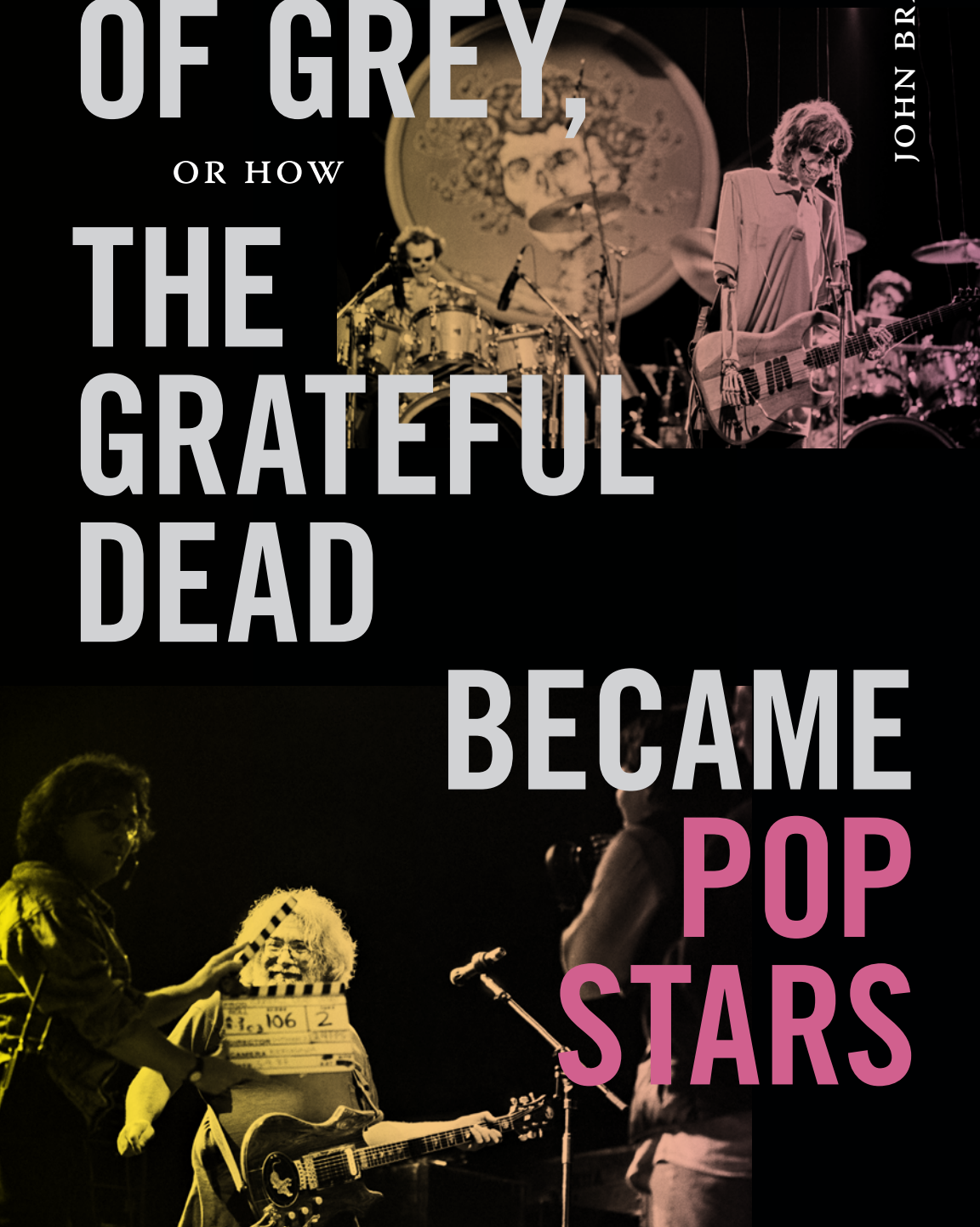


TOUCH OF GREY, OR HOW THE GRATEFUL DEAD

BECAME POP STARS

JOHN BRACKETT



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OR HOW

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For my father

In memory of Clay and Al

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Modern saviours saints and seers
a motley pack of Paul Revers
Keep on smiling through the tears
'Cause it's all right
— ROBERT HUNTER, early verse lyric
for “Touch of Grey” (1980)

The autobiographical first person singular is always the choice of men in trouble, whereas only those writers who are safely disengaged from their subjects may indulge in third person motifs or that most cowardly of all voices, the first person plural—the pompous and devious editorial *we*.
— TOM ROBBINS, *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971)

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Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Krisi, Zach, and Noah for their patience and indulgence as my thoughts drifted Dead-ward once again. I want to believe there is a special place in the afterlife that is reserved for family and friends of those who study and write about the Grateful Dead.

