

# MA Commercial Music Producer

## Creation Module

### Element C2b – Reflective Commentary

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## INTRODUCTION

In this reflective commentary, I will explain and comment on the creation process of the two EPs that I have made and my future aspiration. I will start by making a comparison between the expectations mentioned in my written proposal and the final result of my portfolio. By doing so, I can observe which were my goals two months ago and which of these goals have been effectively met. Then I will analyse and retrace step by step the process of production and mixing of the tracks, comparing the initial idea with the final result and mentioning my inspirations and research which helped me during the production of the piece of work I am most proud of. In this section I will focus on my development in terms of knowledge and skill as well. I will list the hard skills such as technical abilities learnt during the process as well as the soft skills such as personal interactions and collaborations with other professionals. In the final part I will focus on the commercial aims of the EPs and how I intend to convert them into action as well as on my personal consideration about the final work. I will analyse which aspects are more convincing and which aspects require further improvements. This part of my reflective commentary will be supported by a personal development plan in order to have a clear vision of the future process and its evolution.

# COMPARISON BETWEEN INITIAL GOALS AND FINAL RESULT

Starting with the most evident incongruity, my initial goal was to produce a full and compact album divided in A side and B side. Instead, my album turned out to be two EPs. I decided to physically separate the two albums by releasing them in two different steps even if they are united by the same title and musical concept. For this reason, the first EP is named “Any Other Second” and the second one “Any Other Second (B side)”. This need arises from the fact that, although they have only recently been completed, most tracks in the first EP have been arranged a year ago. Inevitably, my influences and musical vision changed and evolved throughout the year, leading me to produce the other five tracks with a different footprint. Despite this, I did not feel like I had concluded that chapter and I did not want to move on to a new musical concept. As a result, I preferred to split the album in half, but without giving the listener the idea that he is listening to two different projects.

Looking at my expectations mentioned in the written proposal, I can say with confidence that I succeeded in creating a connection between all of the tracks, giving the listener the experience of listening to a full album, as opposed to distinct tracks. In fact, every song is coherent with the previous one and with the next one. Although this is not a concept album, every track carry on a musical speech, flowing into one another and matching in terms of sound and emotions with the adjacent songs. I am also more than satisfied with every single song: I believe that in these ten tracks a significant improvement in terms of sound design and arrangement can be found.

From the beginning, I cared about creating a solid but varied piece of work, facing different genres, styles and moods. The first EP starts with the first song that I have produced for this project. “A Kiss” represents a change, a switch from how I used to feel about my music. It is probably the song on which I spent more time in my life as the first demo version goes back to June 2020. The sounds and the cohesion between the first and second part really helped me understand in which direction I wanted to go and the way in which I wanted to combine my rhythmic and electronic influences with the soft and melancholic melodies that I am used to create. The second track “Faint” follows the same mood and philosophy, though the track starts with a more obsessive drum pattern to keep the attention high and keep building the emotions that started in “A Kiss”. The concept of “interlude” always fascinated me and in both EPs, I introduced the interlude to create a break in the middle of the album, in order to reset for a moment everything that happened before and to resume it with the fourth track. Away Again is the second track that I have composed for the project, and its similarity in terms of arrangement and sounds with “A Kiss” suggested me the idea

and the structure of an album divided in a side A and side B by an interlude. The first idea of Mad at You, as the last track of the EP, was to create something simple and conclusive in terms of feelings, but it has never been one of my favourites, which is why I considered discarding it multiple times until Martina added her vocals. From that moment my vision of the track changed radically.

Regarding the B side of Any Other Second, it's been composed in a very short time compared to the other side, as my ideas were clearer this time. I started, as usual, from the first song "What if you need me", which is one of the songs that I am most proud of. It also gave me many suggestions regarding the best musical direction to undertake. The second track Uaresostrong started from wanting to create something incredibly sad and emotional but danceable at the same time, and the final result is very satisfactory. I decided to carry on the same concept into the interlude in a more conscious way by sampling the speech of Alan Watts. Starting from the speech, I built the music around as if it was a soundtrack. After the interlude, I decided to bring up the BPM of the tracks focusing more on the rhythmical part and making it the protagonist. The drums kick in with a surprising effect after the very slow intro of "She Doesn't Care" and they do not stop until the end of the album. The last track is the conclusion not only of this EP but of both. It is the most minimal of the songs, mainly rhythmical and monotonous but that still keeps the melancholic vein of all the other tracks.

One of my biggest fear was making an album that would be perceived as not commercially attractive due to the genre and the mostly instrumental structure of the tracks. Introducing the vocals of Martina Stramaccioni and Cathal Reynolds, I was able to uplift those songs, which couldn't work well on their own as the others and I was able to add a pop/chill vein into the EPs which I believe makes the listening process lighter and more diverse.

