

1959-2009: Music that touches souls, past, present and future

WE BUILD ON A YOUNG tradition here. This is our third music special edition, published in June because this time is the 30th anniversary of [Black Music Month](#). Kenny Gamble of Philadelphia International Records started the three-decade BMM tradition.

For us, in five-year intervals covering the past 50 years [the years ending in nine and four], six Columbia journalism alumni authors write about memorable music that touched their early childhood, adolescence or adult lives.

Music has that power, right? It's personal, visceral. People remember songs and other music they associate with love, loss, happiness and social change for better or worse.

Take a trip with the authors as they mix personal reflections with the music of their times.



In late May, music and basketball lost a good man too soon. Wayman Tisdale [photo], a dominating 6-foot 9-inch [NBA scoring star](#) in the 1990s, hung up his sneakers and transitioned to [electric jazz bassist](#). Tisdale's smile and sunny outlook made him a crowd favorite at the June Hampton Jazz festival in my adopted hometown.

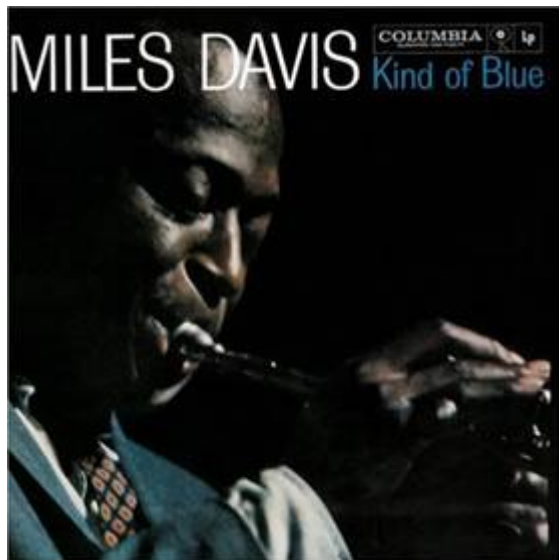
I appreciated that local newspaper music critic made time to write an insightful appreciation of Tisdale, who succumbed to cancer at age 44. Good music and musicians should be treasured.

Check out what my colleague/friends have to say about the memories and soundtracks playing in their heads. And tell us, what are you listening to in 2009 that may sound timeless 10, 25 or 50 years from now? – *Wayne Dawkins, '80*

1959: 'Giant Steps' and Coltrane's 'sheets of sound'

In 1959 I had no idea of what life outside of the confines and dictates of my Baltimore neighborhood looked like or meant. Upscale living meant that one moved from the famous Pennsylvania Avenue corridor uptown, to the newly burgeoning suburbs.

I didn't know what to make of it all but I did know that there was refuge back where I came from. Virtually every day after school I would retreat to the inner city with which I was familiar and then make my way blurry eyed back to the suburbs where my mother had taken me in the morning.



The musical glue and sustenance that held me together was a red and white, one-play-at-a-time record player that I somehow got from the local Sears, Roebuck and Co. store and which I kept — with its top off — in my closet where I could safely play two 33 1/3 rpm records that have somehow define my interest in music: Miles Davis' "[Kind of Blue](#)" and John Coltrane's "[Giant Steps](#)."

I didn't learn that "Giant Steps" was a saxophone exercise until years later when a friend explained the work in a book he wrote about Coltrane. I didn't like "Giant Steps" at first and still find it hard to listen to even today. But I've learned that the Atlantic Records LP was one of the early products of Coltrane's genius.

I on the other hand was a budding teenage who found himself trapped inside of a dark closet in a newly found suburban neighborhood with only a single needle record player to use to

fight and free myself from the squeals and oinks that writers — most notably the great jazz critic Leonard Feather — would later call [Coltrane's] "sheets of sound."

Trane's sheets of sound were anything but: they were carefully planned and executed saxophone arrangements, the kind that many years later after my sojourn to New York and then making subsequent trips to Boston would see young white musicians sitting on the street trying to transcribe by playing 33 1/3 LP records at 16 speed.

