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The Varied Meanings and Uses of ‘World Music’: Commercialization, Education, and Academic Differentiation

Introduction

Broadly speaking, ‘world music’ refers to one of two types of music. The first consists of music understood as endemic to and representative of a particular culture or region. This is primarily what is meant by world music in an educational context, with the term being applied to K-12 curricula, undergraduate survey courses, and performance ensembles. It has at various times been used synonymously with ‘musics of the world,’ ‘world musics’ plural (Zheng 2010, 328), ‘the entire world of man’s music’ (Garfias 1982, 2), or in the case of music educators, ‘multicultural music.’ Generally, it deals with music that is understood to be part of a cultural tradition; music educators by and large avoid popular music, either due to bias or lack of familiarity (Hardwick 2006, 12). This has also been true in academic circles, where the term can denote the ethnomusicologist’s “object of study, all the world’s music,” (Ling 2003, 238), but again with a bias against popular music (Hess 2013, 72). At the K-12 level, it also includes arrangements or simplified versions of traditional music, which may be westernized to varying degrees.

The second type refers to “music in which sounds from various and often contrastive cultures are combined, mixed, and fused” (Nettl 2010, 33). This hybrid music that “combine[s] local musical characteristics with those of mainstream genres” (Guilbault 1993, 36) is commercial in nature, and makes up the bulk of the ‘World Music’ (or ‘International’) genre. The remainder of this World Music genre consists of ethnographic (or pseudo-ethnographic) recordings of traditional music (Rogers 1999); that is, a commodification of world music of the first type. Thus,

it is necessary to distinguish between the lower-case world music (traditional music in educational, academic, or semi-commercial settings), the upper-case World Music (a form of contemporary music signified primarily by the mixing of Western and non-Western elements), and finally the World Music genre or marketing label (which includes music of both types, but is dominated by contemporary hybrid or fusion styles).

The multifaceted, interconnected nature of world music necessitates a multi-pronged approach. Even if attempting to focus on ethnomusicological literature alone, it is impossible to avoid also discussing perspectives from within the music industry as well as music education outside of academia. As Cottrell explains, “collaborations between ethnomusicologists, sound archives, and record companies inevitably began to blur the lines between essentially not-for-profit scholarship and the commercial activities of those corporations whose guiding principles were diametrically opposite” (2010, 11). Feld, for example, describes the production of his 1991 album *Voices in the Rainforest* as “the highest of postmodern ironies” in that it captures the decidedly non-commercial music of a people “uncontaminated by technology” and then proceeds to commodify it via technology (1994, 286). Ethnomusicologists have also worked as consultants in the production of instructional materials for K-12 world music education (Campbell 2002, 30). A small number of ethnomusicologists even find careers in the World Music industry, such as Jacob Edgar, the main music scout for Putumayo records (Kassabian 2013, 212).

The object here is not to place undue criticism on ethnomusicologists, who have expressed a variety of views on the subject. Feld broadly classifies ethnomusicological discourses on world music as either ‘anxious’ or ‘celebratory’ narratives; anxious in the sense of wondering “whether world music does more to incite or erase musical diversity,” and celebratory in the sense of focusing “on the production of hybrid musics” and the potential for “cultural and financial equity

in the entertainment industries” (Feld 2000, 152). These narratives on world music have waxed and waned over time, and combined with the difficulty in separating out the commercial from the non-commercial, the academic from the educational etc. present an obstacle to discussing the subject in a truly comprehensive way. With that in mind, this paper is organized into sections roughly corresponding to a movement from the clearly commercial (that is, World Music as a genre or marketing label) to the clearly academic (emerging issues in ethnomusicology), passing through the subject of world music education at the K-12 and university level along the way.

The World Music genre

Officially, the World Music genre was created in 1987 when a group of music industry personnel convened in London to discuss strategies for how to better market a growing collection of international or internationally-flavored music (Brennan 2001, 46). This disparate array of both contemporary and traditional music from around the world, spread thin across a number minor genres, was now consolidated into a single all-encompassing category (Lell 2019, 88). World Music, as a “unified generic name,” was ultimately chosen as it “seemed to include the most and omit the least” (Anderson 2000).