On the other hand, I have tried to avoid the risk of losing the focus of my initial music concept, trying to combine the vocal elements in the most natural way without letting them overtake. All the cases studied in my written proposal have been a big inspiration for this. By listening to how they manage to introduce vocal elements (samples or performances), I have tried to bring some of those ideas into my music concept.

Although making music with rules has never been a thing for my process, I have arranged most my tracks, sometimes on purpose and sometimes not, following the structure of most of the pop songs.

In my music, this results in using 2 or 4 chords progression (Point Blank Music School, "How to structure a song" [plus.pointblankmusicschool.com/how-to-structure-a-song-part-1/](https://plus.pointblankmusicschool.com/how-to-structure-a-song-part-1/)) and building the arrangement following the four-bar theory. This theory is focused about holding the listener's attention by making something happen every 4 bars through all the song (Colemize Studios, "Four-bar theory")

<https://colemizestudios.com/four-bar-theory-keep-listeners-hooked/>) .I have not interpreted this as a rule that I must always follow, but as a good suggestion and a reminder in those situations where I feel like something is not working as it should, and where something needs more to work better.

This has been done for the same commercial reason mentioned above when talking about vocals: in fact, I am sure that the simple melodies and chord progressions help making the project lighter and more attractive. Thanks to having collected the opinions of my trusted friends (musician and not), neither EPs turned out to be boring or not suitable for an easy listen. I believe I found a good balance between all the elements I wanted to bring in.

Regarding the commercial aspect and future promotion of the project, I will explain my choices more in detail further down. Comparing my initial goal, which was to gain more self-confidence and social skills, with the current situation, I find that I still need to work on myself in order to figure out how to improve my networking skills.

Despite this, I can firmly say that my self-confidence has effectively improved and working with other people considerably helped. Going forward, my goal is to share my music with professionals such as A&R and try to build relationships with those who are in the business. Thanks to social platforms such as Instagram and LinkedIn, it is much easier nowadays to get in contact with anyone. Additionally, as Nick Halkes said in the masterclass, living in a city such as London, where there is such a vibrant music scene, could make a big difference. The A&R sessions with Jamie Searls have been very useful in order to make me realize the many different ways in which I could build connections.

I have tried bring my imagery into the design of the artwork of both EPs as I felt the need create something as coherent with my music as possible, expressing my creative point of view through this medium as well. The images have been created using a combination of free royalty photos of textures, modified by layering them and drawing on them using illustrator for Ipad and finalized on Canva (Canva, “A Step-to-step guide to designing from scratch” <https://www.canva.com/learn/a-step-by-step-guide-to-designing-from-scratch/>).

The front artwork of the EPs is the same but inverted, in terms of colour, for the B side version, while the back present a completely different design. I hope that the idea of juxtaposing a very abstract and mystic picture on the back of the B side to a clear and defined artwork on the back of the A side helps underlining once again the somewhat contradictory concept of similarity and yet diversity between the two works.



FIG 1. Front EP



FIG 2. Back EP



FIG 3. Front EP (B side)