Over the past few years, I have enjoyed speaking about all sorts of Dead-related topics with many fine people, including Rebecca Adams, Bob Bralove, Len Dell'Amico, James Faccinto, Liz Field, David Gans, Todd LaMaskin, Mike McClure, Eric Mlyn, Nick Paumgarten, Chris Reali, and Nick Rubin. I would especially like to thank Guy Charbonneau for his kind telephone and email correspondence. I was introduced to Guy and Le Mobile, his acclaimed mobile recording studio, in 1987 while studying the liner notes to Pink Floyd's *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*. More recently, I enjoyed speaking with Guy about his time working alongside Jerry Garcia and John Cutler on another album he recorded that year, the Grateful Dead's *In the Dark*. I would also like to thank Guy for allowing me to reproduce his photo of Garcia and Cutler from those sessions in chapter 2. The images of the "Dead Ringers" that appear at the beginning of each chapter were photographed by John Werner. Thanks again to Jay Blakesberg for the fantastic cover photographs. Many thanks to Alexander Trotter for preparing the index.

I would like to thank the archivists at Special Collections and Archives at the University of California at Santa Cruz for their continued help and assistance. Thanks also to Caroline for the great conversations, convenient accommodations, and excellent local recommendations during my trips to Santa Cruz.

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I would especially like to acknowledge you, the reader. If you choose to continue reading (and I hope you do), I wish to make one modest request (really a small plea):

As you read, please try to set aside some time for listening.

Much of what you are about to read (or that will be read to you) concerning the history and legacy of “Touch of Grey” describes sounds that have been captured on numerous studio and live recordings. While I sincerely hope that you find what I have written enjoyable, informative, and maybe even a bit provocative, I also hope you are able to make time to listen to these recorded performances. In many ways, the story of “Touch of Grey” is about the sounds preserved on these recordings.

Recordings of “Touch of Grey” and *In the Dark* are readily accessible on a variety of analog and digital formats, numerous streaming platforms, and countless internet sites. As you listen, try to identify the different instruments, voices, and distinctive timbres that you hear. If you know the tune, sing or hum along if you feel like it. Maybe even pay attention to how you would clap your hands or tap your foot to the beat. (You might need to listen more than once, but it’s all right.) After listening, you might find that you don’t especially like the song. That’s all right, too. You don’t have to like “Touch of Grey” to appreciate the story behind the song. I am glad you listened, though.

If you make it to chapter 3 (and I hope you do), I would also encourage you to take some time to view the various videos that were produced in 1987, including the original promotional video directed by Gary Gutierrez along with *Dead Ringers* (the “Making Of” video directed by Justin Kreutzmann) and *So Far* (directed by Len Dell’Amico). As with the audio recordings, all of these videos are accessible via many online sites, including the Internet Archive (archive.org).

The Internet Archive is undoubtedly the most important online resource for fans and scholars of the Grateful Dead. For more than two decades, tens of thousands of live and archival recordings featuring the Dead and a host of other bands and musicians have been available for streaming (and, in some instances, downloading) as part of the Live Music Archive, a division of the Internet Archive. Along with the song “Touch of Grey” (and the videos [and perhaps all of *In the Dark*]), I also encourage readers to listen to select live performances by the Grateful Dead. In the endnotes, I provide links to audio recordings of concerts that I examine in the text. Along with the links to the Internet Archive, readers can also access these noncommercial live recordings at deadscholar.com.

Thank you for reading. And thanks for listening.

INTRODUCTION

“IT MUST BE GETTING EARLY . . .”

Stepping out of my car, I instantly recognized many familiar sights, sounds, and smells. Scattered throughout the parking lot, people in tie-dye T-shirts in every imaginable hue mingled and shared stories about their favorite concerts (“Harpur College!,” “Veneta ’72!,” “Watkins Glen!,” “Cornell!”). I overheard people recounting how they were originally turned on to the band, or—as such conversion narratives are generally known among fans—when they first “got on the bus.” Elsewhere, people were operating makeshift merchandise stands out of the trunks of cars and the backs of vans. As I browsed, I recognized many of the familiar images adorning the T-shirts, stickers, and jewelry that were for sale, including skeletons, skulls, roses, lightning bolts, and marching bears.

Between rows of cars, small groups of people played and sang some of the band’s most popular songs, such as “Ripple,” “Dire Wolf,” and “Jack Straw.” Alongside the impromptu performances, others listened to recordings on car stereos and portable sound systems. I recognized the celebrated version of “Dark Star” featured on *Live/Dead* (1969), the band’s first official live album, and the driving performance of “Samson and Delilah” that opens *Dead Set* (1981), another live record.

