

Eating and drinking in London: I had more choice in 1978

.....and I blame background music

London has changed significantly since 1978 when I first arrived in the capital. There has been a huge growth in the number and variety of coffee shops and restaurants. You can eat food from just about every country in the world. Bars serve a range of foreign beers and wines unheard of 40 years ago

It should mean I have a wider choice than ever before about where I can eat or drink. In reality, that is far, far from the case. For me the number of places for eating and drinking in comfort has shrunk dramatically. And it's all down to background music. Or what I prefer to call 'foreground music' for it is rarely a noise tinkling in the background; it is mostly noise which ranges from horribly noticeable to an assault on the senses.

'I am constantly amazed how people flock to restaurants that blare out music or how they can spend hours on end working on their laptop in Starbucks with the constant thudding of noise in their ears'.

A survey commissioned in 2013 by Barclay's Bank found that 61% of older people find piped music in shops and banks their biggest bugbear. It is reassuring to know that I am not alone. But I still fear that, amongst the population as a whole, I am in a minority. I am constantly amazed how people flock to restaurants that blare out music. Some may find it disagreeable, but they don't dislike it enough to stay away. I just don't understand how people can spend hours on end working on their laptop in Starbucks with the constant thudding of noise in their ears.

There are, though, still places where a lot of people object to noise. Loud music from neighbours is still one of the main noise complaints received by local authorities. And a BBC poll found that 67% of people hated piped music in trains. To me, that is reassuring.

It's not that I never go into somewhere with background music. Sometimes the coffee or the company is too good to stay away. Or it may be an important business meeting.

And you'd be right to say to me that nobody is forcing me into cafes, bars or restaurants playing background music. But it does limit my choices. A day out in London has to be carefully planned so that, wherever possible, I only eat, drink and shop in places without background music. Forty years ago I never had to do that.

- **Pipedown, the campaign for freedom piped music, produces *Quiet Corners*, which lists restaurants, pubs and other places which don't have background music: <https://quietcorners.org.uk>**

Posted by John Stewart