Low is the new loud: The “boom-boom” sound in the midst of live music venues closures

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Introduction

BOOM-BOOM SOUND OR THE INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE OF MUSIC ANNOYANCE

> “I just can’t sleep. It’s torture. Goes on for hours. It’s not fair for me to hear ba-boom. Ba-boom. Ba-boom.”

The online world is full of complaints about the *boom-boom* sound. Social media posts, forums publications, press articles… Any search for the *boom-boom* locution leads to a profusion of people depicting how that “irritating beat” deprives them of rest, peace, or even sleep. The *boom-boom* onomatopoeia appears as an international language of annoyance in the midst of music being played in the vicinity. English calls it BOOM BOOM. French calls it “BOUM BOUM”. Spanish calls it “PUM PUM”. Polish calls it “ŁUP ŁUP ŁUP”. Dutch goes “BOEM BOEM”. Chinese mandarin or Japanese also bear traces of similar pounding beats. The *boom-boom* sound then seems to appear as a cross-border lexicon allowing people to verbalize their annoyance.

BOOM-BOOM SOUND, NOISE COMPLAINTS AND LIVE MUSIC VENUE CLOSURES

While many complaints target neighbours, others increasingly target clubs, venues or festivals. That is what happened in Finland, when the nightclub *Don’t Tell Mama* (DTM), a long-standing queer institution in central Helsinki, had to exit its lease after a luxury hotel opened in the same block and issued noise complaints. The story of DTM echoes numerous examples across Europe of clubs and venues challenged or forced to close after complaints from newly arrived residents, hotels or real-estate developments. While noise complaints are not the only reason threatening the survival of live music venues and clubs, the overall fragility of the sector forces its stake-holders to address any topic that may reinforce said fragility. The UK lost 2424 popular music venues and clubs since 2020. In 2024, 16% of the clubs represented by the German network LiveKomm considered ceasing operations within the following 12 months. In that context, the *boom-boom* sound does not feel trivial anymore. While the topic appears as a long-standing issue for the sector, recent reports and membership feedback from Live DMA members suggest that conflicts have intensified again in the aftermath of the pandemic, both in number and intensity.

> “however, i am on the first floor, and there is a club on the road just below (blue mountain) that i didnt know was a rave club --- the music dissipates outside their shitty walls and i can hear and FEEL it in my flat -- that is the drum and bass is so so loud that i can actually feel things in my flat vibrate and it physically hurts me. I’ve lived on busy streets and didnt mind the noise but this is on a whole other level because its’ constant boom boom boom noises -- i am not a fan of rave clubbing yet it feels like im in a club wen at home.”

EXPLORING THE *BOOM-BOOM* SOUND

While *boom-boom* sound and its associated complaints cross borders, its understanding requires crossing academic fields. While (ethno) musicology and sound studies highlight the core of the *boom-boom* issue, exploring the way rhythm and amplification interact to produce "that irritating beat that penetrates the walls", sociology and cultural studies provide decisive insights into what social attitudes towards "unwanted sound" may say about musical, cultural and social legitimacy. Urban studies are then relevant to inform current and future risks of higher complaints rates, while nightlife policies may address soothing dynamics that could help make *boom-boom* bass more sustainable.

Sound is changing: What the *boom-boom* sound is made of

> "Zaczęła się głośna muzyka. Całymi dniami tylko "ŁUP ŁUP ŁUP BUM BUM BUM!!!" Oszaleć można."

The quest for *boom-boom* sound used across social medias shows that the onomatopoeia is frequently associated to a physical experience of sound. What complainants describe is not just the sound anymore, but the physical experience that said sound triggers: "enough bass to shake the walls"; "it vibrates every damn thing"; "a bass you feel in your chest"... Even when they do not use the *boom-boom* locution, they use a percussive mimicry: it's "booming". It's "thumping". It's "humming". It's "pounding". It's "throbbing". It's "pulsing". It's "beating". Several leads may explain these bodily experiences of sound: they point to beats and bass, to the amplification of beats and bass, and to what ties them together: low frequencies.

MUSIC IS CHANGING

Diving into jazz, samba, electronic dance music, hip-hop and traditional Scandinavian fiddle music, Anne Danielsen et al. explore groove as "a pronounced enjoyable rhythm", "a characteristic rhythmic pattern typical of a musical style" and the "pleasurable urge to move". Beats, drums and bass then act as the architects of groove: they shape sound and generate the rhythmic friction that calls for movement.

