

## **Matt Swinney grew Austin's fashion scene one Fashion X at a time**

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Christina Burke Fashion X Austin's Matt Swinney watches the runway at a 2013 Austin Fashion Week show. American-Statesman 2013

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### **Highlights**

Fashion X is celebrating 10 years of creating Austin fashion weeks.

Matt Swinney has big plans to move Fashion X forward while not losing its Austin roots.

Only in Austin could this story be true.

A local boy grew up playing baseball, got a degree in marketing, survived the tech bubble burst in Silicon Valley, then came home to run a real estate magazine. He launched an Austin lifestyle

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magazine, which led to creating a week celebrating Austin's restaurants, a modern home tour and an Austin fashion week. He would spotlight a growing fashion scene, and then spread that fashion week to other cities.

This is the story of Matt Swinney, founder of Fashion X, which is celebrating 10 years of creating Austin fashion weeks.

While you can see him at a Fashion X Austin or Houston or Dallas event wearing well-tailored suits by local designers, in his office in Allandale, he's more likely to be wearing shorts and a T-shirt. He still drives a green Jeep, his third ... or maybe fourth, and he remembers a time last century when you could get anywhere in Austin in 15 minutes and never worry about getting stuck in traffic or being late — which he hates to be.

He loves the friendliness of the Old Austin of his youth, of which he still can see elements, yet he's embraced the entrepreneurial spirit of New Austin. He's reinvented himself and everything he's done, and he has big plans to move Fashion X forward while not losing its Austin roots or his own.

"It speaks volumes that he's an Austinite," says designer Linda Asaf. "He has the heritage of growing up here."

### **Becoming Matt Swinney**

Swinney, 43, and his wife, Kara, are "unicorns," he says. They're native Austinites. They met in seventh grade at Martin Junior High. He had transferred there from Pease Elementary School, which he attended because his mom was a single mom working downtown and Pease had free after-school care. Kara Swinney was bused there. They were dating by age 15 when they were at Austin High School.

"We're those people," he jokes.

College took Swinney to Trinity University in San Antonio, where he got a degree in marketing. He and Kara settled in Houston, where she was in school studying physical therapy (she's now a practicing physical therapist at the Rise School), and he took a job with the firm Arthur Andersen, where he worked with tech clients. "I was one of a few people in the Houston office who was not in oil and gas," he says. It might have been a good thing. It was 1998. Soon the Enron scandal was beginning to unfold in Houston.

In 2000, he had a chance to relocate to San Francisco and work for a new startup that created online auction software. Money was being thrown at new startup tech companies without many actual results. Swinney rode out the wave of an office that grew quickly and shrank just as quickly. Clients were promised technology the company couldn't deliver, and Swinney would have to clean up the marketing mess left by someone long gone. On one occasion, he was flown to London to have the board of a company yell at him about the software not working. He was read the riot act, he says. "The whole time I'm sitting there thinking, 'If I can talk this guy off the ledge, why am I working for someone else?'"

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Everyone in the Bay Area was being laid off and applying for the same jobs at the time; the Swinneys decided to come home to Austin.

Swinney's father-in-law is a real estate attorney in Austin and was interested in starting a luxury real estate magazine, For Sale by Owner. Swinney ran it for a few years, but he says "it didn't fuel my blood." Publishing did, though. He thought there was a real need for a lifestyle magazine "that felt more like Austin" than what was available at the time. He launched Rare.

"It did very well" initially, he says.

He brought in a partner in 2006, then started Austin Restaurant Week after Kara Swinney visited New York with friends and experienced that city's restaurant week.

The magazine and the restaurant week were fun, but the publishing industry was changing, and his relationship with his partner was changing. "It was no longer fun. 'I'm out,'" he says. His partner bought him out and ran Rare and Austin Restaurant Week for a few years before both ended. (Central Texas Food Bank later relaunched Austin Restaurant Week).

### **The next venture**

The lessons of Rare and Austin Restaurant Week taught Swinney that he was really good at producing events. He also knew he had a city full of supporters and hadn't burned bridges in this town. "I can start something else," he remembers thinking once the partnership ended.

He launched a new event company, 787, with the idea of Austin Fashion Week, and found a new partner in Steven Tatton, who had Sure Fire Media and Promotions. The two met when Swinney booked some of the artists Tatton represented for a Rare magazine event.

"He had a lot of ideas about business, and I had a lot of ideas about business, and the conversations were easy," Tatton says about his first meetings with Swinney. Tatton remembers that Swinney had a sense that the small specialty magazine industry was going to go away. "He was looking for the next best thing," Tatton says.