Trane's sheets of sound have helped keep me together in once piece for more than 40 years. And while I'll never say that I understand what he was doing on the saxophone I will say that when Miles Davis brought Trane and Cannonball Adderley and Wynton Kelly and Jimmy Cobb and Bill Evans together for their historic 1959 recording "Kind of Blue" which included "So What" and "All Blues" the "Chief," as we called Miles, achieved a creative and artistic feat that will never be equaled in the world of jazz or, for that matter, any other genre of music. — *Kip Branch, '79*

Photo credits: sacbee.com [Wayman Tisdale] jazzbioguide.com [Miles Davis, 1959] telegraph.co.uk [Four Tops, 1964]; blast-from-thepast.com [Delfonics, 1969]; dic.academic.ru [James Brown, 1974]; vinyl-masterpiece.com [Sister Sledge, 1979]; star-snitch.blogspot.com [Prince, 1984]; uulyrics.com [Quincy Jones, 1989]; gamespot.com [TLC, 1994]; snowrecords.com [Destiny's Child, 1999] and hiphopr.com [Jay-Z, 1999]; bluebeat.com [Alicia Keys, 2004]

1964: Hypnotic harmonies of The Four Tops

Before I had any comprehension of the adult emotions behind their songs, I remember tuning in to the mesmerizing harmonies of The Four Tops. In 1964, the year they first recorded for Motown, I was all of 5 years old.

Obie Benson, Abdul “Duke” Fakir, Lawrence Payton and Levi Stubbs [all of them gone now, except Fakir] had been gigging around Detroit for 11 years before songwriting masters Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier and Eddie Holland brought them to Hitsville USA.



The first hit Holland, Dozier and Holland wrote for the Tops, “[Baby, I Need Your Lovin’](#),” reached No. 11 on the Billboard pop charts that year and paved the way for their first No. 1 hit, “Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch [Can’t Help Myself]” the following year.

Many vocalists have covered “Baby, I Need Your Lovin’,” but to my ear, nobody’s topped the Tops’ original. An authoritative downbeat and brass fanfare introduce smooth, harmonic crooning in the opening bars, punctuated with crisp, resonant finger-pops.

This gives way to a lush orchestration that sets off the lyrics like a Tiffany jewel. The vocal mix – Tubbs’ plaintive, compelling lead baritone, the soaring falsetto high notes in the refrain – spoke to me of longings for which I had no name as a child, and which still confound me 45 years later. But I can’t *not* listen, over and over.

This gorgeous, complete production takes me back to summer afternoons in the park with the transistor radio on, watching teenagers a few picnic blankets over making tentative advances toward the discovery of what English speakers call “the facts of life,” and what Spanish speakers – perhaps more appropriately – refer to as “los misterios de la vida.”

For the Four Tops, high school buddies who entertained together for 44 years, the lyrics of this durable song must have carried other layers of meaning: the love of performing, the love of longtime friends for one another, the love of conveying what only a perfect pop number can. – *Cheryl Devall, '82*

1969: ‘Didn’t I blow your mind this time’

If not the coda of the decade, it was the end of an era.

It was the year the mop-topped Beatles, vanguard of the British pop invasion four years earlier, parted ways leaving recommendations to “Just Let It Be.”

Enter the [Jackson 5](#), a bubblegum pre-and teen idol group of brothers with afros and brightly colored bellbottom pants and vests, who belted their debut single “I Want You Back” with unexpected emotional sophistication. Their musical godmother was the Queen of Motown, Diana Ross. Continued on next page

1969/Continued

She embarked upon a solo career after closing out the list of 1969 Billboard No. 1 R& B hits with a final recording of “Someday We’ll All Be Together” with The Supremes.



As an eighth-grader, transitioning from tween to teen, 1969 was a somewhat colloquial and sequestered rite of passage. My tastes in music generally stuck to the notes of traditional soul, rhythm and blues. The seven-inch vinyl singles from Atlantic, Motown and Stax records played daily at home and by Philadelphia disc jockey, Georgie Woods tempered hormones.

The [Delfonics](#)’ “Somebody Loves You” b-side of “Ready or Not, Here I Come (Can’t Hide from Love) 45 prepped me for the dreamlike disappointments of the “pick you up at 9:00” house parties and my first on-the-lips kiss during the summer of ’69. The Delfonics [photo] were early ambassadors of the Philly sound nurtured by producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff. Slow jams “La, La Means I Love You” (1968) and the bookend hit “Didn’t I Blow Your Mind (This Time) two years later were standard spins.