Enticing bodily reactions to music are not reserved to organic rhythms and vibrations anymore; they are also facilitated by digital composing and mixing techniques that take bass to a brand-new level of lowness. Modern metal hits are archetypical of that direction, where digital tools allow musicians and producers to reach for "octaves you can't even hear". Contemporary productions achieve impact through "larger-than-life drum sounds" and particularly dense low-end frequencies, while preserving enough "human feel" for listeners to connect with the music.

The idea of a connection with music deep enough to trigger a bodily reaction can then be achieved through organic rhythmic traditions, but also through a growing digitalization of music production that allows music-making to explore once unreachable levels of lowness. Low then becomes the new loud: it fosters depth, power and intensity to music without causing hearing damages.

AMPLIFICATION IS ALSO CHANGING

Digitalized music production tools have invaded (home-)studios and unveiled new paths for mixing and mastering techniques. Initially accessible mostly for recorded music, innovative amplification strategies are now flourishing to allow musicians to replicate their combination of natural and digital elements on stage as much as at home. Music amplification now goes way beyond the mere increase of sound level: it aims to enhance emotional response and audience engagement.

Sound studies confirm that (*boom-boom*) bass amplification and low-frequency sounds act on audience engagement since they induce movement. In an article titled *Undetectable very-low frequency sound increases dancing at a live concert*, Daniel J. Cameron unrolls how "low frequency sound is processed via vibrotactile

and vestibular (in addition to auditory) pathways", increasing groove perception and the pleasurable urge to move to the beat. But on top of movement, lower frequencies also foster emotion: "the stronger the bass, the stronger the emotion."

Low-frequency sounds then:

— Amplify emotional and physical engagement;
— Reinforce bodily connection to the beat[1];
— Intensify immersive experiences in environments where sound is both heard and felt, such as concerts and clubs[2].

Connection with music in venues, clubs or festivals then relies much less on loudness than it does on lowness. But this connection has a price: neighbors may also "feel the beat" since the *boom-boom* bass expands its reach to the full body. Lower frequencies are indeed harder to block, to localise, but also to ignore since they are pulsed rather than continuous and felt rather than heard. Yet, sound measurement in the context of live music venues, clubs or festivals still reach for the loud instead of the low. Hence, even when a venue appears to be "within limits", the bass escapes differently:

"I could complain, but the truth is that the bass just travels, so I just shut up. They aren't being obnoxious."

However, even the most advanced technical adjustments won't fully solve every neighbour disputes, since they also emerge from queuing, smoking areas, crowd dispersal, taxis, or late-night behaviours outside venues.

Humans are (not really) changing: coping with the *boom-boom* sound

The international *boom-boom* lexicon depicted in introduction is not neutral: the onomatopoeia says something about the way sound is socially perceived. While a deeper dive into linguistics could be interesting to tackle the *boom-boom* object with a brand-new lens, several leads may still be convoked to explain what the use of *boom-boom* really says on a symbolic perspective.

BOOM-BOOM SOUND SYMBOLISM

A first, relatively neutral explanation could be that low-frequency sounds resist conventional linguistic description, leading complainants to mimic their bodily perception of amplified bass through onomatopoeia. However, sound symbolism suggests that a more subjective pattern may hide behind the *boom-boom* lexicon. The notion of iconicity is particularly relevant here: it analyses the relationship between the form of a word and its meaning, especially when "the aspects of a word's form map onto aspects of its meaning". The *boom-boom* onomatopoeia does exactly that: it mimics a repetitive, percussive and intrusive sound.

But the overall context of noise complaints may also encompass a less neutral perspective. Indeed, the *boom-boom* focus does not say anything about pitch, tone, melody or ruptures in rhythm. It focuses on impact, monotony and the primitive aspect of a sound purposefully depicted as mere noise. The global, unified use of the *boom-boom* onomatopoeia in the context of noise complaints can then be perceived as a rhetorical move contributing to take the legitimacy of music away. Numerous works approach the social, cultural and political power of sound through the legitimacy lens. As Marie Thomson puts it, "there is much more to noise than unwanted sound".

