

Evangelical Beachfest backed by 250 churches

Events (Festivals, Holidays etc)

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By David L. Beck
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"Great Music! Good News!" read the signs for Beachfest Santa Cruz. And unless you're hip to the world of evangelical Christianity, the small print — "with Luis Palau" — won't let you in on the secret.

Beachfest, a free, two-day event that could bring as many as 20,000 people a day to Main Beach, is a slick mix of high-powered Christian rock and some preaching.

"I hate the music," Palau is fond of saying, "but I love the kids."

Palau, 66, is a prototype of the modern, multimedia world-roaming evangelist, born in Argentina, ordained in Palo Alto, based in Portland, Ore., and appearing someday on a platform near you. He's one of about 20 American clergymen who have been summoned to the White House for a noon meeting with President Bush today.

His first festival featuring young people and loud music drew an estimated 93,000 people to Portland's Waterfront Park in 1999. A second one there the next year drew crowds of 55,000 and 85,000, according to Palau's organization. Crowds in Boise, Idaho, last month hit 50,000.

The Portland park adjoins downtown and is served by both buses and light rail. "We had a lot of people stopping by" in transit, said Da-

vid Gallagher, director of the Santa Cruz event. Shoppers and workers "would hear the music, stop by, come in."

"Here," in Santa Cruz, "the people who show up are going to have to make a much more concerted effort to find us."

The organization is confident that they will. It has spent nearly a year putting Beachfest together.

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About 250 churches in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties are participating. All but \$75,000 of the \$991,000 budget has been raised, Gallagher said. There have been prayer meetings, prayer walks, collections.

Beachfest has even advertised on KPIG, the local alternative-country radio station that claims the largest Internet audience on the planet. But if you didn't recognize the names of the musicians — who include hip-hop gospel star Kirk Franklin and the bands Skillet and dc Talk — or catch the quickly spoken word "Christian," you might not have cottoned to the religious angle.

"I think the way they've gone about organizing the thing ... without telling people what it is, seems like they're sneakily trying to convert people," said Phil Free, part of a worker-owned collective called the Sacred Grove, a Santa Cruz center for magic and witchcraft. "It doesn't seem like they've been very open about the fact that that's what it is."

But with Palau's banners in front of churches all over town, and Palau on late-night TV taking call-ins, the Christian angle is not entirely hidden. He spoke at a business and professional luncheon Monday in Monterey, and at another Tuesday at the Coconut Grove in Santa Cruz.

He even gave a news conference that opened and closed with prayers, while outside on the beach workmen were erecting the stage, the Jumbotron TV screen, the exhibition skateboard area and the rest of the large, complicated festival site.

Beachfest had to "jump through all the usual hoops," said Santa Cruz Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice. That includes building inspectors, a comprehensive traffic plan, permits and fees. The festival must clean Main Beach both before and after.

Fitzmaurice was worried about Palau's message. "Is Mr. Palau an inclusive person? Will he be welcoming to every member of our community? Especially the gay and lesbian community?"

And he worried, too, "about our own particular

BEACHFEST WITH EVANGELIST LUIS PALAU

Where: Main Beach, Santa Cruz

When: 4:30 to 10 p.m. Saturday, 1:30 to 7 p.m. Sunday

Parking: Remote lots and bus shuttles at Sky Park, Scotts Valley; Harvey West Park, Santa Cruz; Cabrillo College, Aptos. Walking, bicycling urged. No street parking near the beach.

Admission: Free. No tickets required

version of traffic — a cul-de-sac by the beach. I don't think they've run into that before." (There will be remote parking lots and bus shuttles.)

Palau responded, "It's not a party for Christians. We want gays to come. We want all groups to come. I've never in my life been anti-gay or homophobic." On the other hand, his is a Biblical message, he said. "If you ask me, 'Is adultery a sin?' I will say yes. If you ask me, 'Is premarital sex a sin?' I will say yes. If you ask me if practicing a gay lifestyle is a sin, the Bible says it is."

By "gay lifestyle," he meant gay sex, he said, adding he didn't bring the subject up, the press did.

"Probably a third of the kids that will be here have had premarital sex — plain old sex." The Bible tells them not to, he said. "But that doesn't mean I don't love 'em — or that I'm heterophobic because I tell the truth: 'Wait till you get married. It's better.'"

The festival will open early both days for food sales and the children's play area, followed by professional skateboard exhibitions. The Luis Palau Praise Band kicks off the music, followed by the Christian music stars, followed by Palau, followed by more music. Dc Talk and Jaci Velasquez are the Saturday and Sunday closers, respectively.

That doesn't seem to leave much time for Palau's preaching — about 40 minutes a day.

"That's a stretch for Luis to go that short," Gallagher said. "He's had to learn the new model."

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