However, the roots of the World Music genre extend back much earlier. In tracing historical use of the term, Klump notes that as early as 1963 the jazz critic Berendt “began using the term ‘Weltmusik’ [World music]...to label a movement in jazz that incorporated musics from outside America” (1999, 8). 1982 marked the inception of the World of Music and Dance Festival (WOMAD) in the UK (Lell 2019, 86). The following year, the American DJ Dan Del Santo released an album titled *World beat*, which combined “R & B, Afrobeat, and calypso styles” (Zheng 2010, 326). The name of this album was then picked up by record companies and applied

as a label to “whatever ‘foreign’ or ‘foreign influenced’ music was in their catalogues” (Klump 1999, 8). Leading up to 1987, two additional factors spurred the creation of the World Music genre: “the uncommon success of reggae in the mainstream market” and “the appearance of the *Graceland* album,” Paul Simon’s 1986 collaboration with South African musicians (Rahkonen 1994). After being released into the world, World Music largely supplanted the former ‘world beat’ designation (Klump 1999, 8; 11).

Many authors have attempted to delineate the features of the World Music genre. The lack of consensus stems from the fact that “the criteria used by record industry insiders to categorize artists as ‘world music’...border on the arbitrary or are based on language and geography and not on musical style” (Klump 1999, 13). As Guilbault remarks, “depending on the country, distributors, record-shop owners, and music journalists, the social, political, or demographic position of certain minority groups in a given country, the category of ‘world music’ would vary in content and include various sets of musical genres” (1993, 36).

Roberts observes that what qualifies as World Music changes depending on where it is being sold. In Anglophone countries, singing in languages other than English is an important qualifier; in non-Anglophone European countries, less so. In the latter case, “The principle of differentiation here seems to be not linguistic otherness (music performed by artists whose native language is other than the national one) but the more dubious one of racial or ethnic otherness” (1992, 231). The location-dependent subjectivity of World Music is echoed by Brennan, but on an even more local level: “[World Music] is real if only because it is talked about as though it were real... And there, in the altogether normal that is a record store, world music is born, and becomes real. The very everyday and haphazard act of simple marketing suddenly coalesces into an idea or, rather, clarifies physically an idea that already exists” (2001, 45-55). In other words, an album or

artist becomes subsumed under the World Music label the moment they are placed in the World Music bin of the record store (or in recent times, more likely the figurative bin of a digital store or streaming service). Similarly, Feld states that World Music is defined not by musical or aesthetic quality, but rather “derives from and is chiefly dependent on the marketplace” (2012, 40).

That being said, there are some features which, while not universally applicable, seem common to much of what is labeled as World Music. In describing the music typically performed at festivals such as the World of Music and Dance (WOMAD), Lell (2019, 93-100) identifies five signifiers. In short, these are: 1) Exotic elements that emphasize “a difference between the self and a perceived authentic ‘other;’” 2) Ethnic dress and appearance; 3) An atmosphere of devotion, happiness, and celebration; 4) “The idea of music as a universal language;” 5) Political engagement. On that last point, World Music “is often considered to be a shorthand for a set of culturally progressive cosmopolitan values and source of political identification” (Haynes 2005, 366). White adds that consuming World Music “constitutes a gesture of solidarity between the consumer and the artist, who represents (or at least stands for) people struggling for economic and political survival” (2007, 196). Lee (1998, 45-6) takes a different approach, opting to divide World Music into its constituent genres. These include: 1) Music from rural areas (ethnographic recordings); 2) Non-western art music; 3) National or folkloric music; 4) Earlier forms of rural and urban music (including European folk music); 5) Non-western contemporary musics assimilating western traits; 6) Western contemporary music assimilating non-western traits; 7) ‘neo-World’ or New Age music with decontextualized exotic elements.