A GROWING ATTACHMENT TO PRIVATE SPACES

> "Je commence à en avoir ras-le-bol d'entendre constamment des boums boums chez moi."

Before they say something about the noise itself, complaints say something about the relationship people entertain with their home.

"(...) the home is much more than a mere physical space or residence. Rather, descriptions of home are typically characterized by their relational, psychological properties, such as personal control, privacy, and warmth[3]".

This quote functions for what the authors describe as "normal circumstances", but suggests that successive lockdowns and newly work-from-home habits may have exacerbated the way people perceive their habitat. Long periods spent at home fostered more insular habits, stronger attachment to private space, and lower tolerance for disturbance in a context when social or occupational outings were at best limited, at worst forbidden. More than ever, "being satisfied with and feeling attached to their residence contributes to people's quality of life and life satisfaction[4]".

A large-scale research work conducted in Greater Sydney, Australia, concludes that staying more at home, and especially working more from home, leads to higher residential satisfaction. Diving further into this idea, Catherine Sturton has demonstrated that the more comfortable residents are at home, the more active and supportive they are to their neighborhood[5].

A GROWING DISLIKE OF NOISE, A HIGHER TENDENCY TO COMPLAIN

This is where noise and sound get intricated with social dynamics: feeling comfortable at home has a logical, positive impact on the well-being of the individual. Being uncomfortable at home has a direct, negative impact on the well-being of the community. The more annoyed or disturbed people are within their walls, the tenser the disputes arise, for noise and sound are then objectified as a loss of control and power. In the words of Marie Thompson:

"neighbor noise is taken to be a problem insofar as it traverses the boundary that separates the private from the public—it comes from outside and serves to disturb and disrupt the intimate, carefully regulated and closed system of home. "Outside sounds represent an intrusion of the public world into the domestic realm".[6]"

It is then not that surprising that the act of lodging an (in)formal complaint in itself already acts as an affirmation process and a sense of control that seem to directly lead to mood improvement[7]. The feeling of dispossession or loss of control over one's environment may explain the surge in noise complaints, especially since South Korean research suggests that persistent neighbour noise exposure may transform annoyance into psychological distress and direct confrontation. Further insights additionally demonstrate that noise complaints also appear strongly correlated to environmental stressors such as night-time[8], winter periods[9], or weather conditions[10] affecting tolerance to noise.

> "We just moved into a lovely flat, everything is perfect apart from the fact our neighbours upstairs love to play their drum n bass really loudly, its constant during the afternoon especially the wkend- when your relaxing, trying to have a lie-in then all of sudden boom boom boom!! as you can imagine its getting on our nervous! I'm not sure what to do? Any helpful tips and ideas would be much apperciated!"

THE REMANENT STIGMA OF NIGHTLIFE ACTIVITIES

If the *boom-boom* onomatopoeia can be analyzed as a way to deprive bass-amplified repertoire from its musical legitimacy, operating as a live music venue, club or festival does not necessarily convey a greater social recognition. It may as well be the other way round, with a remanent stigma being opposed to live music scenes.

"Parce que la fête ne se réduit pas au "boum boum" que certain·es aîné·es plaquent sur la fête techno, un espace perçu comme abrutissant, aliénant et nihiliste d'une génération que l'on dit en perte de repères, à défaut de la comprendre.[11]"

This downgraded perception of live music scenes may have aggravated the rise in noise complaints when live music resumed after the pandemic: people appeared more sensitive to noise and less willing to compromise. That trouble-maker lens as applied to live music scenes is frequently reported in cultural studies. Venues and clubs are then "denied the cultural relevance of what they refer to as "selling beer and vodka," and denounced local café-bars as "out-and-out businesses," and their frequenters as "crowds of drunk, unruly kids"[12]. The neighbouring "sidewalks are littered with broken glass and "roaring" tourists.[13]" The premises of said venues may also contribute of

their edgy character. Myrtille Picaud describes "the glasses people drink from on the dance floor, sometimes plastic ones crushed by many raving feet[14]" as one of many symbols that may fuel cultural hierarchization.