In addition to the performances familiar from the group’s massive discography of official releases, just as many of the sounds I heard were from recordings that had originally been produced by fans. By the early 1970s, some concertgoers had begun to record the band’s live shows on equipment that had been smuggled into the venue, including microphones, tape machines, and handheld recorders. Over the years, these “tapes” (as they were generally

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referred to) circulated freely among fans, forming a massive archive of unofficial recordings documenting much of the group's live performance history.

Walking through the crowd, I recognized many performances that had been captured on these fan-produced tapes. I heard keyboardist Keith Godchaux's delicate piano octaves that introduced "China Cat Sunflower" at the Winterland Arena in San Francisco on December 29, 1977. I heard the local radio personality and TV horror film host John Zacherle introduce the band ("the Grateful-Goddamn-Dead!") on Valentine's Day in 1970 at the Fillmore East in New York City. I also heard Jerry Garcia tell the overeager audience at Barton Hall on May 8, 1977, "All these people in front are getting horribly smashed here, so that means all you people in the back have to move back!"

The air was filled with the distinctive aroma that would have been familiar to anyone who had followed the band for any length of time: a heady, decidedly "earthy" smell best described, perhaps, as equal parts marijuana, patchouli, and body odor. As I joined the throng of fans filing into the venue, I noticed someone holding a sign that read "I Need a Miracle." The phrase not only referred to a song by the band; it had also been adopted by ticketless fans in search of a kind and generous person who might help them get into the show ("a miracle"). Given the circumstances surrounding the performance that night, however, the prospect of being "gifted" a ticket was unlikely.

On the evening of August 16, 2021, the musical group Dead & Company played the first concert of their summer tour at the Coastal Credit Union Music Park at Walnut Creek in Raleigh, North Carolina. Following the death of founding member and de facto band leader Jerry Garcia in 1995, numerous groups variously composed of the surviving members of the Grateful Dead had routinely toured and performed live. Featuring guitarist and vocalist Bob Weir and percussionists Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart, Dead & Company represented the latest incarnation of the Dead. Alongside Hart, Kreutzmann, and Weir, the band included Oteil Burbridge on bass guitar, Jeff Chimenti on keyboards, and John Mayer on vocals and guitar.

The concert that night also marked the first time that Dead & Company had played live in more than a year. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, musicians and entertainers all over the world had been forced to cancel live performances as scientists and health officials raced to find out how the virus was transmitted, how it affected people, and how it could be treated. Calls for social distancing and the implementation of regulations limiting contact among people devastated the live performance industry, impacting musicians, actors, dancers, stage and lighting designers, road crews, sound engineers, and the many people who owned and operated venues across

the United States and throughout the world. Given the tremendous loss of life and the debilitating health issues that many people continued to experience, performers, promoters, and audiences were still a bit uneasy as live, in-person concert performances began to appear more regularly by the summer of 2021.

Indeed, a sense of nervous anticipation permeated the audience that night as we anxiously waited for the show to begin. Following a brief rain delay, twenty thousand people erupted in loud cheers and exuberant applause when the band finally came onstage. After not having played live in over a year, Dead & Company opened the first concert of their summer tour with “Touch of Grey.”

Many people in the audience sang along, and the crowd grew even louder with each repetition of the song’s well-known chorus, “I will get by, I will survive!” The energy and intensity of the performance reached a climax near the end of the song when the lyrics of the chorus changed to “We will get by, we will survive!” At that moment, the audience—in a cathartic expression of gratitude, relief, and joy—responded with a collective, jubilant roar. As people all over the world were slowly adjusting to the “new normal” that was life and society after COVID-19, the phrase “We will get by, we will survive!” provided a simple yet powerful expression of hope, optimism, and perseverance.

By 2021, audiences had been responding to that lyric for over forty years. For the aging demographic of Gen Xers in attendance that night (such as myself), Dead & Company’s performance of “Touch of Grey” might have conjured memories of the summer of 1987, when the song rose to the top of the popular music charts in the United States. It was almost impossible to ignore the song and the Dead that summer, even for someone like me who was listening to more modern (i.e., “alternative”) rock releases such as *The Joshua Tree* by U2, *Document* by R.E.M., *In My Tribe* by 10,000 Maniacs, and *Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me* by the Cure. “Touch of Grey” dominated FM radio that summer and was featured on a variety of formats, including rock, Top 40, and adult contemporary. The song was even finding its way onto playlists at college radio stations on the left of the dial.