It was not all idealized romance. My adolescent angst flared during the nine-day vigil of the Apollo 11 flight and Neil Armstrong’s incredulous walk on the moon; the My Lai massacre, the Charles Mason murders in Hollywood, the Chicago Eight trial and the execution in the same city of Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark as they slept.

Plus, I missed the biggest four-day party of the year in upstate New York — Woodstock – *Kissette Bundy* ’87

1974: ‘Hollywood Swinging’ and ‘The Big Payback’

In mid-winter 1974 I was a second-semester freshman at Long Island University who was learning how to be college student. I was elated that I made the junior varsity basketball team as a forward, but road trips and two-hour practices at home put a hurt on maintaining a good GPA.

No one got hurt, as long as
they were on a dance floor

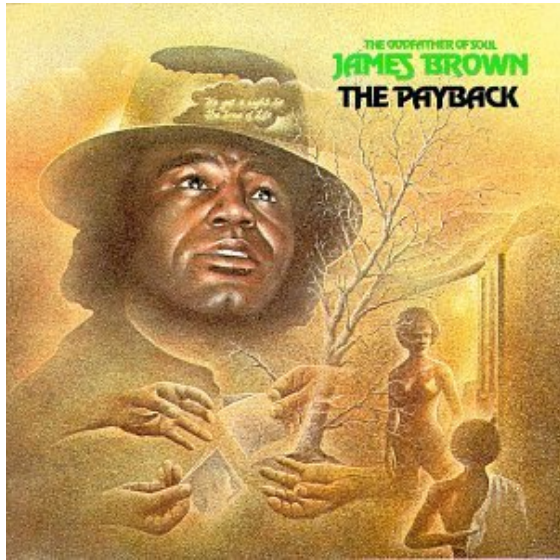
That was the year of platform-heel shoes [yes, even a conservative dresser like me could not avoid them] and flared pants. Afros were still in fashion. [The best I could do was a TWA – Teeny, Weenie Afro.]

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1974/Continued

The music that year was appropriately funky and complemented the clothes and hair.

After practice, sometimes we bonded with a spontaneous sing-along to the chorus of "[Hollywood Swinging](#)" by Kool and the Gang.



Furthermore, 1974 was the year of James Brown's "[The Big Payback](#)." Even 35 years later, the JB classic is alternately menacing and funny.

There's that howling echo at the start of the tune warning of a storm approaching, then James Brown's indictment, "Get down with my girlfriend/ that ain't right/holler and cuss/wanna fight."

Uh oh. Get ready y'all for The Big Payback!

Fortunately, despite all of the wolf tickets sold by the Godfather of Soul ["I don't know karate," warned JB, "but I know ka-razor"], no one gets hurt, as long as they're on a dance floor.

The most fun I ever had dancing to "The Big Payback" was when the DJ spun the tune at the "Grown folks funk jam" at the first Unity convention two decades later.

The sponsors wisely gave each of the 30-to 40-something women and men in the packed Atlanta ballroom big T-shirts so we could change after we sweated up our dress clothes.

Remember, we were engaged in grown folks business. – *Wayne Dawkins, '80*

1979: What goes around comes around in music, and business

When I was a child I used to hear the adults in my neighborhood conclude an observation of some usually gossipy occurrence with this remark: what goes around comes around.

Here we are today and Chrysler is at the government's door seeking a bailout, just as it was preparing to do in 1979. Politicians and Wall Street were outraged at the idea of the government having a big hand in running a private company, just as they are today.

It was a lively time and fortunately for me, I had a front seat as Detroit Bureau chief and chief automotive writer for The New York Times. What a ride that was.

Continued on next page

1979/Continued



Even more exciting was the fact that the challenging and wonderful opportunity I had was being replicated by scores of reporters of color all over the country. Getting into the mainstream of this business was still very much a new and uphill struggle, for sure. Yet, there were signs of progress at most every turn. The wind was at our backs. Opportunities seemed unlimited, save for a few pockets of resistance to affirmative action.

