

# LIVE MUSIC CHALLENGES IN EUROPEAN CITIES

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## Noise complaints as a direct consequence of an inadequate urban planning

The testimonies collected during this study highlight that **noise complaints** represent a significant challenge for live music venues, impacting both their operations and general environment and ambiance within the venue, which can become strained or negative due to tensions and restrictions associated with noise-related issues. A single determined neighbor with the resources and persistence to initiate legal action can pose a threat to any venue over time. The stakes are high, as venues found in violation of building codes or activity standards may face forced closures or the need for prohibitively expensive renovations.

This vulnerability underscores the precarious position of urban music venues, which must constantly adapt—often at great expense—to evolving regulations and community expectations. Furthermore, public financial support is far from guaranteed and often remains minimal in comparison to the substantial investments that venues must make themselves. Among the respondents, two venues were in the process of implementing soundproofing measures:

### Respondent from The Netherlands, Amsterdam - 2000-capacity venue



*To safeguard our operations and avoid the potential loss of permits or even closure, we devised a comprehensive master plan two years ago during the COVID-19 pandemic. This ambitious project involves a substantial renovation and expansion of our building, with a primary focus on sound insulation. Simultaneously, it aims to preserve and modernize the historic structure, ensuring it is fit for the future. The scale of the undertaking is significant, with an estimated timeline of at least a decade for completion and projected costs running into millions. However, we believe this is the only viable path to secure the venue's long-term sustainability.*

### Respondent from Denmark, Aalborg - 110-capacity venue



*We don't have the equivalent of 2 million Danish kroner, which is a challenge for us. This situation stems from a complaint made by a neighbor. Two years ago, the owner of the apartment building next to our venue raised an issue. While the residents love our venue, the owner wants to soundproof the building because he realized there was too much noise. However, his building was constructed almost ten years after our venue, and it was poorly built compared to the original plans. Despite this, we are the ones who have to bear the cost of the situation.*

The cost of such an operation is exceedingly high. Faced with this significant challenge, two main strategies emerged: **fundraising and solidarity within the venue's community and with other concert halls, and long-term investment by a venue with substantial resources and the ability to diversify activities and revenue streams.** In all cases, it is evident that without public support and when required to undertake such renovations to remain operational, these projects represent a significant threat to the survival of the venue, akin to a sword of Damocles hanging over their future.

As highlighted by several testimonies, what are frequently referred to as noise complaints often include concerns about a wider range of issues: **nighttime disturbances** such as public disorder, street racing, or urban rodeos, as well as the state of public spaces after late-night activities (e.g., litter, urine, and other waste left behind by crowds). These interconnected issues often blur the distinction between legitimate sound-related conflicts and dissatisfaction with the overall impact of nightlife on local neighborhoods. **The blame frequently falls on easily recognizable central-city concert halls or clubs**, which can become targets for a variety of concerns. These dynamics or perceptions are sometimes further intensified by the actions of public authorities themselves:

#### Respondent from Spain, Barcelona - 140-capacity venue



*During the pandemic, a campaign was launched by the Spanish government, known as the «pin-pad ad»<sup>1</sup>. The campaign was structured like a children's game, with a sequence of images: first, there is a party at a club, then people kissing, and finally, an elderly person dying. It essentially criminalizes venues, despite the fact that during the pandemic, we were forced to close. What does this «ping-pong» mean? It seems they are working on the public's subconscious, associating our venues with negative and harmful imagery.*

Beyond the challenge of soundproofing the building, venues are often **compelled to allocate significant resources to mediation efforts** with their audience, neighbors, and public authorities. Managing dissatisfaction frequently falls primarily on concert halls and other spaces perceived as noisy, which requires substantial financial and human resources and demands a significant investment of time and energy from venue directors.

