

Conference Proceedings:

Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space

Venue: University and Museum of Copenhagen,

August 24-25 2023



MEDIALISED SOUNDS

---

Soundboks and the City: The Impact of Mobile  
High-Performance Speakers  
on Urban Sonic Living

---

Vitus Vestergaard

---

# Soundboks and the City: The Impact of Mobile High-Performance Speakers on Urban Sonic Living

---

## **Vitus Vestergaard**

Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Southern Denmark. His research and tuition centers on media production, media theory and other media-related topics. Alongside his academic work, he has been involved in the exhibition and dissemination of media history and has co-developed eleven exhibitions in museums and open-air spaces.

## **Summary**

Since 2015, the Soundboks has become an increasingly popular mobile Bluetooth performance speaker in Denmark. From a media ecological perspective, the introduction of new technology fosters new patterns of human association, typically with advantages for some and disadvantages for others. This paper examines the Soundboks story, focusing on the controversy and nuisance complaints following an increased presence of the Soundboks in urban residential areas.

As a case study, residents affected by Soundboks speakers, centred around the Copenhagen waterfront area Islands Brygge, completed a survey on their experiences. The results indicate a problem of a different scale than most other potential urban noise nuisances.

## **A Sonic Success Story**

In 2011, Jesper Theil Thomsen, a Danish highschooler, built a portable loudspeaker to bring to his Roskilde Festival campsite. The speaker, a DIY project called 'The

Boominator',<sup>1</sup> lasted for around 20 minutes until beer was spilled, ending its short life.<sup>2</sup>

But an idea had been born: to develop a Bluetooth performance speaker able to 'break through the noise of Roskilde Festival with the loudest music' and 'outlast the wildest nights and take anything our favourite week-long, outdoor festival could throw at it'.<sup>3</sup>

The next year, Thomsen collaborated with a couple of high school buddies, and the speaker design became better, although it was 'basically a wooden box with some speaker units and a car battery on the side'.<sup>4</sup> In 2014 the idea went into orbit when the highschoolers were hired to build such a speaker for another Roskilde Festival goer. Hoping to sell a few more units, they posted an ad on *Den Blå Avis*, the Danish equivalent of Craigslist. More than two hundred people contacted them, exceeding both the expectations and the capacity of the highschoolers.

They built five units, but there was a huge market for the Soundboks. In 2015 the friends registered Soundboks as a company. Funding was achieved through Y-Combinator (a Silicon Valley company that also funded startups such as Airbnb, Dropbox and Reddit), as well as Kickstarter and investors including a former CEO of Bang & Olufsen.<sup>5</sup> The Kickstarter alone raised a total of \$784,320, making Soundboks one of the most funded Danish Kickstarter campaigns.<sup>6</sup>

Through the years, the company had its ups and downs, but above all, the company is an example of very successful innovation and entrepreneurship.<sup>7</sup> The Soundboks became a mobile audio unit for many kinds of (mostly young) people, and it spread from festival campsites and into city gardens, parks, and waterfronts. Even schools adopted the Soundboks as a flexible alternative to traditional PA systems. Somewhere around 2019, the word 'soundboks' emerged as a proprietary eponym in Danish vernacular, no longer referring to just the brand but to large portable speakers in general.

---

1 <https://www.diyaudio.com/community/threads/the-boominator-another-stab-at-the-ultimate-party-machine.104402/>, accessed 14 June 2023.

2 John Rahbek, 'Død højtaler på Roskilde Festival skabte dundrende succes', *TV2 Kosmopol*, 27 August 2022, <https://www.tv2kosmopol.dk/koebenhavn/doed-hoejttaler-paa-roskilde-festival-skabte-dundrende-succes>.

3 <https://soundboks.com/eu/story/>, accessed 14 June 2023.

4 Hakon Mosbech, 'Jesper Thomsens succesvirksomhed var i krise. Løsningen? At lade hans ansatte give ham en skideballe', *Zetland*, 4 November 2019, <https://www.zetland.dk/historie/s8l43Gnp-a8dOKjiz-266ad>.

