

HEAVY BASS VICTIMS you are NOT ALONE

By James Kaufman

Do you often hear low thumping, rumbling, and booming sounds that you can't ignore, and wonder why others seem to be going about their business as if everything is normal and fine? Do you marvel at how others can be experiencing the same “thunder and earthquake” vibrations and act as if they don't notice, never mentioning this profound detail as they talk about the weather? Why the strong taboo on the subject of this invasive noise?



What you are experiencing are consumer audio systems, mostly in cars, that pump out much more bass than the ones of yesteryear. The big sound waves that these devices put out penetrate through walls and closed windows, causing agony, torment, and lost peace for those within. If you feel alone, you are not. One study shows that 40% of victims of low-frequency noise believe that they are the only ones who can hear the sound! But though your ears might be better than average at catching the bass, there are many others silently sharing your grief.



Sound that rattles your walls may be dramatic and stories of such violent noise may get you a sympathetic word. But more common and relentless is the bass that smoothly penetrates through the concrete and gets into your head. This was not your great-grandmother's noise problem; this is new-like fifteen years young as a mass consumer phenomenon. And it is very real.



We are dealing with a profoundly different kind of sound here—artificial bass so pure and muffled that you rarely find it in nature. And when you do, it usually signals something dangerous, like an earthquake, or a tsunami. Natural acoustic low sounds are always accompanied by higher waves, called overtones. But many of the bass tones emitted from boom-cars have little or none of this higher component. It is such a foreign sound to us that we have no good words to describe it. “Loud” doesn't quite do it even when it is powerful.



Strong low-frequency sound has always signaled danger, and this might be why it produces stress reactions in our bodies and minds. Research shows that these lows bother people more than sounds of more natural proportions. One study compared noise with significant lows to noise without lows. It showed that the bass-heavy noise was much more likely to cause symptoms like heart palpitations, anxiety, shortness of breath, frustration depression, and even backaches.*



But then, why does the majority seem to go about their business as if all is normal and well? One reason is that some people can just hear these lows “better” than others. There are quite a few studies that show how much variation there is between different people's ears. For example, 10 percent of 50-60-year-olds will hear bass tones that are 10-12 dB softer than the average folks in their age group.** Here's how this might work in real life: ten people are sitting in a room together. A boom car passes by a block away. Most everyone can hear it, but just barely, and there is likely a person or two who cannot detect it at all. But chances are that one person heard it long before everyone else did, and will continue to hear it until it is about four blocks away. And during the course of an hour, most of those people will notice a few passing violations, while that one person may only experience a few precious moments of NOT hearing a boom car. So while boom cars are passing annoyances for some, they are relentless torment for a significant minority.



In a low-tech society, these “good-eared” people may have been valued as tribe-members that could provide early warnings of danger. Yet these sensitive ears can seem like a curse in today's societies where there is no escape from technologically produced thumping.



Geoff Leventhall, a low-frequency noise researcher in the UK believes that although there may be a lot of variation in what ears can hear, there is even more variation in how minds and bodies respond. For example, in a group people hearing the same rumble in the air, one might have trouble sleeping, while another might not be able to stay awake. One might get a funny heart-beat, while another might have trouble focusing. Some may not notice any effects, though they hear it just as well.

Do you ever find yourself looking for where the bass is coming from? Again, you are not alone. Geoff Leventhall writes, “in the absence of known sources, Hum sufferers often search their neighborhoods for a source, walking or driving around at night. It is important for them to find a target for their frustrations.” Yet finding the source can be difficult, because these waves are so large that they don't reveal the direction of their source. You may have to get pretty close to the car to make sure it is the right one. Then there is the reality that this is not just a machine emitting these sounds, it is a machine operated by people. Where do you go from there? Do you try to talk to them? Do they know how horribly their behavior affects others? Are they doing it on purpose knowing how much it hurts people? Are they dangerous people, or simply unaware? Should you just call the police? This human element defies healthy social interaction, which contributes to victim's feelings of isolation.



There is a group in England called “Low Frequency Noise Sufferers Association.” This support group was created because sufferers felt alone and isolated. The nature of low frequency sound causes people who suffer from it to feel alone. It penetrates walls. It causes sickening effects in many people. At lower levels it is heard by some, but not all.

It signals danger. It is everywhere, yet nobody talks about it. And it is deliberately made by people operating equipment specifically designed to pump it out.

Are you a low-frequency noise sufferer, or do you know of a loved one who is? If so, give us a call, a letter, or an email. We will identify with your plight, and listen to your laments. But more importantly, we will work together for change.

* Mirowska and Mroz, 2000

** Van den Berg and Passchier-Vermeer, 1999

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