"He started describing for me how a regular fashion week would work and how an Austin Fashion Week would work," Tatton says.

It would be geared toward boutique owners, and it would be done in a dead time of the year. Swinney knew he couldn't compete with all of the established Austin events of spring and fall with this new event. Instead he chose late July and early August. It was a calculated risk because now he was talking about doing a red carpet event in 100-degree heat, but media outlets looking for events to cover would notice it.

Tatton remembers that first event in 2009 at the Long Center and everyone pitching in to move chairs. It had the feel of "let's try it and see if it works," Tatton says. Leading up to it, there was a lot of doubt, Tatton says. "When you're doing a new event, there's always a sense of, 'Well, it might or might not work.'"

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Swinney, however, is an eternal optimist. “He’s one of those guys who has superpowers that he’s not aware of,” says Lance Avery Morgan, editor of the Society Diaries who was running Brilliant magazine when Swinney was running Rare. “He’s enthusiastic. He brings it to the runway. He brings it to the designer, to the vendors, who want to be attached to his brand.”

As the first event happened, the boutique owners got behind Austin Fashion Week. “No one had taken an interest in them before,” Tatton says. ... “They showed up and their friends showed up.” As did some people really interested in high fashion.

Swinney says he made an effort to spend the money he needed to make it look good, like there was a big budget. He didn’t want to be like other failed fashion weeks in other towns. That scenario plays out like this, Swinney says: A couple of creative friends get together and decide to create a fashion week with local designers. They try to attract sponsorship and maybe a few local businesses give them \$1,000. Now they create a first-year event that doesn’t have the money behind it. The next year, the sponsors don’t want to invest again in something that doesn’t look right, Swinney says. “They can’t figure out how to make money,” he says.

Tatton says Swinney was always focused on the business model — not just how to make the event successful, but how to earn money for the business, too. “I didn’t invest in Austin Fashion Week,” Tatton says. “I invested in Matt Swinney. He has some of the most dogged determination of anybody I’ve ever met.”

It hasn’t always been rosy. “I’m not sure I knew what I was getting into,” Swinney says.

There was the year it rained inside La Zona Rosa and one of the crew members had to wipe down the stage after each time the photographers got their shots so that the models in 6-inch heels wouldn’t slip and slide. And there was the show in which one of the designers didn’t have half of their models walk the runway. Or the show in which the lights went out for about 20 seconds and the model stood frozen on stage, not sure what to do.

The early critics reminded Swinney that he had called it Austin Fashion Week and with that came the responsibility to represent the town well and do it right. “It always stuck with me,” he says. “I take it very seriously.”

Not every idea worked, either. “There were a lot of events we tried that didn’t move the needle,” Tatton says, but those that did remained. Three years in, Tatton was able to sell his portion and move to California to work for Apple. By then, Swinney had other investors.

It’s a business model that relies heavily on sponsorships as well as ticket sales and designers “paying to play,” which is common practice. “I’m running a business, not a nonprofit,” Swinney says. “If you want to be a successful fashion designer, you’re going to have expenses to market your product.”

Designers pay about \$2,500 to participate in a runway show and about \$400 to be part of the boutique. For that, they get models, production, marketing and hair and makeup. He estimates it’s about one-tenth of what they would pay to do a small show in New York.

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The show is curated; not everyone gets invited to participate, and occasionally Swinney will provide a scholarship for an up-and-coming designer he really wants to give a shot to.

He and assistant Kylie Bollwitt will discuss the potential show participants. Sometimes they take a chance. The biggest chance he remembers taking was on Nicholas Nguyen with the line Mysterious by NPN. He submitted a well-written application four years ago with just sketches, no actual finished designs. Swinney questioned him about what the fabric was and how was he going to have the designs made. Nguyen's plan was to have his family in Vietnam, who manufacture clothing for a living, create 10 looks.

They were amazing when they showed up but had been made to fit a woman in Vietnam, not the American models walking the runway. Behind the stage, fellow designers helped Nguyen rip apart and put back together his clothes to fit the models.

“(Designers) have ego, but that ego gets checked at the door of the show,” Swinney says. They were all thinking, “It could totally have been me,” he says.

Even with all the craziness that is the backstage at a fashion show, designers know what they are going to get with Swinney.

“He’s one of the few people who is considered super trusted,” Asaf says. “You know he’s going to do the right thing. He has great integrity, he’s consistent. He’s a super pro, and you know that if you work with him, you’re going to have a great experience.”

