

Quiet Please

The Hot New Sound in South Beach: 'Quiet, Please'

By DANA CANEDY

New York Times

April 20, 2003

The pretty people and the trendy shops can stay, but South Beach residents have had enough of the loud music that thumps nightly from car stereos, boomboxes and nightclubs here, and they want the city to turn down the volume.

It's not just the noise and the vibration," said Clotilde Luce, a freelance writer who lives on Ocean Drive. "I can actually hear the words to the music from a club four blocks away. I can hear the D.J."

"When things get pretty loud, I wear earplugs to be able to concentrate on what I'm doing," Ms. Luce said. "I think Miami Beach has a choice between more conservative people with money, who have pushed real estate here, and a crowd that comes over and behaves like it's spring break all the time."

In some respects, the South Beach neighborhood is a victim of its own success. About 15 years ago, it was blighted, its Art Deco hotels faded and neglected. Since then, the vibrancy of South Beach's night life has made it an international hot spot.

Some celebrities, like Madonna, have moved on, but there have been recent sightings of Britney Spears and Jennifer Lopez. And South Beach is increasingly home to affluent people who were drawn by its vibe but prefer sipping Cuban coffee in cafes to dancing the night away.

In an effort to strike a balance between the night life of South Beach and the quality of life its residents are demanding, city officials are cracking down on nightclubs and night owls that violate the city's ordinances on noise control and other quality-of-life issues.

"Over the past decade or so," said Simon Cruz, a Miami Beach city commissioner, "What started to happen is that residential zoning and commercial zoning started to bleed into each other. There were areas that were commercial where condos sprung up and residential areas where open-area clubs started protruding, so it was a clash that was waiting to happen."

Enforcing an ordinance that has been on the books for a long time, the Miami Beach Police Department has begun citing or arresting anyone whose club, boombox or car stereo music can be heard 100 yards away. Violators are issued tickets for \$50 to \$500 and can be sentenced to up to six months in jail. Nightclub owners who violate the ordinance face fines of \$250 for first offenses and \$500 for each subsequent offense. Miami Beach is considering legislation that would give the city the authority to close clubs that repeatedly violate it.

Since the crackdown began last weekend, the police have issued 84 citations and arrested 4 people for violating the ordinance, said Detective Bobby Hernandez, the spokesman for the police department.

"The loud noise is something that has become a real hot topic here in Miami Beach and the chief, knowing this, put a task force of about 20 officers together to address it between the next 30 to 60 days," Detective Hernandez said. "Our goal is to get the word out there that this type of behavior is not going to be accepted anymore. It will also address other quality-of-life issues like prostitution, urinating in public and loud exhaust pipes on motorcycles."

There have been 276 citations and 50 arrests for such offenses since last weekend, he said.

Jacqueline Arias, a 21-year-old legal secretary from Miami, found out the hard way just how serious the city is about noise. She was cruising down Ocean Drive with two friends in her white BMW, playing her radio with the windows down, when a police officer stopped her. The officer wrote a \$50 ticket but later decided to let her go with a warning.

"He walked up and asked me if I was aware of the noise violation," Ms. Arias said. "I said, 'No.' We saw signs when we were driving in and we were like, what is this?"

Ms. Arias said that with all the public safety and security issues the police have to deal with, enforcing a noise control ordinance was a waste of time and resources.

Club owners on the beach say the city has forgotten the importance of its night life. "Everybody got hurt when they started messing with the clubs," said Esteban Ramirez, the manager of the Club Deep nightclub. "Now they're enforcing this ordinance, and they're really, really strict about everything. The city doesn't care much about the club scene anymore."

Mr. Cruz, the city commissioner, said South Beach was in the throes of adjusting to its "new reality."

"Before, we had transient residents who were renting the Art Deco properties around the area," he said. "They were a part of the night life, but they have been supplanted by permanent, year-round residents."

"Now," he continued, "we have a situation where we have to acknowledge that the night life that got us the notoriety and appeal that makes us the city we were has changed, and we are also a city that wants to have a certain level of sophistication and tranquility."

Homeowners say that their investment in the community has fueled the local economy in recent years, and that the city has an obligation to respond to their concerns.

"When you live in \$750,000 to \$2 million apartments and have to sleep in a small bedroom on the opposite side of your apartment just to avoid the noise, it's very infuriating," said David Haber, a lawyer for the Portofino Towers Condominium Association. "You can't have a beating drum screaming in your ear all night."

Beach residents insist that they are not looking to stop anyone from having a good time. They say they simply do not want to feel as if they are living in Party Central.

"When there is loud music on, you shut your doors and you still can't peacefully watch TV," said Josh Fisher, 56, a senior researcher at a computer company, who lives in a condominium on the southernmost tip of South Beach.

"You can't have dinner on the terrace or entertain people. Well, you can, but you count on somebody else to provide the music."