



# Will Austin Come Crawling Back To Uber And Lyft?

Insights

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The sharing economy has become so entrenched in our vocabulary and culture, it's hard to remember when exactly the romance began. For Uber, the story started on a "snowy Paris evening in 2008" when two tech dudes had trouble convincing a *chauffeur de taxi* to rescue them from the elements. And thusly the biggest of the ride-sharing giants was born in 2009. Way back when, it wasn't 50 Shades of late-model Nissan Sentra—it was all black Lincoln Town Cars, all day long.

But as with any real-life romance, eventually the fanciness fades and the five-star dinners and flowers fade to Endless Apps™ and Netflix. With Uber and Lyft, there were growing pains, competing desires, and unexpected twists—passionate arguments for and against the companies, from cities, cab unions, and people who were just sick of getting stuck in the snow.

Much like John Cusack's character in 1989's classic *Say Anything...*, Uber and Lyft showed up with a boombox and a whole bunch of independent contractors, even in cities where they were explicitly banned, hoping to woo the cities over to giving them a permanent place in the heart of the city.

Austin was one such city. After being locked in a regulatory battle with the city over whether it would even be allowed to operate in city limits, ride-sharing service Uber announced in June 2014 that it was showing up, and it wasn't leaving until the City came outside to talk about its feelings. Flash forward to December 2015, and it looked like Austin was ready to say yes to the proverbial dress—with one hefty condition. All drivers would have to undergo a fingerprint-based criminal background check. For Uber and Lyft, that was the relationship equivalent of being asked to lose fifty pounds and quit smoking. And with that, the two car sharing platforms packed their bags, knowing that one day—Austin would know what they missed out on.

In the months that followed, news outlets touted the micro-ride share companies that filtered into the mix, a seemingly perfect pairing to the City's microbreweries and burgeoning micro-apartment fix. Austin was blasting that new relationship all over the (social) media, and news outlets looked to cities like Austin as evidence that there was "life after Uber. And it's pretty good." One sharing economy expert even said that "It's a really helpful place where we've been able to hit the hold button on Uber and Lyft and say -- what else is possible? What else might happen?" (read: I'm really happy about this breakup, I can really grow as a person, you know?)

Times change; people change; cities change. Austin's micro-Uber alternatives faced their first, big, test at this year's SxSW (an annual ten day conference/festival that the *really cool people* claim isn't

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cool anymore, but that still draws 72,000 registrants and artists each year). It doesn't take a gambling man to say that the micro-Ubers of Austin weren't ready to take on the once-a-year burden of most of the population of Asheville, North Carolina (population 88,512) or Bloomington, Indiana (population 84,067), just like it doesn't take much analysis to safely say that the ultimate result of Austin's rejection of Uber and Lyft was a literal meltdown.

Enough time has passed now, and Austin doesn't have to keep doing wrong to prove that it was right a year ago. One of the many great things about Austin—whose downtown ZIP code has the most bars per capita than any other ZIP code in the country—is that its citizens are equally committed to a cold, cheap PBR as they are a local microbrew. Lyft, Uber, and the City's unique micro ride-sharing companies can exist amongst each other. This author hopes Austin will give John Cusack another chance.