de Cesar Chavez on June 22. Don’t sleep on the stacked local undercard, which includes DJs Chale Brown and the CME, followed by neo-soul powerhouse No Water After Midnight—San Jose’s best kept musical secret.

"Crusoe" (2000) by Rafael Fajardo. (Courtesy of the artist)
NextNewGames

June 22 - Sept. 16
San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art
More Information

In the next installment of the biannual "NextNew" series, the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art presents eight artists who create "a porous relationship between the imaginary land of the game space and that of the real world." In "Liberty City," creative duo COLL.EO bring game play in Grand Theft Auto to a crawl, revealing a surprisingly active side to the extensive landscape by Rockstar Games designers. For a more hands-on experience, check out the work of Rafael Fajardo, whose two games provide contrasting glimpses into the experience of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

San Jose Obon Festival

July 14-15
San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin, San Jose
More Information

The San Jose Obon Festival is the biggest weekend of the year for San Jose's Japantown neighborhood. The fest coincides with the seasonal Buddhist tradition of honoring the spirits of ancestors. Yes, there are food and vendor booths, but the festival's centerpiece is usually San Jose Taiko, who mix booming percussion with light and fluid choreography. They've been sharing the Japanese tradition of kumidaiko, a drum performance style that's been around since the '50s, locally since 1973.
Pete Escovedo

Aug. 22
Town Plaza, Los Gatos

Born into a highly musical family, percussionist Pete Escovedo emerged as a Latin jazz heavyweight after his work in the ‘70s with Santana and Azteca. He's remained a South Bay crowd favorite ever since. (Did I mention he once owned a Latin jazz club in SJ’s SoFA District?) He's been a staple of Music in the Park’s programming over the years, and this year, fans can catch him at the more intimate Los Gatos Town Plaza. Escovedo and his band close out the free Jazz on the Plazz summer series, a Wednesday weekly that kicks off June 13. Bring a blanket or folding chair and make sure you arrive early to see a living legend up close.

Native Gardens

Opens Aug. 22
Center for Performing Arts, Mountain View

Theatreworks’ regional premiere, the latest play by Mexican-born, Washington, D.C.-based playwright Karen Zacarías, sees a territorial dispute devolve into a comedic examination of class, race and privilege. An upwardly
mobile Latino couple—attorney Pablo and his pregnant wife, doctoral candidate Tania—move next door to established D.C. couple Frank and Virginia, who have cultivated a stellar English garden in their backyard. When their long-standing property line comes into question, civility goes out the window. The play runs through Sept. 16.

Sonido Clash Festival  

*Sept. 2*  
*Mexican Heritage Plaza, San Jose*  

*More Information*  

Best known for their “Selenabration” tribute parties, which paid homage to Selena in San Jose and Oakland this year, the Sonido Clash collective has a reputation for curating Latinx sounds that honor the past while exploring the future of cumbia, Latin alternative and beyond. Presale passes for their third annual Sonido Clash Festival recently went on sale, but they have yet to reveal the acts for this summer’s festivities. Last year featured teenage heartthrob Cuco, “cholo goth” duo Prayers and Ecuadorian-American vocalist Helado Negro. Expect a similarly eclectic curation this September at Mexican Heritage Plaza.