

Many Pleas for Quiet, but City Still Thunders

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ABSTRACT

Mr. Stern dealt with grievances from those who produced noise and those exposed to it, including a case that shot up to the Supreme Court between Rock Against Racism, a group that put on concerts in Central Park, and the police commissioner. [...]outside, construction, hovering helicopters and idling trucks have drowned out the few successes the city has had, like the virtual elimination of boom boxes and car alarms. In "City Noise" an exquisitely detailed report of their findings published in 1930, they concluded that New York was so loud that a Bengal tiger could "roar or snarl indefinitely without attracting the auditory attention of passers-by."

FULL TEXT

New Yorkers have complained about noise for as long as anyone would listen.

To silence the city, or at least quiet it down, the police have yanked hand organs and boom boxes from peddlers and pedestrians. Blinking traffic lights replaced whistle-blowing police officers. Horses and subway cars were outfitted with rubber soles. The League for Less Noise renamed Herald Square "Quiet Square." Jet planes were rerouted and clanging garbage trucks redesigned. Trucks wired with microphones roamed the streets to measure the cacophony.

Yet the racket thundered on.

Henry J. Stern, who created so-called quiet zones when he was the parks commissioner, summed up the struggle this way: "It's a city, not a cemetery. You can't tell everybody to go around wearing earplugs."

Mr. Stern dealt with grievances from those who produced noise and those exposed to it, including a case that shot up to the Supreme Court between Rock Against Racism, a group that put on concerts in Central Park, and the police commissioner. "A noisemaker's First Amendment right stops when a listener's Eighth Amendment right is impaired," he said.

And so it has gone for more than a century, as the city has simultaneously grown and pulsed with energy while struggling to keep the commotion to a minimum. Although its nerve-rattling effects are known -- deafness, high blood pressure, cognitive impairment, irritability and violence -- curbing this sleepless city's din has tested the bounds of public relations and enforcement. Campaigns with aggressive slogans like Operation Soundtrap and The War on Noise came and went, vanquished by a lack of public resolve, tight budgets and more pressing problems like war and poverty. Untold thousands of fines and summonses were handed out, even as the culprits shifted from steamship whistles to boom boxes.

The noise has won every battle.

Today, many believe the city is the loudest it has ever been. Sound systems are deliberately cranked up to full volume in restaurants, gyms and stores – with the goal of creating a frenzied environment in which people want to spend money. And outside, construction, hovering helicopters and idling trucks have drowned out the few successes the city has had, like the virtual elimination of boom boxes and car alarms. But public outrage was perhaps louder in the early 1900s, when Julia Barnett Rice, a physician and socialite, organized the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise.

Dr. Rice lobbied Congress to pass one of the earliest antinoise laws, one that prohibited "unnecessary" steamboat whistling that could "murder sleep and therefore man." She posted signs around hospitals, churches and schools. Mark Twain had "an abundance of sympathy for this movement." Schoolchildren who pledged to be silent near hospitals received black-and-white buttons saying, "Humanity."

Then as now, there was resistance. When the police threatened to ban megaphones on Coney Island in 1907, the barkers union staged a protest. "How are you going to get a crowd to come in and see 'the boy with the tomato head' and the rest of the wonders if you don't talk to them?" asked the oldest barker, "Pop" Hooligan.

Dr. Rice's effort faded, but science came up with new ways to quantify the din. In the 1920s, a group of acoustical experts used the decibel, named after Alexander Graham Bell, to figure out just how loud the city was.

Men with rounded glasses and porkpie hats from the Noise Abatement Commission created a roving laboratory on the back of a flatbed truck. In "City Noise" an exquisitely detailed report of their findings published in 1930, they concluded that New York was so loud that a Bengal tiger could "roar or snarl indefinitely without attracting the auditory attention of passers-by."

There was tremendous optimism that a scientist's gauge could solve the problem, said Emily Thompson, a historian of sound technology and culture at Princeton.

"Measuring was easy," she said. "Control was harder."

In 1935, Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia used stronger language by declaring a so-called War on Noise during a radio address.

"Boiled down, everything we have in mind can be accomplished without any fuss and difficulty if every one, in a spirit of cooperation, courtesy and neighborliness, merely thinks twice before causing any kind of noise which might grate on the ears of the other fellow or among his neighbors," he said.