Along with widespread radio play, the innovative and incredibly popular music video for “Touch of Grey”—featuring the band members as skeleton marionettes performing in front of a live audience—appeared in heavy rotation on MTV and other music video programs. Throughout the summer of 1987, the Grateful Dead were also featured in most of the major trade publications, music magazines, and popular network and cable television programs of the era. As a contemporary ad exclaimed, it truly was a “Dead Summer!”¹

As Dead & Company performed “Touch of Grey” in Raleigh in August 2021, other people in the audience may have recalled the summer of 1987 as the moment when the prevailing scene around the Grateful Dead was suddenly transformed. For a group that was accustomed to playing in arenas, the overwhelming popularity of “Touch of Grey” and *In the Dark* attracted many new fans to the Grateful Dead’s concerts, and as a consequence, the band began to perform regularly in stadiums. But while many recent converts attended the group’s shows to experience the music and to interact with established Dead Heads, others came to party and carouse among the growing number of vagabond vendors that often set up shop in the parking lots surrounding the concert venues.

Alongside an assortment of Dead-inspired merchandise and other goods, drugs and alcohol were also becoming more accessible throughout the area that came to be known among concertgoers as “the Lot.” The presence of dealers and the growing use and public consumption of drugs contributed to the darkening and increasingly dangerous scene that had sprung up on the Lot. Furthermore, gate-crashing was becoming more common at the band’s concerts as hordes of people without tickets—many of whom had been partying in the Lot for much of the day—forced their way into venues. By the end of the 1980s, many promoters, elected officials, and local community members were beginning to have second thoughts about hosting concerts by the Grateful Dead due to the deteriorating conditions that often accompanied the band’s performances.

Among those fans who were already “on the bus” before the summer of 1987, the performance of “Touch of Grey” by Dead & Company may have evoked another memorable live performance of the song, a performance that might have felt just as joyous and cathartic as the one experienced by fans in Raleigh in 2021.

That earlier concert occurred on December 15, 1986, at the Oakland–Alameda County Coliseum Arena in Oakland, California, nearly seven months before “Touch of Grey” began to make its way up the pop music charts. At the time, the Grateful Dead had not played live in almost five months, a relatively long hiatus for a band that was known for its tireless touring and performing schedule. In July 1986, Jerry Garcia, arguably the most recognizable member of the Grateful Dead and an iconic figure in the history of American popular music, had fallen seriously ill and was hospitalized. As doctors attended to Garcia, he fell into a coma and was placed on a respirator. After several days, Garcia emerged from his coma, and he began to receive treatment for

what was diagnosed as adult-onset diabetes. As Garcia continued to recover over the following weeks and months, the Grateful Dead were forced to cancel their fall tour. Throughout the rest of the summer and into the fall, Dead Heads anxiously awaited updates on Garcia's health and the future of the band.

The concert on December 15 marked the first time the Grateful Dead had performed together since Garcia's health crisis. The band—including Jerry Garcia (guitar and vocals), Mickey Hart (drums and percussion), Bill Kreutzmann (drums and percussion), Phil Lesh (bass guitar), Brent Mydland (keyboards), and Bob Weir (guitar and vocals)—opened the concert with "Touch of Grey." Although they had not yet released the song on any of their commercial albums, the Grateful Dead had been playing "Touch of Grey" as part of their concerts since 1982. Most of the Dead Heads in the audience, therefore, were already familiar with the song, having previously heard the band perform "Touch of Grey" at an earlier concert or, perhaps, from recorded performances that had been captured on any number of live concert tapes.

As heard on many of the extant recordings from the concert on December 15, the crowd greeted the band with an ecstatic round of applause and cheers when the Grateful Dead returned to the stage at the Oakland Coliseum.² Remarkably, the audience grew even louder when the group began to play "Touch of Grey" to open the concert. On the one hand, of course, the reaction of the crowd was a spontaneous, collective expression of gratitude and relief following the events of the previous months. On the other hand, the tremendous response of the crowd also signaled that many people in attendance that night knew the song. Moreover, many fans were already familiar with the lyrics to "Touch of Grey" and the dramatic rhetoric of the song's musical form.

As soon as the band launched into "Touch of Grey," many people in the audience that night knew that Jerry Garcia would sing the lyric "I will get by, I will survive!" during the chorus. Prior to Garcia's health scare, fans did not generally acknowledge any special significance to the first-person singular perspective—the "I"—that narrates the lyrics to "Touch of Grey." Following the band's show on December 15, 1986, however, Dead Heads understandably began to attribute a great deal of symbolic meaning and autobiographical associations to the chorus lyrics as referring to Garcia himself. For an audience that desperately wanted to be assured of Garcia's health and well-being, his triumphant declaration "I will survive!" was met with thunderous cheers.