#### Respondent from The Netherlands Utrecht, 300-capacity venue



*When I reflect on my main tasks over the past three years, I realize that I have spent significantly more time mediating and communicating with neighbors, as well as liaising with the municipality. One major challenge is that the regulations for residents renovating their buildings are less strict, making it easier for them to do so. As a result, buildings are increasingly being constructed closer to our venue. This creates a dual issue: nuisance from the industrial activity near us and sound from our hall affecting the nearby residences. It's a very complex and difficult situation to navigate.*



Credit: Mind Palermo, Keepon Fest at I Candelai (Palermo, IT)

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1. Campaña #EstoNoEsUnJuego: «Pito, pito gorgorito...» «Pin, pan, fuera...»



*Trying to bring together the entire nightlife sector across different neighborhoods, forming associations, and signing contracts with various parts of the city council. This involves working to reach agreements, such as funding and deploying security personnel and civic workers to patrol the streets. These teams engage with the public to prevent large gatherings, public drinking, noise, and other disturbances. Additionally, collaborations include maintaining a cleaning team in partnership with the city council. For instance, ensuring cleaning staff work during the night so that by seven in the morning, the streets are spotless. This ensures that when residents step out, the streets are clean, with no visible signs of the previous night's activities.*

### Are people becoming less tolerant?

Several testimonies report an increase in noise complaints since the lockdowns implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, attributing this to a **perceived decline in tolerance among local residents**. In his book *This Must Be the Place*, Shain Shapiro provides a broader, structural perspective, **attributing these tensions to a lack of urban planning** that fails to incorporate considerations for nightlife, and even less so for live music venues. This oversight highlights a systemic issue where urban development often disregards the cultural and economic importance of such spaces, exacerbating conflicts between venues and residential communities.

*It was patently obvious that the way planning law was interpreted, implemented and governed [in the UK] was one of the reasons why venues were closing at an accelerating pace. In 2015, in an effort to fast-track housebuilding, the UK government tweaked the planning rules to create the "permitted development rights" framework. Permitted development rights impact all manner of land uses and, in many respects, allow for changes in how land is used without going through planning permission, which takes time and money. In this case, the changes allowed offices to be converted into residential premises, without seeking full planning approvals. Much of these conversions happened in business parks and have led to homes being created out of office blocks. (...)*

*In addition, offices above pubs were converted to housing, with no additional soundproofing, and on high streets housing developments emerged where there were once offices and commercial premises. As these developments were built, sold and inhabited, a number of issues became apparent. When residents can't sleep due to pounding bass, single-glazed windows or the dispersal of a nightclub across the street at 4am, tensions rise, noise complaints increase and venues are blamed.<sup>2</sup>*

### Effective measures to prevent conflicts and reduce disturbances.

**Noise complaints arise from a combination of factors**, including gentrification, urban densification, and demographic shifts in the surrounding population. Additional contributing elements include older buildings without proper soundproofing being repurposed as concert venues, poor urban planning, and new constructions that fail to adequately address noise mitigation. These factors often intersect, exacerbating conflicts between music venues and nearby residents. The situation is further complicated by inconsistent enforcement of regulations and the lack of comprehensive strategies to integrate live music spaces into urban development plans. It is very challenging to completely prevent complaints, but the risk of closure can be mitigated through **robust soundproofing and genuine consideration for nearby residents**.

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2. Shapiro, Shain. *This Must Be the Place: How Music Can Make Your City Better*. Repeater, 2023.

This involves measures such as ensuring streets are cleaned before residents wake up and establishing ongoing mediation and communication throughout the year. Some cities have implemented the [Agent of Change principle](#), first introduced in Australia (notably at The Tote), adopted in San Francisco in the 2000s, and more recently in London in 2016. This principle dictates that the entity causing the change (such as an investor or developer) is responsible for minimizing its impact on the surrounding neighbors. In practical terms, if new housing is built near an existing bar or concert venue, it is the responsibility of the developer or landlord to ensure the building is soundproofed adequately.

Unfortunately, this is a principle rather than a law, and it has not been applied in any of the cases we encountered during this study. **Operators are left to handle the situation themselves** by making their presence known, reaching out, and raising awareness among developers building near their venues. This risk is significant, and its consequences further strain structures already weakened by the current economic climate.

FULL STUDY

MAP OF CHALLENGES