In 1936, the city passed its first comprehensive noise code. A fine of \$1 would be issued for the first offense.

In the 1970s, car alarms, truck back-up beepers, the component car stereo and roaring jet planes rattled the next generation of peace-seekers. Noise was now considered a pollutant.

Robert Alex Baron, a theater impresario and the author of "The Tyranny of Noise," founded Citizens for a Quieter City, a nonprofit group that staged marches and created posters that read: "Noise pollution won't kill you. It can only drive you nuts or make you deaf." A volunteer "ear force" spent nights and weekends at an Upper West Side storefront, logging hundreds of phone calls and walk-in complaints about interrupted sleep patterns and elevated

stress levels from aircraft or ventilating equipment.

In 1972, the city's noise code was overhauled. Horn-honking "when there is no imminent danger" became a criminal offense. The Sanitation Department redesigned its garbage trucks to operate at a noise level no louder than a vacuum cleaner. Car owners had 10 minutes to shut off a wailing alarm.

In 1973, inspectors staked out busy intersections. One outraged driver who was given a ticket near the Lincoln Tunnel shouted, "Didn't you see that guy cut me off?"

But plans to enforce and educate the public about the code faded after a wave of budget cuts in the 1980s. The police were too tied up pursuing violent crimes to issue summonses for boom boxes, despite the public clamor for quiet. "You get more complaints about noise than you do about drugs," an Upper Manhattan assemblyman said in 1993.

That year, Department of Environmental Protection inspectors rode around in police cars during Operation Soundtrap, on the prowl for throbbing sound systems over 80 decibels at a distance of 50 feet. In one afternoon, 19 boom cars, crammed with speakers blasting music at earsplitting volumes, were impounded in Washington Heights.

In 1998, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani began a Civility Campaign, in which he said he was determined to stop annoying behavior, like littering and blaring car alarms, before it started. The police began mapping complaints about loud music along with major crimes, and in 2000 issued 4,866 noise summonses.

When he took office, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg vowed that frequently dismissed noise infractions would be enforced. In January 2002, he announced plans for a 311 Citizen Service Center.

Armed with data from the call center, the city went after the 24 noisiest neighborhoods in Operation Silent Night. Officers wielding noise meters converged on drag racers along Sutphin Boulevard in southeast Queens and a 24-hour restaurant in Upper Manhattan, among other scofflaws. According to the mayor's office, 7,400 people were arrested and 111,180 summonses were issued over the course of a year.

With the third major overhaul to the noise code in December 2005, garbage trucks could not rumble through residential areas between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m. Nightclubs and bars faced expensive summonses for loud music or chatter. Construction companies were required to post mitigation plans outlining how exploding rocks, jackhammers and other outbursts would be tempered. The ice cream man had to halt his sprightly tune while parked at the curb.

When the code took effect two years later, few noticed or cared. Except when the noise police arrived. The driver of a Mister Softee truck parked at a curb in Queens told the two agents who handed him a \$350 summons that he would lose business if he did not play the jingle.

This year, the Transportation Department began removing "Do Not Honk" signs to declutter lampposts. But antinoise activists worried it was a tacit acknowledgment of defeat.

Arline L. Bronzaft, a psychologist who helped erect the signs 27 years ago, said people needed visual cues to be reminded of their responsibility to respect the rights of others. "I wish we could regulate good manners," she said.

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WHAT? The Long War on Loud: Articles in this series are exploring the changing, and sometimes deafening, soundscape of New York City.

Photograph

1929: To Figure Out Just How Loud New York Was, Experts From the Noise Abatement Commission Measured the Sounds of Times Square in Decibels. Generations Have Tried to Curb the City's Roar. (Photograph by Wide World Photos); 1936: The City's First Noise Code Prohibited the Prolonged Blowing of a Horn. (Photograph by Times Wide World Photos); 1961: A Jackhammer Was One of Many Noise Culprits. (Photograph by William J. McGarry); 1986: Transit, From Horses to the Subway, has Long Contributed to the Din. (Photograph by Peter Freed); 1940s and '50s: The Committee for a Quiet City, Top, and Others Sponsored Antinoise Campaigns. Drawing: 1905: An Illustration Called New York the "Noisiest City On Earth."

DETAILS

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