Swinney uses his knowledge of media and translates it to fashion, Morgan says. “He understands how (designers) work and how they evolve. In the style and fashion world, things can be a little finicky.”

### **Where do we go from here?**

Five years after the first show, Swinney felt like Austin Fashion Week was doing well enough that he could start moving it to a more desirable time of year — springtime. He also began to explore doing it in Dallas, where a Dallas Fashion Week had been done before, but the name had a bad stigma that needed to be overcome.

He made the bold move to call it Fashion X Dallas and also change Austin Fashion Week to Fashion X Austin (though the Austin Fashion Week name has been hard to shake). He worked with local Dallas folks to bring a show that was right for Dallas.

Two years ago, he expanded to Houston. “Even though they represent each city, there’s always an undercurrent of Austin,” Morgan says.

This past summer, while taking 8-year-old son Cashion on a tour of Major League ballparks, Swinney put together a business plan to find new investors so he can expand to another 10 cities in the next five years. He’s also expanded Fashion X Austin to include fall events, including an upcoming show to highlight South Asian designers and another show for dog fashion.



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“We know how to scale it,” he says of fashion week.

Yet Swinney’s heart will always be in his hometown and its fashion scene. The Austin fashion industry has grown up with Austin Fashion Week.

Swinney has worked with the city, state and State Department to bring attention to the industry, to bring new ideas and technology here.

It’s a move that has paid off. Austin Community College now has a fashion incubator that is pairing technology with fashion to try new things. “We’re poised to become one of the leaders in the convergence between fashion and technology,” Asaf says. “Matt is a big part of it.”

“He’s the main person in this industry in Austin to promote independent fashion designers,” Asaf says. While there’s a lot of entrepreneurship and creativity in Austin, fashion often has been overlooked, she says.

Swinney often serves as a connector between new designers and experienced designers who can guide the new ones in the industry and how to get their clothing made. For many Austin designers, he says, clothing manufacturers think, “You’re at point A, you need to get to point D before you can talk to me.”

Part of the key of Fashion X’s longevity was getting designers and boutique owners onboard early on, promoting them and connecting them to future clients.

Austin, he says, has a growing population of people who are willing to pay \$89 instead of \$59 for a blouse to be able to form a relationship with a designer. They like the idea that they are supporting a local entrepreneur and wearing something that not everyone else has.

That support has translated into the Swinneys’ own closets. For shows, Kara will usually wear something made by someone showing that night. Swinney’s choices are more limited because of the smaller number of designers working in menswear, but he often finds himself turning to League of Rebels or Ross Bennett.

His daughter, Sadie, 11, has taken classes at Austin School of Fashion Design and showed clothing on the runway. He says she “comes by (fashion) honestly. We’re not pushing her.”

Another key to Fashion X is changing it up each year. He takes a chance on new designers and asks frequent designers to try something new, like the time he got all the designers to design in white, which was a challenge for designer Gail Chovan, who up to that point had only designed in black. She embraced it and later did an all-white collection.

“It’s all about what’s on that runway and the quality and each designer’s vision and choice of what they put on the model’s body,” Morgan says. “It all really corresponds to the vibe of each designer. ... Matt really understands how different they are and embraces that.”

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He's also tapped new audiences by creating Style Setters three years ago to honor stylish Austinites, support their favorite charity and get them to invite their friends to support them at that runway show.

As it's grown, Fashion X Austin has outgrown venues or venues become unavailable, which create new opportunities to do something different each year. "It keeps it fresh, it keeps it happening," Morgan says. "The first year is so different than now. It's like a 1-year-old and a 10-year-old. They're a different human being."

It's always changing, always evolving, with Matt Swinney helping it mature to be better than even he imagined.

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### **Moda X South Asia**

South Asian designers bring their looks to U.S. runways for the first time.

**When:** 7 p.m. Oct. 10

**Where:** La Zona Rosa, 612 W. Fourth St.

**Tickets:** \$35-\$150

**Information:** [austin.fashionx.co/schedule/moda-x-south-asia](http://austin.fashionx.co/schedule/moda-x-south-asia)

### **Fashion X Furry Friends**

A dog-centric fashion show benefiting Hounds for Heroes, which provides service dogs for local veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and mobility issues.

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Nov. 10

**Where:** 7Co, 1501 E. Seventh St.

**Tickets:** \$35-75

**Information:** [austin.fashionx.co/schedule/furry-friends](http://austin.fashionx.co/schedule/furry-friends)