However, night-time stigma can be challenged out of the growing interest for night-time itself. A Chinese case-study based in Hangzhou sheds light on night-time activities and exposure to darkness as benefitting both physical and mental health, since it shrinks cortisol levels[15]. "Darker nights, happier lives?[16]"

Cities are changing: the hidden battles of the *boom-boom* sound

"The UN predicts that, by 2050, two-thirds of people will live in cities. India is projected to have another 416 million urban dwellers than it does now, with China adding 255 million and Nigeria 189 million. And as cities swell, there are signs we are finding it harder to cope with the noise.[17]"

As it already transpires from previous parts, urban planning has a key responsibility in preventing and managing *boom-boom* bass (and other noise) disputes. Korean research about inter-floor noise complaints has demonstrated the correlation between denser living units and higher noise complaints rates. The same pattern has also be monitored in England, where "cities/regions with high population densities tend to have a higher noise complaint rate.[18]"

However, noise complaints jeopardizing live music venues and clubs are not restricted to denser urban environment. With each geographical and demographical context comes a peculiar type of neighbouring conflicts regarding live music.

BOOM-BOOM BASS IN BUSY TOWNS

Several case-studies[19] tend to show that real-estate development may result in conflicting uses of the same street. A commercial street populated with shops opened in daytime and closed in the evening, topped with corporate offices on the upper floors may coexist with a live music venue operating in the same block without causing any kind of disturbance, for the crowds they respectively attract may never cross paths. However, in the context of urban densification, the shops and offices tend to be converted into residential housing, creating incompatible uses of the same premises that now need to coexist in the same timeframe. The sounds emanating from the venues then become hearable by the freshly moved-in neighbors, shall it be the *boom-boom* sound or just the coming and going of the audience.

"As expected, we found that noise complaints increased with increasing urban density. (...) These findings could be used to (...) setting up different noise control criteria according to densities, and using and protecting greenery in urban areas.[20]"

Said greenery, when encompassing natural elements such as bodies of water, have proven themselves useful in the context of noise complaints, notably because they seem to countereffect the external stressors previously described such as time[21], season and weather. Hence, the greener the city goes, the lesser the noise complaints.

BOOM-BOOM BASS IN RURAL SPOTS

> "Joder la puta gente no se da cuenta de que con la ventana abierta su puta música se escucha en todo el edificio y en el de enfrente (compartimos patio). Si os cuento mi vida porque estoy hasta los cojones de que la puta gente solo piense en si misma... no me quito el PUM PUM PUM PUM... que me tiemblan hasta las cejas."

In rural areas, conflicts related to urban densification are also emerging, notably between year-round residents and temporary visitors. Here, research shows that *boom-boom* bass disputes are as acoustic as they are symbolic.

Australian-based research by Jeffrey Parnell and Rebecca Sommer, anchored in outdoor musical events, pinpoints background noise levels explains as a key distinctive acoustic feature between urban and rural contexts: they are significantly lower in rural settings, making music audible over greater, "significant distances". They also point that rural festivals are often multi-stages events, which generate "cumulative impacts" that react differently to "meteorological enhancement and directivity[22]".

But beyond acoustics concerns, rural noise complaints also reveal tensions regarding the social uses and symbolic ownership of rural space. Research by Duffy and Waitt on rural festivals highlight how such events may simultaneously strengthen local attachment while generating disputes over who legitimately belongs within a given environment. While rural festivals may contribute to the feeling of belonging[23] out of "cohesion and pride, (...) shared values, and improve[d] quality of life[24]", they also unleash frictions regarding the identity of rural territories and entitlement over them.

This symbolic dimension is well illustrated by Chinese research on acoustic rurality, which underlines how rural environments are strongly associated with calmness, naturalness and restorative quietness. There, "natural sounds—singing sands, water, birds, insects, and frogs—should be treated as valuable natural resources such as water, land, and minerals", which necessitates rural soundscape planning to accommodate those who chose "acoustic rurality[25]". In that context, *boom-boom* bass may appear not only as noise, but as an urban, technological and culturally foreign intrusion into a space socially imagined as peaceful and authentic.

On the contrary, *boom-boom* bass may also be sought for by rural communities in the context of economic development targeting festival tourism. Romanian research led by Diana-Iulia Chiciudean approaches rural festivals as tools of territorial vitality in areas facing demographic or economic fragility. Festivals are then understood not only as entertainment activities, but as infrastructures contributing to local attractiveness, social cohesion and cultural sustainability of rural territories[26]. Thus, rural *boom-boom* bass disputes may oppose music and silence, but they mostly reflect different expectations of what a territory should sound like, who gets to shape its soundscape, and which ways of inhabiting a place are considered legitimate.