Others find it more sensible to define the genre by what it is not. World Music may be understood as “just about anything other than mainstream Western music (e.g., classical, jazz, country, rock)” (Rogers 1999). While far more succinct, this approach has the opposite problem

of being frustratingly ambiguous. Simon Hopkins wrote in the liner notes of a 1991 World Music compilation album that “There’s seldom been a more confusing, arbitrary or universally detested a marketing term...if all it takes for a record to end up in the world music rack is for it to come from...anywhere that the Queen’s English isn’t the first language, then the term is...a meaningless load of crap” (Guilbault 1993, 40). Evidently, the term is contentious even for those in the music industry. David Byrne—creator of what many consider a seminal World Music album, 1989’s *Rei Momo*—lambasted the term in a New York Times op-ed, saying that it relegates “99 percent of the music on this planet” to a realm of irrelevance and serves to reassert “the hegemony of Western pop culture” (Byrne 1999). In a response, Ian Anderson—the mind behind fRoots magazine and himself a participant in the 1987 genesis of the World Music marketing concept—argues that criticism of the term “says a lot more about the prejudices of the accuser than it does about the subject itself.” Anderson defends what was originally intended as a “short-term marketing plan” that wound up being not only good for business but “good for the incomes of the artists too” (Anderson 2000). Even today, the industry has not reached any consensus. A 2019 article from The Guardian explores why the label continues to persist despite disapproval from artists, event organizers, and record label personnel alike (Kalia 2019).

It has been suggested that the growth of the World Music genre starting in the late 1980s and continuing through the 1990s is reflective of a set of socioeconomic and cultural conditions particular to contemporary Western society. According to Erlmann, the music “answers an old-fashioned, residual desire in the West for a unity and coherence of worldview that has for ever been lost” (1993, 8). This nostalgia for an imagined utopian past is “a response to the alienation many feel in contemporary North American society: fragmented world views, the loss of community, the lack of contact with the earth and natural rhythms, increasing asceticism, and an

excessive tilting of the scales toward technology and computers” (Rogers 1999). World Music satiates the consumer’s “hunger for the cultural practices of the third world” (Brenner 2001, 46) which serve to stave off a sense of looming global hegemony and cultural ‘grey-out.’ As Bohlman explains, “Music expresses and mediates the fear of what lies ahead, and it may serve as a weapon to deflect or stay the impact of an unknown, undesired future” (2002, 7).

Who is (or was) consuming World Music?

In the aughts and moving into the early 2010s, a number of authors recognized that World Music was no longer (and perhaps had never really been) a music of the youth demographic. Instead of taking its place alongside pop and rock as “a music for the people, i.e. the ordinary music fan of MTV” (Ling 2003, 239) it had become “a shorthand for a set of culturally progressive cosmopolitan values and a source of political identification that is typically associated with more affluence consumers” (Haynes 2005, 366). Such consumers tend to be more educated, in or bordering on middle age, and overwhelmingly white.

Both Ling (2003) and Taylor (2012) suggest that World Music appeals to the demographic conventionally associated with classical music. However, the extent to which World Music has become—in Jan’s words—“the ‘classic music’ of our time” has perhaps been somewhat exaggerated. In the 2004 study “The Current Status of World Music in the UK,” Hattersley uses figures from record sales, festival attendance, and magazine subscriptions to arrive at a rough estimate of World Music’s share of the market at that time. He figures that out of a national population of 60 million, $\leq 150,000$ individuals actively follow World Music (at best, a quarter of one percent). Similarly, record sales of World Music albums accounted for only 0.4% of the

domestic total. Whether these statistics would match those of the US and other countries is unknown (2004, 214-5).

One might imagine, given the decline of brick-and-mortar record stores, that the World Music bin (whether real or figurative) may also be going the way of the dodo. Writing ten years ago, Cottrell remarked that music websites and platforms “now act often as the principal conduits through which musicians interact with each other and their audience” (2010, 19). In the intervening decade, this exodus of music to the digital world has only accelerated. AllMusic, the largest music catalogue on the Internet, has no ‘World’ category, only ‘International.’ On Spotify, a streaming service that relies on both users and algorithms to generate playlists, the label ‘World’ has remarkably little presence. If there is any evidence that this not just a peculiarity of the online music environment but reflective of a broader movement in the industry, it’s that as of 2020 the GRAMMY Awards has changed the name of their long-standing “Best World Music Album” to “Best Global Music Album” (Yglesias 2020).

World music education

In the context of this discussion, “world music education” refers to a type of non-academic, hands-on learning at the K-12 level that today has strong connections with broader notions of multiculturalism, pluralism, and diversity. It exists mostly in the context of elementary school curricula, but can also be found in the outreach and community programs of certain organizations.