Columbia J-School was hopping with affirmative action at the core of much of what it was doing. NABJ, which held its convention that year in Washington, D.C., was strutting.

The top album, “[We Are Family](#),” by Sister Sledge, and the top single, “[Don’t Stop ’Til You Get Enough](#),” by Michael Jackson, were the musical backdrops for an exciting time that seemed to only get better day-by-day.

Fast forward to 2009 again. The steam has run out of the affirmative action/diversity engine. Our once bountiful ranks in newsrooms and the J-School are at or below where they were in 1979, depending on how you measure. We, the news industry, need a bailout of our own. NABJ and its cohort groups are struggling to remain alive and be heard again.

I see memories of 1979 all around. It’s funny to realize that what those ‘old’ folks were saying really is true: what goes around comes around. – *Reginald Stuart, ’71*

1984: ‘Purple Rain’ and ‘I Just Called to Say I Love You’

This year was monumental in my life because after 28 years, I left my home state New York and settled in the Philadelphia area. It was the year Orwell had predicted as a time of totalitarian dread, even as 1984 delivered the smash hit “Cosby Show,” a presidential run by Jesse Jackson [aborted by his “Hymietown” gaffe], and a time when music videos drove the pop scene.

Michael Jackson was still in his two-year reign as the King of Pop because of his chart-smashing “Thriller” LP. Yet 1984 had notable R&B gems.

Anyone today annoyed by that GEICO commercial in which a stack of bills with eyeballs is tailing customers? The music is a relic from ’84, specifically Rockwell’s [It always feels like] “Somebody’s Watching Me.” The novelty hit included a cameo by MJ and the tune lasted five weeks at No. 1.

Continued on next page

1984/Continued



The next five weeks, Cameo topped the charts with “She’s Strange” [But I like it].

If fans thought Larry Blackmon and his Cameo crew were eccentric, they probably were not ready for what was about to hit ‘em. This was the year of the music video-length movie “Purple Rain,” starring Prince, plus Morris Day and the Time, and Apollonia 6.

Prince’s “When the Doves Cry,” topped the charts for eight weeks. His rollicking “[Let’s Go Crazy](#)” broke through for one week in the fall.

But c’mon, give some love to his shameless rival Morris Day and his goofy dance tune “[The Bird](#).” Remember Day’s sidekick Jerome carrying the big mirror around so Day could vogue on stage?

On the sweet side, Stevie Wonder recorded “[I Just Called to Say I Love You](#),” a tune from his soundtrack for “The Woman in Red,” a remake of a French comedy that is one of my guilty pleasures.

Looking back a quarter century, 1984 seems so innocent. Sigh. – *Wayne Dawkins, ’80*

1989: Quincy Jones was good to us

The end of an era was evident at a Sam Goody music store inside Deptford Mall in New Jersey.

I eagerly purchased the Quincy Jones LP “Back on the Block.” The teenage cashier was taken aback by my exuberance and surprised by the duo-toned black and tan album in my hands.

With CDs well established as the music delivery system of choice, and cassette tapes as the low-tech fallback, the puzzled cashier asked, “What’s an album?” There was no trace of sarcasm.

“Back on the Block” was a [tour de force](#) of black music.

Q’s mission statement was in the opening chorus of the first tune:

We’re back on the block

Back to rock you with the soul, rhythm and blues, bebop and hip hop

Back on the block, back on the block

Rappers IceT, Melle Mel, Big Daddy Kane and Kool Moe Dee took turns referencing black achievements, and other times lamenting urban decay on the block. The head bobbing tune was their clarion call to reclaim the cities.

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1989/Continued



Q's timing was prescient. That fall, David Dinkins made history as the first elected black mayor of New York City. It was a thrill to observe from the Philadelphia suburbs that the City Sun newspaper of Brooklyn was 5 years old. The black weekly of my native city covered politics, arts and culture with equal doses of passion and ferocity.

Spike Lee's movie, "Do the Right Thing," tapped viscerally into the tension, rage, and yes, humor of competing ethnic groups in New York. That summer, NABJ held its first and only convention ever in the Big Apple. It established a new attendance record with 2,000 registrants.