5 Heather Farmbrough, 'How A Danish Speaker Startup Raised \$3 million', *Forbes*, 19 Dec 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/heatherfarmbrough/2017/12/19/how-a-young-danish-speaker-startup-took-off>.

6 <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/554939252/soundboks-the-loudest-battery-powered-speaker>, accessed 14 June 2023.

7 Farmbrough, 'How A Danish Speaker Startup Raised \$3 million'.

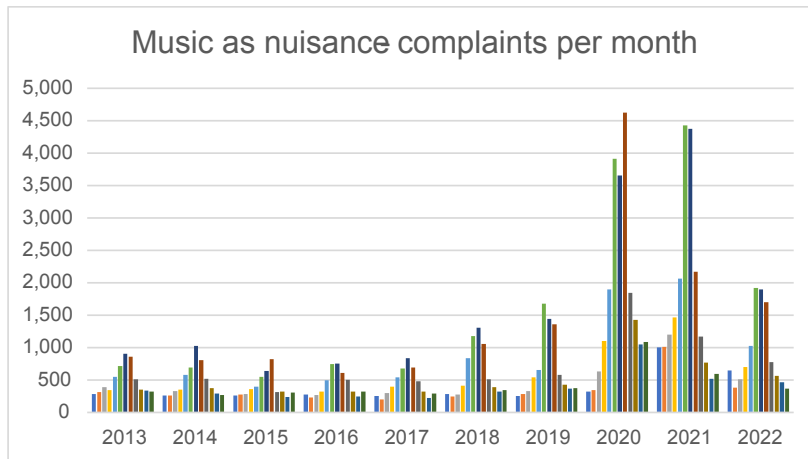


Figure 1: Music as nuisance reported to the Danish police<sup>8</sup>

Although Soundboks marketing has evolved significantly since the inception, there is still a great focus on raw power. The slogan is still ‘break through the noise’, and the customer testimonials on the official product page include statements like ‘it drowned all of the music coming from other picnic, they never stood a chance’ and ‘No lies, this is the loudest speaker in the world.’<sup>9</sup>

The latest Soundboks generation (Gen. 4) is marketed as having ‘concert level volume’. That involves a battery life of ‘6 hours at full volume’ (126 dB) and a volume knob that literally goes up to eleven.<sup>10</sup>

## An Acoustic Crime Story

In 2018 and particularly in 2020, the Danish police registered notable rises in reports of offence code 61720, ‘music as nuisance’. This happened alongside sky-rocketing Soundboks sales.

Causality or not, in public discourse the increased Soundboks popularity quickly became associated with the increased number of complaints about music. In the summer of 2018, Odense Municipality banned music after 7 p.m. in Munke Mose, an inner-city park area. A resident spokesperson explained, ‘the music has just been so loud this year ... and in our opinion it is because of the speakers called Soundboks.’<sup>11</sup>

Two years later when indoor gathering was restricted due to Covid-19, the Soundboks became notorious as a symbol of alternative, unruly, ways of gather-

<sup>8</sup> Dataset acquired from POLSAS / The National Police of Denmark.

<sup>9</sup> <https://soundboks.com/products/>, accessed 14 June 2023.

<sup>10</sup> <https://soundboks.com/products/soundboks-gen-3/>, accessed 14 June 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Nordentoft, ‘Musikken skal slukkes i Munke Mose’, *Fyns Amts Avis*, 13 August 2018, section 118.

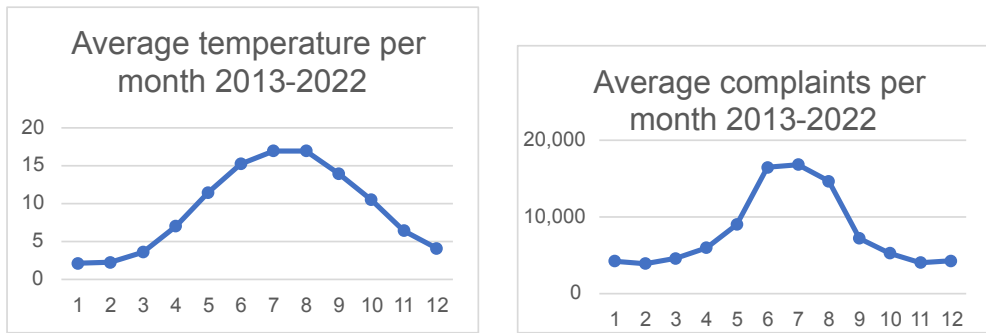


Figure 2: Danish temperature and music as nuisance complaints<sup>12</sup>

ing. One columnist mourned: ‘the Coronavirus should change us – but we ended up with soundboks inferno’.<sup>13</sup>

