

# Festivals – an untapped millennial gold mine

By Henry Grabar, Salon

If you were driving on an American highway earlier this month, you probably passed one. They came from Nashville, New York and New Orleans, from Boston and Seattle and Chicago and Los Angeles, and from four dozen other countries entirely: 2,000 musical acts, in vans brimming with equipment and ambition and hope, rolling toward Austin, Texas, for South by Southwest like filings drawn to a magnet.

It's a big week for these aspiring musicians. Like preseason football hopefuls, many will do two-a-days, playing to land a label or a spot at a big summer festival. But it's also a big week for Austin. Like a polished party host, the city doesn't flaunt its own hospitality. But after nearly three decades, the festival's brand of forward-thinking, creative cool seems perfectly aligned with Austin's own.

This symbiotic relationship has turned heads in municipalities across the country. Cities have historically competed for visitors by building cavernous convention centers and taxpayer-funded stadiums, and though economic wisdom frowns on these expenditures, they still build them. But festivals represent an alternative growing in popularity. Industry conferences and major sporting events, like your average American family, do not visit the same city year after year. Festivals, by contrast, are a municipal golden goose. And they don't just stick around: They can float a cultural aura that helps affirm a city's identity year-round. For Austin, that's live music. For Miami Beach, it's art. Nearly everyone agrees it's a concept worth imitating – so why do so few American cities have world-class festivals?

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