

Last Call

FOR THE TOWN CAR

THE DECADES-LONG REIGN OF THE LINCOLN TOWN CAR AS THE KING OF NEW YORK'S SO-CALLED "BLACK CAR" INDUSTRY IS FINALLY COMING TO AN END.

BY PRESTON LERNER

D.J. AUTO SALES SITS behind a metal fence topped with razor wire in Long Island City, a gritty swath of industrial wasteland in the shadow of the glittering towers of midtown Manhattan. "Specialist in Lincoln Town Cars," reads the bannerlike sign out front. "Lincoln Parts Sold Here At Wholesale Prices. All body parts, lights, switches, sensors, pumps & more. Bad credit. No problem. We finance all." Nearly four dozen Town Cars are parked on the lot. Black ones. Silver ones. White ones. Sedans and stretch limos. Some lightly used and some beaters with a quarter-million miles on the odometer. Cars offered for outright sale or on a pay-by-the-week basis. Cars in for routine service. Cars getting overhauled. In one of two bays in the open-air garage, a long-wheel-base Town Car is up on a lift getting new brake pads and rotors while a body man replaces a crumpled fender. Inside the mobile home that serves as an office, co-owner John Rodriguez has just negotiated the purchase of a low-mileage Town Car from Saint Louis. "I've got about 400 cars," he says. "Ninety-five percent of them are Town Cars. I'm not interested in Toyotas. They can't go 400,000 miles."

Rodriguez is one of the prime suppliers to New York's unique "black car" industry, the generic term used to describe the city's huge livery and limousine trade. Some high-end operators prefer Mercedes-Benzes and Cadillac Escalades, and there are bottom-feeders that get by with Toyotas and Ford Crown Victorias. But for the past quarter century, the black-car industry has been dominated by the venerable Lincoln Town Car, so much so that "town car" has become a term interchangeable with "black car." The Town Car's distinctively understated shape is as much a part of the city's landscape as jaywalking pedestrians and street-corner hot-dog carts. "Not only are Town Cars cheap, but there's a huge supply of aftermarket parts to keep them running," Rodriguez explains. "There are whole warehouses full of nothing but Town Car parts. An engine is \$1200. A transmission is \$600. As long as you maintain them, they'll last forever. I've seen Town Cars with 600,000...700,000 miles. Nothing kills them, other than an accident."

And yet now Ford is doing what millions of pot-

holes, hundreds of thousands of ham-fisted drivers, and untold hours fighting stop-and-go traffic couldn't accomplish. In August, the assembly line in Ontario, Canada, will close and production of the Town Car will cease. Ford hopes to replace it with a livery version of the Lincoln MKT crossover. But in the black-car world, the prospect of the old warhorse's imminent demise has generated doom and gloom in equal measures. "It's crazy that they're getting rid of it," says longtime driver David Goldstein, whose last three Town Cars have gone 377,000 miles, 370,000 miles, and 300,000 miles, respectively. "They want us to go to something smaller. But we need a big car with a big trunk—and one that's easy to repair." Adds fellow chauffeur Alex Reyf: "There's nothing else that can stand up to the beating cars take in New York."

Ironically, the features that make the Town Car so appealing to the black-car industry—which is to say the very reasons that it's so inexpensive and nearly indestructible—have rendered it irrelevant to just about everybody else. Outside of the commercial world,