Quincy Jones, the ultimate maestro, got the rappers together with jazz giants. On a remake of "Birdland," the MCs took turns cuing Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, James Moody, and Joe Zawinul.

On other tracks, there was plenty of room for group harmony and spectacular solos, whether such gems came from Bobby McFerrin, Al Jarreau, Take 6 or Siedah Garrett.

And make way of the architect of soul. Ray Charles was in the house to sing an inspired remake of "I'll be good to you" with Chaka Khan.

What's an album? An example was a 1989 recording that brought Quincy Jones six Grammy awards the following winter, including [Album of the Year](#). — Wayne Dawkins, '80

1994: One crazy/sexxy/cool year

For journalists, 1994 was a year for some bizarre stories.



Nancy Kerrigan got [clubbed](#) at a Detroit arena and the mastermind [I'm using that term loosely] turned out to be fellow figure skater Tonya Harding.

O.J. Simpson led police on a low-speed [chase](#) on national TV.

White males, who controlled almost everything worth controlling, declared themselves angry over their plight and mounted a political uprising.

Perhaps to compensate for all this craziness, the top hits tended to focus on an age-old subject – love, or at least sex. [TLC](#) came out with their "CrazySexyCool" album, and Boyz II Men had a [hit](#) with "I'll Make Love to You."

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1994/Continued

R. Kelly heated up the [airwaves](#) with “Bump and Grind,” while

Tevin Campbell wanted to [know](#), “Can We Talk?”

I was a reporter for the [Detroit Free Press](#), trying to make sense of it all, enjoying the last years of my bachelorhood, working hard and playing hard.

Who knew the news could get even more bizarre:

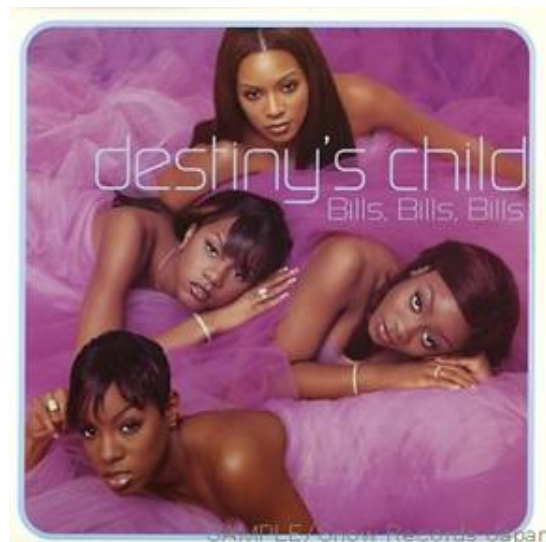
- A president caught in an affair with an intern [1997-98];
- Airliners used as terrorist weapons to topple the World Trade Center towers on 9/11 [2001],
- and Wall Street “experts” investing billions in risky assets no one understood? [2007-08].

Who knew we’d have a black president – and the newspaper industry on the verge of collapse – within 15 years?

I’m married with children and I’ve left journalism, but I’m still trying to make sense of it all. – *Dan Holly*, ’85

1999: Hush li’l babies, you can’t really be *old school*

It could be as the mighty Temptations sang, “Just My Imagination.”



mere babies.

However, back in the days of *slow* [when people communicated by snail mail and by phones hooked to walls, and when newspapers were actually printed on paper], more than now, a solo artist or singing group, usually had amassed sufficient bona fides to be comfortably referred to as “old school.” Gladys Knight, Patti LaBelle, Smokey Robinson and Diana Ross, to name a few, were either approaching their 50s, or well into them, before any dared, to their faces at least, reference them or their music as “old school.”

Back in the day, “old school” usually meant the music that your Mama and Daddy danced to. But as I checked out some of the top R&B singles and albums of 1999 [OK, not albums, but CDs. Blame it on my old-school sensibilities], it occurred to me that the music some now happily describe as “old school” was performed by a lot of folks who, chronologically at least, are

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1999/Continued

Destiny's Child's big hit "[Bills, Bills, Bills](#)" was fronted by a certain Beyonce Knowles, who this year, is a very tender age 27. The mega-talented Lauryn Hill, whose "[Miseducation of Lauryn Hill](#)," blew up the charts in '99, is today, in 2009, only in her early 30s.



