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I was always told that the clap of thunder was due to air refilling the gap after being punched through by the lightening plasma arc. That cannot be the reason for the pop when such xenon tubes fire as there is no air inside them , why the pop?

"Air" is a mixture of gasses, Xenon tubes are filled with Xenon gas, so no real difference from that perspective, both the earth and the flash tube have an atmosphere of gas.

I thought the sound was the shockwave created by the rapidly heated column of gas expanding, haven't really researched it though.