The police saw the same connection between gathering and music as nuisance. Thus, in a press release from August 2020, the Copenhagen Police Department asked the public to avoid crowding in public places due to Covid-19 and to ‘turn down the music’ or otherwise face fines or seizure.<sup>14</sup>

Three things are noteworthy: First, the police explicitly mention playing loud music on a ‘soundboks’ (with a lowercase s), institutionalizing the proprietary eponym. Second, the police list eight hotspots - mainly parks and harbour areas - describing them as ‘breathing holes of the city’. Third, the police anticipate problems because of a coming heatwave.

There is a well-known association between heat and criminal behaviour,<sup>15</sup> and comparing code 61720 complaints with Danish temperature data shows a similar correlation.

Several factors might play a part in the overwhelming rise of complaints from May to September every year. Other than it being the summer months in Denmark, it is also a time of vacation, graduation, and celebration. So, leisure time and alcohol probably also play a role when citizens go to these ‘breathing holes of the city’ to gather and play music criminally loud.

12 Datasets acquired from The Danish Meteorological Institute and POLSAS / The National Police of Denmark

13 Nathalie Ostrynski, ‘Kære danskere, coronaen skulle forandre os – men vi endte med soundboks-inferno, rasende færgægæster og affald på Bryggen!’, *Berlingske*, 9 August 2020, <https://www.berlingske.dk/aok/kaere-danskere-coronaen-skulle-forandre-os-men-vi-endte-med-soundboks-inferno>.

14 <https://politi.dk/koebenhavns-politi/nyhedsliste/opfordring-fra-koebenhavns-politi-hold-afstand-og-skru-ned-for-musikken/2020/08/06>, accessed 14 June 2023.

15 K. Heilmann, M.E. Kahn & C.K. Tang, ‘The urban crime and heat gradient in high and low poverty areas’, *Journal of Public Economics*, 197 (2021), 1–25; M. Ranson, ‘Crime, weather, and climate change’, *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, 67 (2014), 274–302.

Other crimes followed, and, thus, the summer of 2019 featured both vandalism against a Soundboks<sup>16</sup> and death threats. The latter came in response to an interview with Soundboks CEO Thomsen titled ‘Loud music is part of making the party unforgettable.’<sup>17</sup> Thomsen recalls that following publication of the article, in ‘no more than 10 minutes’ he received the first threats. He responded by offering people to contact him to discuss potential solutions to Soundboks nuisances, but ‘zero people wrote back.’<sup>18</sup> Since then, Thomsen has taken several other initiatives to foster dialogue, not least co-founding a non-partisan youth movement called Saga.<sup>19</sup> But ultimately, even Thomsen thinks that in some urban areas, prohibition might be ‘...an unfortunate last resort, but nevertheless a valid last resort.’<sup>20</sup>

Some citizens have written proposals for banning public Soundboks use at a national level. But so far, the proposals have failed to muster the 50,000 signatories necessary for parliament to consider them.<sup>21</sup>

Legally and practically speaking, Soundboks nuisances are therefore being managed locally in cooperation between resident associations, the police, and municipal authorities.