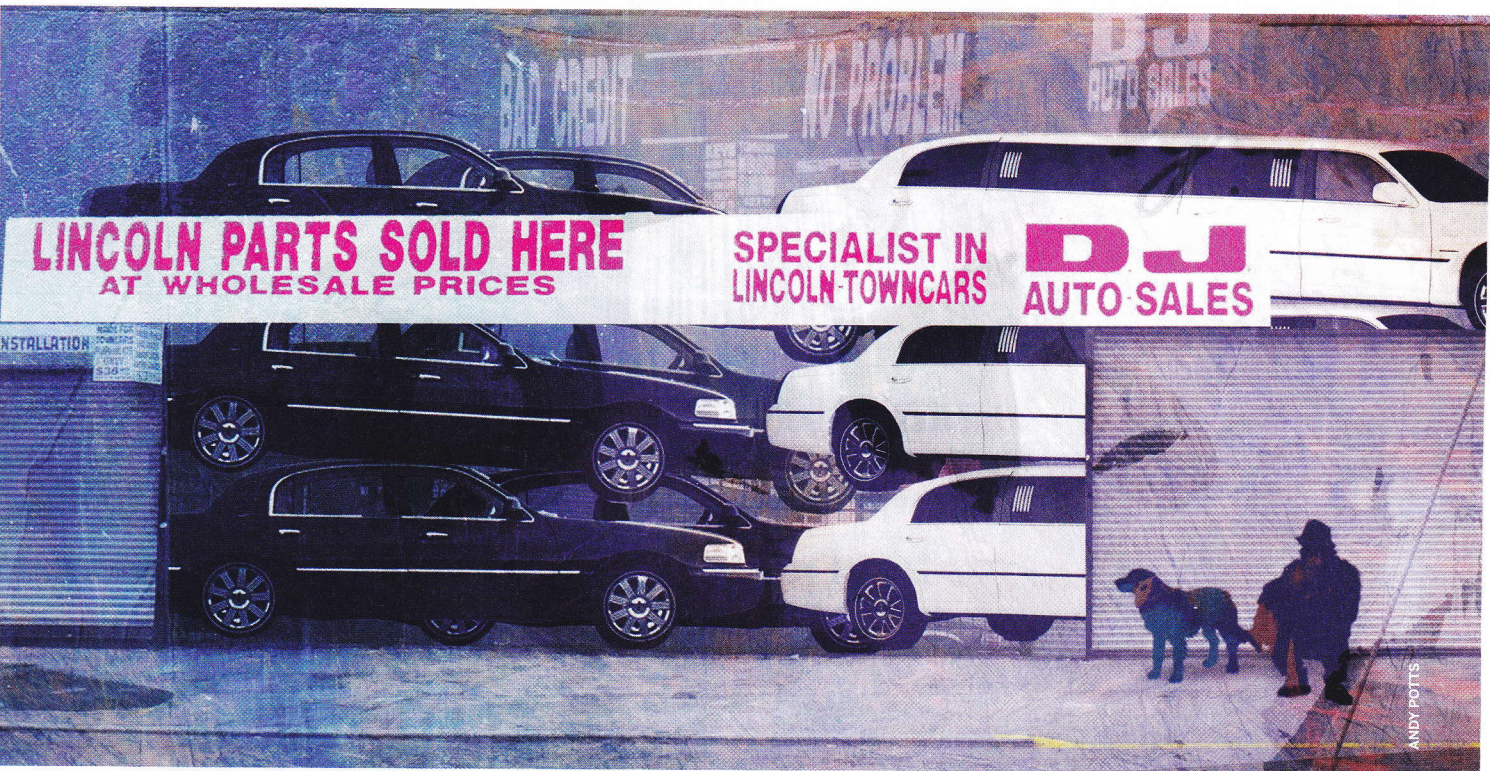


TO SALES

LINCOLN

PARTS

ANDY POTTS



there's no market for a car featuring an obsolete body-on-frame chassis, an inefficient V-8 engine, and rear-wheel drive with a live rear axle. Retail sales are barely a blip on the radar, and the commercial sector doesn't represent enough volume to justify Ford keeping an assembly line open. In an era that obsesses over minimizing carbon footprint while maximizing value, the Town Car is a dinosaur long overdue for extinction. "It was the right vehicle for its time," says Gerry Koss, Ford's fleet marketing manager. "But you know what? Times change."

Still, after its long career squiring around celebrities and captains of industry, the Town Car deserves a final turn in the spotlight before it succumbs to evolution. Although it was restyled in 1990 and again in 1998, the Town Car has always been based on the same Panther platform that underpinned the Ford Crown Victoria and the Mercury Grand Marquis. When the Town Car first appeared as a distinct model in 1981, American roads were full of cars designed around the same basic template, and if the Town Car's full figure seems bloated to modern eyes, that's only because others cars, like the movies in *Sunset Boulevard*, have gotten smaller.