A historical study by William M. Anderson (1974) links the advent of world music education to the progressive education movement that was in vogue during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Public awareness of and interest in foreign musical traditions had been piqued by a series of world’s fairs at the turn of the century, in which colonial powers “put the cultures and

peoples they were gathering on display” (Bohlman 2002, 16). Additionally, an influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe to the US introduced the American people to forms of music that were simultaneously familiar and exotic. Folk songs from those regions began to be taught in schools, along with arrangements Native and African American songs (Kang, 2016: 22).

As interest in world music education continued growing through the mid-20th century, there was increasing concern about the authenticity of the musical materials used by educators. Much of world music education still consisted of singing Westernized arrangements of foreign songs (Kang 2016, 24; Anderson 1974, 32-3). That is partly why, starting in the 1960s, world music education began to involve practitioners from the recently created field of ethnomusicology. In the winter of 1960-1961, Elizabeth May, Mantle Hood, and “other advanced students of ethnomusicology” (May and Hood 1962, 38) conducted an experiment in which they taught Javanese songs to elementary school students in Santa Monica, CA. These students then sang along with the gamelan at ULCA’s Institute of Ethnomusicology.

Another successful experiment was conducted by Paul Berliner (then a PhD candidate in ethnomusicology at Wesleyan) in 1973, who implemented a world music curriculum at a Massachusetts middle school. Its impetus was a string of music teacher resignations at that particular school, and more generally an “increased disenchantment of secondary school students with traditional music curriculums and teaching methods” (1973, 50). According to Berliner, “The music of contemporary rock groups was used as a point of departure for the study of world music.” For example, the Beatles’ use of sitar and tabla led into a unit on Hindustani music (1973, 52). If couched in later terminology, Berliner was essentially using World Music (commercial/popular music with signifiers of an exotic Other) to stimulate interest in world music (i.e. non-Western musical traditions).

This issue was revisited many years later in a 2004 study by Demorest and Schultz that gauged whether elementary school students preferred original or arranged versions of “multicultural songs.” They concluded that “Students overwhelmingly preferred the arranged versions, suggesting that these may be the best choice as a starting point for introducing world music, even if the eventual goal might be to make students aware of more authentic recordings,” and that “teachers should introduce world music to their students using examples that sound like music the students know” (2004, 309-10). This begs the question: what good is exposing students to unfamiliar musical traditions if they are taught to understand them only through the lens of what is already familiar?

In Nettl’s view, the primary purpose of world music education is not to expose students to musical diversity but rather “to persuade them that all the world’s people have music that can be comprehended—that all the world’s musics have a lot in common” (2010, 38-9). While not going so far as to suggest the universality of music, it does echo sentiments that today some might find outdated. For example, Hood’s statement in the early years of ethnomusicology that “we should eliminate the argument that an alien musical expression has cultural or racial characteristics which make it inaccessible.” (1960, 55). Even today, there are those in the music education field who—knowingly or unknowingly—invoke the ‘music as a universal language’ trope. Take for example a 2016 piece by NAFME member Kelly-McHale (2016), in which music “crosses cultures and is an experience that can be considered universal.” As White reasons, “We often invoke the idea of the universal when we cannot describe why we enjoy certain types of music” (2011, 207).

It can be argued that world music education is predicated on two mutually contradictory attitudes. First, that music has a specificity that enables it to represent specific cultural and/or ethnic groups by embodying their “hopes, fears, aspirations, and beliefs” (Baker 1983, 174).

Second, that music has a universality that allows any and all specificity to be comprehended, no matter the actual or figurative distance between the participant and the original source. Lell describes this as “the paradox of world music,” explaining that it “is desired as unfamiliar, exotic, unknown music on one hand...but on the other hand, the newly found, exotic music is expected to be comprehensible without too much effort. World music, therefore, should be unfamiliar and new but at the same time not demanding, which again enforces notions of a primitive, predictable ‘other’” (2019, 98).