BOOM-BOOM BASS AND POWER PLAYS: "GLAMOUR WITH NO CLAMOR[27]"

The willingness to shush the *boom-boom* bass also says something about power struggles at stake in society. If the *boom-boom* onomatopoeia cannot be resumed at a systematic, voluntary attempt to deprive music of its legitimacy, noise complaints in the context of gentrification cannot be systematically associated to a willingness to oppress the other. Yet again, if *boom-boom* bass is not neutral, silence isn't either, and noise complaints can also be the instruments of the "displacement" or invisibilisation of class, race or gender minorities.

About class, Xochitl Gonzalez writes that silence is "more than the absence of noise; it was an aesthetic to be revered", along with the "sound of gentrification[28]". Her USA-based essay echoes the works of Joanna Kusiak about acoustic gentrification in Poland. Both "shed new light on the class lineaments of the noise struggle", with the "new rich" denying the "cultural relevance[29]" of venues and clubs, hence implementing a "sonic warfare" that perpetuates the way "sound and silence have been historically used as forces of political class struggle in Poland.[30]" Away from Poland, Xochitl Gonzalez also "makes "noise" part of a class war":

> "New York in the summer is a noisy place, especially if you don't have money. The rich run off to the Hamptons or Maine. The bourgeoisie are safely shielded by the hum of their central air. But for the broke, summer means an open window through which the clatter of the city becomes the soundtrack to life.[31]"

About race, Allie Martin has been "listening to gentrification in Washington DC", depicting what she describes as both a sonic and a racialized process, with the racialization of sound "actively contribute to violence against Black people[32]." Samuel Petal's work[33] also underlines how the "right to be quiet" contributes to antiblackness, convoking the example of a Black drummers circle which had been playing in a Harlem Park every Saturday since 1969, who got police called upon them when residents of a freshly built luxury residential unit complained about "African drumming [being] wonderful for the first four hours, but after that it's pure, unadulterated noise.[34]" The drummers circle was authorized to keep playing, but got relocated twice throughout the park. This example is even more relevant to the context of *boom-boom* sound that beats, bass and ruptured rhythm are traditionally approached as an ethnomusicological feature of "African-American performance traditions, such as jazz, R'n'B, soul, funk, disco and hip-hop[35]".

If shushing the *boom-boom* bass can appear as an (in)direct technique to erase social groups from view and hear based on race and class, the same pattern can also be spotted with regards of gender. Back in Finland, the DTM club was a legendary gay club for the queer community, where people from Helsinki and beyond would rally. Simone d'Antonio confirms:

"One of the things that is growing a lot in our URBACT network is the sensitivity towards these venues that are in danger of disappearing. And it's not just about music venues, but it's also about LGBTQ bars and places where the LGBTQ community can reunite."

Conclusion

The *boom-boom* sound ultimately says much more than "noise". It speaks about music, technology, housing, urban change, legitimacy, attachment and power.

If low has become the new loud, then the conflicts surrounding *boom-boom* bass reveal not only changing soundscapes, but changing ways of living together. Because these tensions emerge simultaneously from evolving musical practices, changing residential expectations and increasingly dense urban environments, responding to them cannot rely on sound reduction alone. The synthesis instead highlights the need for approaches combining updated low-frequency regulations, adapted insulation and monitoring tools, early-stage mediation, integrated urban planning strategies, and stronger recognition of venues, clubs and festivals as cultural infrastructures embedded within local communities.

Sustainable coexistence may then depend less on silencing the *boom-boom* bass than on collectively negotiating the place music occupies within contemporary cities and territories. Here ends the *boom-boom* sound exploratory journey: on a note that underlines "the political possibility of sound", following Salomé Voegelin, in an attempt to "demonstrate the critical potential of engaged sound studies, which understands the listener as a subject of politics.[36]"

> "My duplex neighbors are into the hip-hop, rap thing with the big boomy bass and it drives me nuts. Vibrates every damn thing including my frontal lobe. BUT.....I went next door one day to deliver a misguided piece of mail and stepped inside and the stereo was low, we could talk over it, it was just not loud at all. Immediately upon entering my apartment -- booooooom, bum-bum-bum BOOOOOOOOM and vibrated one a cap off a molar."

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