Nowadays, except for commercial applications, the Town Car is a relic driven mostly by frail old men. But the Town Car was a solid seller for Lincoln for nearly two decades, accounting for more than 90,000 units annually from 1984 to 1998 and peaking at nearly 150,000 cars in 1990. For a long time, it was the car of choice for well-heeled members of the Greatest Gen-

eration, at least the ones who insisted on buying American. In affluent retirement communities across the Sunbelt, Town Cars were thicker on the ground than golf carts. "We had some great years with the Town Car and the Grand Marquis," says John Scanlon, who ran a Lincoln-Mercury dealership in Fort Myers, Florida. "I remember another dealer from up north who was on vacation down here telling me, 'Scanlon, if I see another white Town Car, I'm just going to throw up.'"

But as Town Car owners aged, their numbers naturally dwindled. For a while, Ford propped up sales by focusing on rental fleets, but this undermined resale value. Eventually, only one core constituency remained—the limousine and livery-car trade. Cadillac had gone to front-wheel drive with its Sedan de Ville in 1985, and Chrysler—which wasn't really a serious player in this segment—failed to gain a foothold with the K-car limo that debuted in 1983. Suddenly, the Town Car was the last rear-driver left standing. "Lincoln had the perfect situation with the limo/livery segment," says Coleman Hoyt, the owner of Acton Lincoln in suburban Boston, a dominant dealership in the commercial market. "They had an end-user community that absolutely adored the product, that didn't really cross-shop anything else, that bought cars and drove them 100,000 miles a year every year, that wore them out rapidly and came back for more."

With its ladder-style chassis, the Town Car was ideal for limousine conversions. Basically, all you need are a plasma cutter and a Sawzall to chop the frame rails in half. Then you use box sections of steel tubing

to sleeve and stretch the frame by four standard lengths—70, 85, 100, and 120 inches, which is the maximum Ford allows under its Qualified Vehicle Modifier certified program. The Limousine Builder's Package, known internally at Ford as code 418, comes with a heavy-duty suspension, engine and transmission coolers, a stouter alternator and battery, and wiring-harness extensions so that even hooking up the electronics on a stretched limo is more or less a matter of plug and play. "It's really just [automotive] carpentry," says Lou Saif, the New York service manager for Royale Limousine.

Back when the economy was booming, there were dozens of companies doing Town Car conversions. These days, Royale is one of the biggest survivors, and although the company is headquartered near Boston, Saif has several ten-packs—ten-passenger stretch limos—crammed into his garage in Long Island City. Over the past thirty-two years, he's worked on countless conversions. But none, he insists, outperforms the Town Car. "The self-leveling air suspension is critical because the weight differential between a fully laden and an unladen vehicle is so huge," he says. "A Chrysler 300 with coil springs is just brutal because it's either too stiff or not stiff enough. But a stretched Town Car rides better than anything on the road—even a Maybach."

The circumstances that transformed the Town Car into a cultural touchstone unfolded a generation ago in New York City, with its singular concentration of wealth and traffic within a compact urban center. Most of the locals commuted without cars, so at peak hours, the competition for cabs was fierce. In 1982, to ease what had become a citywide scandal, the NYC Taxi and Limousine Commission created a new class of for-hire vehicles—so-called black cars—that could pick up customers by appointment rather than accepting a hail and offer flat-rate fees instead of charging by the meter. Dial Car, which had been in the taxi business since 1963, became one of the pioneers of black-car service. It started with repainted cabs—Buick LeSabres, Oldsmobile Delta 98s, even a handful of Peugeots. "Now," says Dial Car vice president Jeffrey Goldberg, "we have 310 cars, and 98 percent of them are Town Cars. That's what our customers want."



Succession Plan

LINCOLN HOPES TO STEER ITS LIVERY CUSTOMERS TOWARD THE MKT.

When the Town Car goes out of production, Ford hopes to entice livery customers with a vastly different vehicle: the MKT, a FWD/AWD crossover with a transverse engine and unibody construction. But one thing will be the same: the name. Lincoln is calling the livery version the MKT Town Car.