And how about Maxwell? His "Fortunate" was huge in '99 too. He'll turn 36 this year.

In fact, the "old man" among Top five R&B chart toppers in '99 is Jay-Z [photo]. Come December, Beyonce's husband will turn the big 4-0.

So, I'm thinking. Wow! If your music is "old school" before you're even 40 years old, what pray tell will you and your music be called when you're in your 50s and 60s? Ancient?

Now, I know, there's a lot of good that can be said about modernity in music, but being called "old school" prematurely it seems to me, raises expectations before one has had a real opportunity to marinate in the spices of life that produce the flavor that over many generations has been bottled and sold as "old-school wisdom." – *Betty Winston Baye*

2004: Young adults' attitude at the polls and on the playlist

That year the big story was the presidential campaign. At that time I was managing editor/news of BlackAmericaWeb.com, a virtual daily Web newspaper. We did boots-on-the-ground reporting from the South Carolina primary in January and Democratic and Republican national conventions that summer.

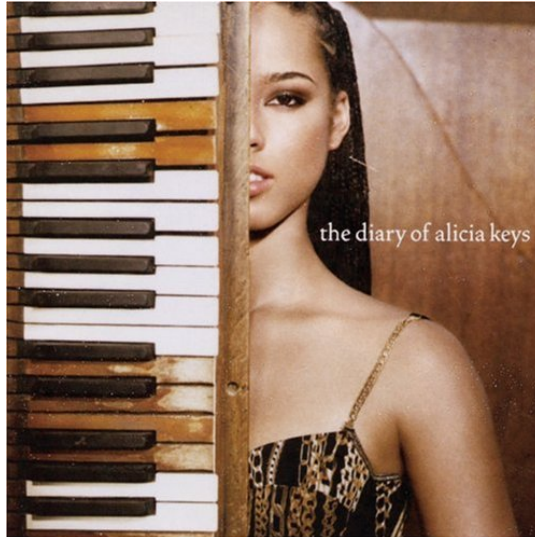
George W. Bush was barely re-elected, probably because he was a war president and some of Bush's surrogates successfully "Swift boated" a Vietnam War veteran, stonefaced Democrat John Kerry.

"Battleground states" were appropriate phrases because black, young and poor voters in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida registered to vote and showed up at the polls. Most of these new voters came up short on their choice in '04, but four years later in 2008 they pushed their candidate over the top.

Young people's music did not overtly reflect the politics of 2004, but the sounds reflected the times. Young black artists were exuberant, confident and they did not feel they had to ask anyone for permission to initiate or create.

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2004/Continued



For example, take please Kanye West's "[The College Dropout](#)" CD. "Jesus Walks" and "Spaceship" revealed West's defiance, charming arrogance and consternation.

Usher brought joyful exuberance with his dance tune "Yeah!"

During the summer of '04 I observed the attitude of 16-year-old Carmen, the millennial generation youth in my house. My daughter giggled mischievously as she sang along to Usher's video "Burn." That summer my daughter channeled Alicia Keys. She braided her hair like the star on the cover of "[The Diary of Alicia Keys](#)" CD. Keys' video, "If I Ain't Got You" featuring co-rising star Mos Def was entertaining," and Keys' "Diary" single was evidence of a rising star.

Keys, Kanye and Usher were confident of their creative success. So were many young adults strutting confidently into the political landscape. – *Wayne Dawkins, '80*

The **Black Alumni Network** of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism was founded in May 1980 and since July the group has published a monthly newsletter. The BA Newsletter's mission is to keep people connected. We publish job changes and moves, news about books and films published or produced by alumni, and family milestones. And of course we keep alumni connected to news from the Columbia GSJ. Log on to our Web site at www.jrn.columbia.edu/alumni/services/ban/ or see our link on the home page of www.blackjournalist.com Wayne J. Dawkins – **editor**, Betty Winston Baye, Kip Branch, Kissette Bundy, Angela Chatman, Cheryl Devall, Dan Holly, Keith Rushing, **contributing editors**
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