Aside from serving as a practical alternative to conventional band or choir, world music education encapsulates a number of values or ideals, most significantly that of multiculturalism. Diverging somewhat from Nettl’s view, Campbell argues that “The multicultural music education movement (which some have called world music education) has been primarily about musical diversity, with less regard for the cultural interfaces, contexts, and processes of the music” (2002, 31). Here we see ‘world’ explicitly used as a synonym of ‘multicultural,’ a practice common within the music education field. Concerns about multiculturalism can be traced back to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when “ethnic minority groups initiated actions to make others aware of the perspectives and needs of their underrecognized groups” (Campbell 2002, 28). From then onwards, multiculturalism became a significant influence in the design of US school curricula, with a focus on the “preservation of ethnic heritages and cultures, and the development of respect for all people” (Mark 1998, 178). While teaching world music to children in the early 20th century was used as a means to an end for alternative or progressive models of education, by the mid-20th century it had become a matter of social justice, and remains that way today. Wasiak (2009, 213), for example, states that “educators have a moral, political, and professional obligation to contribute to social justice,” and that “music educators are particularly well positioned to contribute to global

harmony.” In a piece about world music education for *The Choral Journal*, Stephen Hartfield frames the music educator’s role in almost zealous terms:

[Music educators] produce a medicine all the more needed since the disease of cultural memory loss found in our mobile, technological society so often goes unrecognized and untreated. If music educators can keep the world’s life-blood circulating through even the smallest, most out-of-the-way artery, then they are healers; they play a larger-than-life role. They expand the limits of the possible and in the process are transformed themselves (1995, 26).

As we have seen, the underlying purpose of world music education at the K-12 level is not for students to gain any deep understanding of foreign musical traditions and their respective cultural and historical contexts, or even to improve their musicianship more generally. Rather, it is to foster a sense of global community and impart the values of multiculturalism. As Mark explains, “Those American music educators who do incorporate other musics do not try to make ethnomusicologists of their students, but they give them the greatest possible exposure to the music of other peoples” so that “they will have more understanding and compassion for the rest of the world and for their own countrymen” (1998: 186). This approach of favoring breadth over depth of exposure has been criticized as a form of ‘cultural tourism.’ Campbell is of the view that giving a “whirlwind tour of songs from many lands...may breed more of an exposure than an educational outcome,” (2002: 31) and recommends that elementary school teachers opt for covering a few select musical traditions. Hess (2013: 76-77) is perhaps most critical of world music education as a form of cultural tourism, arguing that it is more often than not a trivializing celebration of diversity and “a literal ‘performance’ of tolerance” that serves to reinforce existing power structures. This problematic manifestation of world music education is perhaps best encapsulated by Putumayo’s 1999 World Playground program, in which students filled out a mock passport “as they [progressed] through a musical journey of cultural diversity” (White, 2002: 193).

World music in higher education

What about world music education changes when it occurs in the context of higher education? How is it that a world music program designed for an elementary school classroom is a form of cultural tourism, but a world music survey course or performance ensemble (or even degree program) designed for university students is not? The obvious response would be that the latter is academic in nature; and while it perhaps still has connections with multiculturalism and social justice, that is not its *raison d'être*. Central to the existence of what is commonly called world music performance at the university level is Hood's concept of bi-musicality that describes the need for ethnomusicologists to develop basic competency in playing the music they hope to study as scholars.

It could be argued that the musical learning that occurs in such ensembles is, in essence, not fundamentally so different than what occurs in some K-12 programs. The level of difficulty, pacing, and pedagogical approach of course differ, but ultimately the immediate goal is the same: to get a group of people to play a form of unfamiliar music in a more-or-less "correct" manner. Both also grapple with the same issues: the varied backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles of students; how to strike a balance between students' creative impulses and a respect for musical and cultural conventions (Hughes, 2004); and the complex politics of instructors as "culture bearers" (Hess, 2013).

Differentiating between the two therefore becomes not only a matter of context, but also intent. World music performance at the university level exists primarily to cultivate bi-musicality among its participants, whereas K-12 world music education does not. Titon, a self-described advocate of bi-musicality, speaks about its ability induce 'subject shifts' in which the ethnomusicologist "acquires knowledge by figuratively stepping outside oneself to view the world

with oneself in it, thereby becoming both subject and object simultaneously” (1995, 288). Interestingly, what Titon describes in positive terms as a subject shift has parallels to what Hess (not an ethnomusicologist but a world music educator and performer) describes in highly critical terms as a figurative journey or encounter with the racial Other. In such a journey, “the dominant body encounters the excluded Other...It is through [this] that the dominant subject often becomes dominant. I maintain that this coming to know oneself can also take place in a musical encounter with the exotic Other or exotic music” (2013, 71). In essence, both Titon and Hess are saying that figuratively engaging with the Other can induce a change in self-perception; they just disagree on its broader implications. Furthermore, Titon’s comment that “experientially based musical knowledge...can in other instances lead to a more general understanding, not only of music, but of people—of others and of oneself” (1995, 288) sounds remarkably like something one or another idealistic proponent of K-12 world music education would say. Again, it seems as if intent plays a significant role here.