The MKT Town Car has no third-row seats, and the second-row bench is repositioned for more legroom. The standard (livery) model will be offered with either front-wheel drive or all-wheel drive. There's also a beefed-up (limousine) model that, like the current Town Car, is designed to be stretched—in this case by 44, 80, or 120 inches. The limo version is all-wheel drive only. Ford hasn't announced engines yet, but the front-wheel-drive livery edition is tipped to get a 2.0-liter EcoBoost four-cylinder, while AWD and limo versions would use the 3.7-liter V-6 from the current MKX. New technology to benefit drivers includes Sync, blind-spot warning, and a backup camera. Passengers will have a Wi-Fi hot spot.

Although the MKT Town Car promises to be better for both drivers and passengers—with more rear-seat room and luggage space, a smaller footprint, improved bad-weather traction, and new driver aids—its ultimate popularity likely will depend on how it treats fleet owners. Will it be durable and easy to fix? That will be the real test when the new MKT Town Car rolls out onto the mean streets of New York starting next spring.

— JOE LORIO



Today, the commission estimates that there are nearly 25,000 Town Cars plying their trade in New York City. Naturally, the transformation didn't occur overnight. So when chauffeur Jeff Rose decided to go into business for himself in 1986, he thought long and hard about what vehicle to buy. "The stretch limo had been part of the coke-and-smoke days of disco," he says. "But I saw where the industry was going." Rose had big-name customers like Barry Diller and Mike Nichols who wanted to be cosseted without attracting attention, and a black-on-black Lincoln fit the bill. "I think I was the first guy to start a limo company with a Town Car," he says. His firm, Attitude New York, caters to an ultra-high-end clientele, which has prompted him to add Benzes, Lexuses, and even hybrids to his fleet. But twelve of his thirty-six vehicles are still Town Cars.

By the '90s, traveling around Manhattan in a Town Car was not only de rigueur for celebrities, it was a standard perk for executives in the financial, legal, and publishing industries who were meeting clients across town for three-martini lunches or heading home after staying late at the office to rack up billable hours. Even today, there are times when black cars and taxis account for virtually all of the traffic around Wall Street. Pundits claimed that they knew things were drastically wrong at the Condé Nast magazine empire when editors were no longer allowed to take Town Cars to and from work.

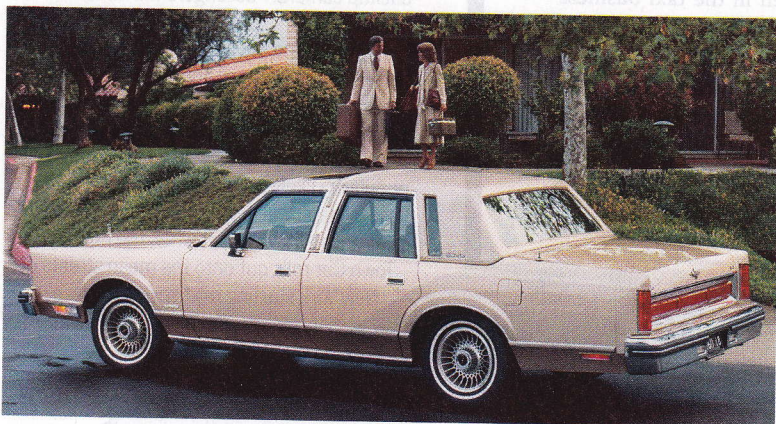
People who don't live in the five boroughs can't understand the Town Car's appeal. The exterior is showy. The interior is cheesy. By enthusiast standards,

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performance is dreadful, with an anemic power-to-weight ratio and land-yacht handling characteristics. But the Town Car is the perfect weapon for battling traffic in New York. The old-school engine offers plenty of low-end torque, and the floaty suspension soaks up the worst of the city's streets. Stout yet sedate, the Town Car is a mobile oasis of calm in the maelstrom of Manhattan. "It's the Rolls-Royce of American cars," Reyf says, without a trace of irony.