Even as the crowd continued to rejoice each time Garcia sang "I will survive," many fans also knew that the chorus lyrics changed ever so slightly at

the end of the song. For years, concert audiences often let out a loud, collective cheer when Garcia, Mydland, and Weir would harmonize the lyrics “We will get by, *we* will survive!” as part of the song’s dramatic coda. In light of the events of the previous five months and the stresses and uncertainties that confronted the band and the entire Grateful Dead business organization, the shift to the first-person plural perspective (“We will get by, we will survive!”) was a powerful and welcome confirmation that—along with Garcia and the rest of the band—the community of Dead Heads and the vibrant, eclectic culture that they had helped to create would also survive. “We will get by, we will survive!” celebrated the rebirth of the Dead and reaffirmed the unique bond that existed between the band and their dedicated fans.

In some ways, the story of “Touch of Grey” begins with the Grateful Dead’s concert in Oakland in December 1986. Within a few months, the song would become an unlikely anthem for the band and would transform the Grateful Dead from a very successful rock group with a devoted cult following to become one of the biggest pop acts of the era. But the story of “Touch of Grey” is about much more than the Grateful Dead’s first (and only) Top 10 hit. As Dennis McNally, the Grateful Dead’s former publicist, recalls in his biography of the band, there were many factors that contributed to the massive success of “Touch of Grey.” “It helped,” he observed, “that the single was a very good song, excellently recorded, and supported by a record company and an entire industry that had positive feelings about the band, now twenty-two years along.”³ (McNally also acknowledges that Garcia’s “near-death” was also a “major” reason for the song’s success.)

Moreover, the widespread popularity that accompanied “Touch of Grey” and *In the Dark* starting in the summer of 1987 dramatically altered the historical trajectory, financial fortunes, and popular legacy of the Grateful Dead. Given the song’s extended history and enduring significance, “Touch of Grey” serves as an excellent case study for examining themes relating to musical meaning, modes of listening and attending, recording technologies, the symbolic associations of sounds and timbres, fandom, the mechanics of the music industry, mythmaking, and legacy building. In what follows, I draw on a variety of contemporary sources to explore these and other themes, including numerous documents housed at the Grateful Dead Archive at the University of California at Santa Cruz, such as contracts, communications among members of the Grateful Dead organization, details on the recording process, and numerous faxes, letters, and memos involving some of the most powerful figures in the contemporary music industry.

But many years before “Touch of Grey” became a hit single for the Grateful Dead, Robert Hunter, the band’s principal lyricist and songwriter, regularly performed the song to audiences as part of his own concerts. The story of “Touch of Grey”—as with so many of the Dead’s most beloved songs—really begins with Robert Hunter.

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“IT MUST BE GETTING EARLY . . .” 7

Notes

INTRODUCTION. "IT MUST BE GETTING EARLY . . ."

- 1 "Grateful Dead, *In the Dark*."
- 2 Listen to the performance at "Grateful Dead Live at Oakland–Alameda County Coliseum on 1986-12-15," Internet Archive, December 15, 1986, <https://archive.org/details/gd86-12-15.nakcm101-dwonk.25263.sbeok.flac/gd1986-12-15-dwonk-d1to1.flac>.
- 3 McNally, *Long Strange Trip*, 564. In his wide-ranging cultural history of the band, Peter Richardson considers how the success of "Touch of Grey" "reflected . . . the nation's more conservative political tone," a tone that, he suggests, "was shaped by the ascendancy of [US President] Ronald Reagan, another California utopian." Richardson, *No Simple Highway*, 269.

1. "DAWN IS BREAKING EVERYWHERE"

- 1 Hunter's journal entry from January 8, 2006, is reproduced at "Robert Hunter Journal Update, 1/5-8/06," Google Groups, accessed October 29, 2025, https://groups.google.com/g/rec.music.gdead/c/orkZR3tspSE/m/e__syowOXmwJ?pli=1.
- 2 On some of the references and allusions in Hunter's published lyrics to "Touch of Grey," see Dodd and Trist, *Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics*, 313–15.
- 3 Listen to a recording of the performance at "Robert Hunter Live at the Other End on 1980-08-21," Internet Archive, August 21, 1980, <https://archive.org/details/rh1980-08-21.sbd.unk.flac16/rh1980-08-21.sbd.unk.flac16.do1to2.flac>.
- 4 Along with "Touch of Grey," Hunter introduced "Keep Your Day Job" to his concert audiences in 1980. Hunter first performed "West L.A. Fadeaway" as part of his live engagements in 1981.

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