## A Waterfront Ballad

Islands Brygge is a waterfront area in central Copenhagen that has been an epicentre of the Soundboks controversy. It is one of the ‘hotspots’ listed by the Copenhagen Police, and Soundboks CEO Thomsen has acknowledged that ‘what they experience on for example Islands Brygge is not okay.’<sup>22</sup>

In April 2020, residents formed a Facebook group, *Soundboks noise on Islands Brygge, no thanks*, with currently 631 members. The group has been very active in organizing communication with the municipality, police, and other authorities, and

- 
- 16 Thomas Harder, ‘Ophidsede teenagere: Voksen mand smed vores Soundboks i søen’ *Ekstra Bladet*, 21 June 2019, <https://ekstrabladet.dk/nationen/ophidsede-teenagere-voksen-mand-smed-vores-soundboks-i-soeen/7682754>.
- 17 Sarah Skarum, ‘Direktøren bag den højlydte Soundboks: Høj musik er med til at gøre festen til noget, man aldrig glemmer’, *Politiken*, 28 July 2019, <https://politiken.dk/ibyen/art7309633/H%C3%B8j-musik-er-med-til-at-g%C3%B8re-festen-til-noget-man-aldrig-glemmer>.
- 18 Oliver Bodh Larsen, ‘Soundboks-stifter har fået nok af gammelmandsvældet’, *Euroman*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.euroman.dk/samfund/soundboks-stifter-har-faaet-nok-af-gammelmandsvaeldet-jo-yngre-du-er-jo-mindre-magt-har-du-over-klodens-udvikling>.
- 19 Jesper Theil Thomsen, ‘SAGA: Hvorfor og hvordan?’, *Medium*, 30 June 2021, <https://sagajesper.medium.com/saga-hvorfor-og-hvordan-83d7631d2480>.
- 20 Gustav Pors Olesen, ‘Byrådsmedlem om Soundboks: Forbud er eneste løsning’, *Radio4*, 14 July 2022, <https://www.radio4.dk/nyheder/byraadsmedlem-om-soundboks-forbud-er- eneste-loesning/>.
- 21 <https://www.borgerforslag.dk/se-og-stoet-forslag/?id=FT-08502> <https://www.borgerforslag.dk/se-og-stoet-forslag/?id=FT-08462> <https://www.borgerforslag.dk/se-og-stoet-forslag/?id=FT-08387>, accessed 14 June 2023.
- 22 Per Munch, ‘Efter dødstruser vil Soundboks’ opfinder lære unge at feste med god stil’, *Politiken*, 4 July 2020, Section 1, 13.

as a case study on resident experiences, a survey was conducted with 100 group members participating.

When complaining, the respondents describe being met with an attitude that 'I have chosen to live in the city, so I must expect noise'. Interestingly, the survey does indicate a tolerance of some noise. One resident describes a 'perfect evening' with idyllic sounds such as rustling leaves and birdsong but includes potential nuisances such as cars and happy shouting from the beach volleyball court in the description. Another resident explains that the children of the residence, having trouble sleeping, are 'of course used to the sound of the city, but a soundbox is a whole other class of decibel than some cars passing by and some talking'.

The residents seem to tolerate most sounds of the city because they draw a distinction between 'outside' and 'inside': between the urban and the indoor soundscape. And when urban sounds become irritants, it is generally possible to regulate the pollution of indoor sound. One example is soundproofing of windows, and 'secondary glazing [removes] some car noise, shouting and other noise'. But 'it cannot remove the pumping bass from the soundboks. That goes straight through'.

When asked why Soundboks noise is a nuisance, the most agreed-upon statement with 97 percent agreement is 'because I want to decide how it sounds inside my home'. And according to the residents, the Soundboks makes this almost impossible. For instance, 64 percent say that closing windows and doors helps very little to none.

Pointing to technology, 96 percent of the respondents feel that music as nuisance is worse now than before the Soundboks was invented. But they also suggest possible technological solutions, such as GPS-based volume restriction. Here they refer to the GPS-based reduced speed zones of rental e-scooters. Other technological solutions include hearing protection and headphones with active noise reduction. Thirty percent of the respondents have tried such devices and found them helpful, but at the same time, point out that they are uncomfortable to wear for extended periods of time and impair social interaction in the home.