Black-car companies operate within a strictly regulated three-tier hierarchy of vehicle services. At the top are limousines. In the middle are black cars. At the bottom, often serving the outer boroughs, are car services. Typically, the limousine and high-echelon black-car companies and/or their drivers buy new cars. These cars then work their way down the food

Town Car Timeline



1980: The downsized (modern-size) Lincoln Continental is born, with the Town Car—and Town Coupe—as a trim package. The car rides on the new Panther platform, shared with the Ford LTD Crown Victoria and the Mercury Grand Marquis. The 117.3-inch wheelbase is down from 127.2 inches, and the overall length is chopped by some fourteen inches, to 219 inches. At just under two tons, the car has shed more than 700 pounds. A 302-cubic-inch V-8 engine replaces the previous standard 400-cubic-inch V-8.



1981: Town Car officially replaces Continental as the name for the standard Lincoln, and it's available as both a two-door and a four-door.

1982: The two-door Town Car is dropped.

1985: Minor styling revisions front and rear soften some of the sharp edges. The three versions are base, Signature Series, and Cartier Designer Series.

1990: The Town Car is redesigned. Its size is maintained, but somewhat more aerodynamic styling replaces the laser-straight lines of its predecessor. The 4.9-liter V-8 continues with 150 hp, but Ford claims that the retuned chassis has a firmer ride with less body roll and more precise steering. Relatively speaking, of course.

1991: A new, SOHC 4.6-liter V-8 replaces the QHV 4.9-liter unit.

Sales by Calendar Year



chain, with L models—which come from the factory with a six-inch-longer wheelbase than standard sedans—commanding a premium. At the bottom, it's not uncommon for Town Cars with 400,000 miles to change hands for a few thousand bucks.

Because drivers put so many miles—plus endless hours of idle time—on the cars, livery companies are what Rose calls “incubators for problems,” from fragile door-lock actuators to intake-manifold issues that prompted a class-action lawsuit. Although livery versions of the Town Car come with a liberal four-year/150,000-mile warranty, there's a network of shops that caters to high-mileage vehicles. At Emil's All Tire in Brooklyn, for example, owner Ralph Czeisler keeps three Town Car transmissions in stock at all times and replaces six to eight control arms a

week. “They're always breaking down,” he says with a grin. “They keep me in business.”

With production of the Town Car slated to end in the fall, a buying frenzy has begun as limo operators and drivers hedge their bets against the MKT. Low-mileage cars are already in short supply, and those who can afford it are stocking up on 2011 Town Cars. “I don't know about the MKT,” says independent dealer Jamie Friedkin, expressing the skepticism that pervades the industry. “I don't like the crossover look, and I just don't think it's big enough. There are a lot of choices out there, but there's nothing like the Town Car. Me, personally? I don't believe there's going to be a single car that dominates the industry in the future. It's going to be like the Wild West out there.” He shakes his head sadly. “It's the end of an era.” **AM**



1998



2003



2008

1995: A minor makeover results in thinner headlamps, a bigger radio for aging fingers, and a standard antitheft system.

1998: The current-generation Town Car debuts. Length is trimmed a few inches and more rounded styling is adopted to make it look less massive. The 4.6-liter SOHC V-8 returns with 200 hp standard and 220 hp in the new Touring Sedan. The latter is an attempt to create a more sporty-handling car to appeal to younger buyers. No one notices.

1999: Side air bags are added. Executive, Signature, and Cartier are the three trim levels.

2000: A long-wheelbase variant goes on sale to fleet customers as the Executive L and to retail buyers as the Cartier L. It has an additional six inches between the wheels.



2003: A bulletproof (literally) Town Car is introduced. All Town Cars are restyled front and rear. Output increases to 235 hp. A navigation system is available. The hood ornament returns.

2004: Cartier disappears in favor of Ultimate.

2005: Ultimate is scratched in favor of Signature Limited. Sales to fleets exceed retail sales for the first time.

2006: Designer is the new top trim level.

2007: Town Car production ends at Ford's Wixom, Michigan, plant, a longtime Lincoln factory, which then closes. Production moves to Ontario.

2008: Signature Limited and Signature L are the two retail versions.

2011: The classic Town Car sedan reaches the end of the line.