The history of world music performance ensembles can be traced back to inception of the first ethnomusicology program at UCLA. Robert Brown, a graduate of that program, came to Wesleyan University in the 1960s and introduced the term ‘world music’ “to describe the combination of performance study of non-Western music with traditional ethnomusicological studies” (Rahkonen 1994). Wesleyan’s World Music Hall, “the first building on an American campus designed specifically for the performance of global traditions of music and dance” (Slobin 2010, 53) was opened in 1973. The term was subsequently applied to a number of other programs, such as Kent State University’s Center for the Study of World Musics in 1980 (Klump 1999, 9) and, perhaps most recently, UCLA’s World Music Center in 2015.

Conventionally, world music performance ensembles are part ethnomusicological coursework or otherwise treated as an extracurricular or general education course. However, in more recent years, a number of institutions have started offering courses of study in world music itself, some terminating in a bachelor's or even master's degree. In some sense, these programs represent an inversion of Hood and Brown's original conception; rather than ethnomusicological programs supplemented by music performance, they are more like music performance (or teaching, or composition) programs supplemented by ethnomusicology. Unfortunately, a full survey of such programs has not yet been conducted. Of notable mention are Northern Illinois University's MA Music: Specialization in World Music, UC Santa Cruz's DMA: World Music Composition, Bowling Green State University's BA Music: Major in World Music, and CalArts's BFA: World Music Performance Specialization.

Finally, it worth noting that many institutions—even those that do not have a formal ethnomusicology program—offer world music survey courses at the undergraduate level. These courses ostensibly use 'world music' in its broadest sense, although in practice Western art music is generally excluded. Nettl states that it was around 1965 when such courses first started to appear (2010, 34-5). Textbooks intended for such courses, nearly all edited or written by ethnomusicologists, include some combination of 'world music' in their titles. For instance, Nettl's *Excursions in World Music*, Titon's *World of Music*, or Alves's *Music of the Peoples of the World*.

Analytical World Music

Another area of interest is the emergence of a potentially new sub-field of ethnomusicology, which for sake of convenience will be called "analytical world music." It appears to have its origins in a 2006 book edited by Michael Tenzer titled *Analytical Studies in*

World Music. The promotional blurb states that the book “offers fresh perspectives for thinking about how musical sounds are shaped, arranged and composed by their diverse makers worldwide” by “combining the approaches of ethnomusicology and music theory.” A second book, again with Michael Tenzer as well as John Roeder as its editors, was published in 2011 with the title *Analytical and Cross-Cultural Studies in World Music*. In addition to the aforementioned approaches of ethnomusicology and music theory, it also claims to incorporate music composition.

Also in 2011, the journal *Analytical Approaches to World Music* was established, welcoming “submissions that engage the analytical, theoretical, and cultural aspects of the panoply of world musical traditions” (AAWM 2020). The journal’s board boasts numerous prominent ethnomusicologists. Interestingly, individuals in their author directory are described not as ethnomusicologists but rather “world music scholars.” As of 2020, both the journal and a conference by the same name operate under The International Foundation for the Theory and Analysis of World Music, part of the Barry S. Brook Center for Music Research and Documentation at the City University of New York. There is also a book series in the works, *New Directions in World Music Analysis*. (American Musicological Society 2010).

Is analytical world music simply comparative musicology 2.0? Or is it perhaps a new haven for more musicologically oriented ethnomusicologists in a field which, some may argue, has become overly preoccupied with social theory? A call for papers from the 2018 Analytical Approaches to World Music conference mentions examining “world musical traditions from any analytical and theoretical angles, including (but not limited to) ethnographic, historical, formal, computation, and cognitive perspectives” (Sturgis 2017). The omission of an anthropological and/or sociological angle from that list does not seem to be an accident.

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