## Déjà entendu?

From a media ecological point of view, there is nothing strange about a new technology such as the Soundboks having social consequences. When, in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan argued that the 'medium is the message', his point was exactly

that any medium introduces a new scale into our affairs and fosters 'new patterns of human association'.<sup>23</sup>

Neil Postman, who later coined the concept 'media ecology', was a bit more candid when he described the introduction of new technology as trade-offs, Faustian bargains, meaning that 'for every advantage a new technology offers, there is always a corresponding disadvantage'.<sup>24</sup>

When in the late 1920s, gramophone technology went from mechanical to electric, it created groundbreaking opportunities for high fidelity music listening in private homes as well as the use of electrical transcription in radio broadcasting. At the same time, a 1929 Danish newspaper article mourned the lack of laws preventing a neighbour 'from ruining our existence by letting his gramophone sit and make noise from an open window'.<sup>25</sup>

Neighbour disputes on music were already common during the nineteenth century following the introduction of affordable pianos.<sup>26</sup> But mobile music has its own history. Busking, or street performance, has been known since antiquity, and while some buskers have probably always been regarded a nuisance, it is not necessarily so. A study on buskers as a potential nuisance in Sweden 1800-1880 observes that 'the degree to which society tolerated and accepted foreign entertainers during the first half of the century is striking'.<sup>27</sup>

But during the last half of the century, public opinion changed. The increasing number of buskers and technology such as barrel organs cannot fully explain this shift. Another part of the explanation is that music was a nuisance in the lives of a growing middle class. It was a clash of lifestyles and, in a sense, became an urban territorial battle.

Since then, transistor radios, boomboxes and car stereos have been involved in similar battles. Car audio is probably the most extreme case, with sound levels comparable to the Soundboks, and in car audio culture the extreme bass is a key part of practices best described as 'a mobile territorializing event'.<sup>28</sup>

But unlike extreme car stereos, the Soundboks is not a niche product. It is more like a transistor radio, a device for anyone, yet it has the power to transform spaces

---

23 M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd Ed. (Signet, 1966), 23.

24 N. Postman, 'Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change', Talk, *New Tech '98*, Denver, Colorado, 27 March 1998.

25 'Byens Liv', *Dagbladet*, 6 Nov 1929, 11.

26 J.I. Parby, 'Fremskridtets lyd? Lydrevolutionen og håndteringen af støj under Københavns industrialisering ca. 1850-1910', *Kulturstudier*, 2 (2021), 41-71.

27 L. Runefelt, 'Threat or Nuisance? Foreign Street Entertainers in the Swedish Press, 1800-1880', in S. Nauman, W. Jezierski, C. Reimann, L. Runefelt (eds), *Baltic Hospitality from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century. Palgrave Studies in Migration History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

28 G. Carfoot, 'Competition Hertz: The culture and practice of car audio competitions', *Continuum*, 22:5(2008) (2008), 667-674.



for everyone. The auditory solipsism we saw in iPod culture<sup>29</sup> is turned inside out by the Soundboks, territorializing even the bedrooms of strangers. A new kind of orphic media, such as headphones with active noise control, promises to help 'sonically fabricating microspaces of freedom for the pursuit of happiness';<sup>30</sup> and according to the people on Islands Brygge, to a certain extent, they succeed. But those microspaces are fragile, only comfortable for a while, and they exclude the people whose voices the residents do want to hear.

There is no simple solution.

---

29 M. Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod culture and urban experience*, (Routledge, 2007).

30 M. Hagood, *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 3.

**How to cite:**

Vitus Vestergaard: "Soundboks and the City: The Impact of Mobile High-Performance Speakers on Urban Sonic Living" in Parby, Jakob Ingemann (ed.): *Conference Proceedings: Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space*, August 24-25, Copenhagen 2023. University of Copenhagen and Museum of Copenhagen, 2024.

**Soundboks and the City: The Impact of Mobile High-Performance Speakers on Urban Sonic Living  
© 2024 Vitus Vestergaard**

In Conference Proceedings: Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space  
University and Museum of Copenhagen, August 24-25 2023

Editor: Jakob Ingemann Parby, Museum of Copenhagen

Design & Layout: Anna Falcon, [www.annafalcon.dk](http://www.annafalcon.dk)

Cover Design: Elias Friberg Lewinsky

The conference and the proceedings were funded by The Velux Foundation