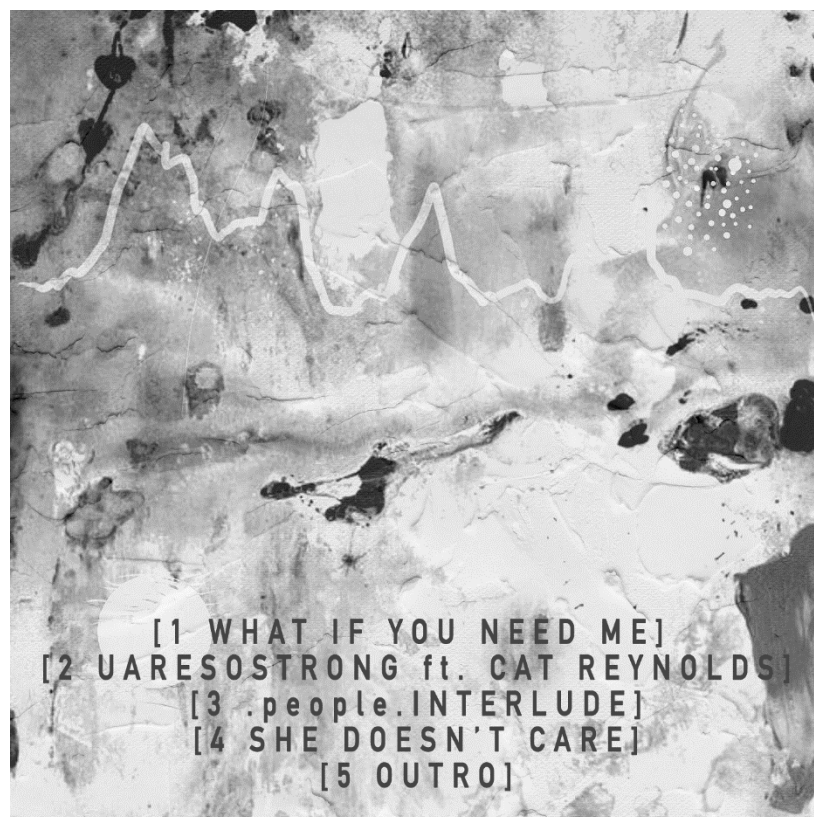


FIG 4. Back EP (B side)

## THE PROCESS:

### KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT: SOFT, HARD AND FUTURE SKILLS

The first rough version of each song has been created in a similar way: my process of composing normally starts with a four-bar loop, which, most of the time, is a sample made by myself by recording guitar or diving into synthesizers until I find out an inspirational sound or melody. Sometimes, when I cannot find the inspiration in this manner, I start to look for samples which could be extracted from an existing song, a sample downloaded from Splice or a sample present in some sample packs that I have collected on my hard disk over the years. This first sound is not necessarily the main instrument of the track; in fact, most of the time the main focus comes out later in the process. Usually, the only function of the sample is to kickstart the process and help me come up with an idea. When the track starts to be developed, I usually delete or replace the sample where I started from. Examples of this are: “A Kiss”, which is a song that I developed around the guitar loop that kicks in at the beginning, or the idea behind “What If You Need Me”, which started from a drum loop extrapolated by SeeSaw of Jamie XX (which in turn has been sampled from the song See Saw by Mary Buffett) (Who Sampled, “Jamie XX – SeeSaw” <https://www.whosampled.com/Jamie-xx/SeeSaw/>). Once the arrangement of the song was completed, I replaced the drum loop with my own drum kit and a similar pattern.

### HARD SKILLS

Regarding hard skills and techniques applied in the project, I conducted an intensive research through my case studies about they achieve certain results and effects. One of these methods has been applied in the two songs recorded with Martina: A Kiss and Mad at You. During the recording process, the condenser mic had been placed relatively far away from the source (the singer), forcing me to be more generous with the pre-amplifier level. The result is a vocal take with no effect of proximity: this helped me from the beginning to get a vocal track that seems far in the mix, leaving more space to the instrumental and without clashing, which succeeds in providing the ethereal and dreamy effect that distinguishes the songs. This technique is often used by Thom Yorke and the Radiohead’s producer Nigel Godrich in many of their song and in other projects produced by Nigel as well, like Warpaint or Air.

Another technique that I learnt during the process is the renowned reverb EQ, which has been used in the Abbey Road Studios since the 1960s. The technique consists in setting an EQ with a high-pass filter to 600 Hz and a low-pass filter at 10kHz before the signal gets into the reverb. This method not only allows to cut off all the excessive muddiness, but it also allows to send more signal into the reverb, as the useless frequencies have been cut off and more energy can be channelled into the remaining frequency range. By doing so, the reverb effects will be more evident, which is essential for the music genre I want to produce, but at the same time, it will not ruin the mix by making it murkier and muffled. As a result, all the single sounds will be easily distinguishable despite the long and wide reverbs. As reported by Westlake Pro, “The Abbey Road reverb EQ technique not only prevents a track from swimming in reverb and thereby losing intelligibility, it also offers a means of gluing instruments and vocals together in a mix. It eliminates annoying high-frequency tails, increases clarity, yet still provides the sheen and size that reverb can impart to a sound.” (Westlake Pro, <https://westlakepro.com/abbey-road-reverb-trick/>). This trick has been applied to all the tracks during the mixing process. Another very useful technique that I have used, which was suggested to me by my mentor Goetz Botzenhardt, was to layer my drum samples in order to create drum sounds that are punchier and more particular. What I found especially useful was to layer my drum kits with the classic TR 808 and TR 909 sounds, as they are very minimal and versatile, which means they fit well with any other sound. This helps making the drum parts stand out from the early stages, avoiding to over-cook them later (Mode Audio, “Drum Layering” <https://modeaudio.com/magazine/drum-layering>).

The last hard skills achieved during the process have been the mix bus technique and the multiband compression on the low frequencies. Mix bus technique consists in starting the mixing process from the end, so from the master bus, processing it at the beginning and then moving on to all the group buses such as the drums, the keys or the vocals, leaving the processing of the individual tracks for last. According to my own personal experience, this type of workflow works very well sometimes. This is because it helps to shape the sound of the mix from the beginning and to maintain the focus on the global sound and not on the single tracks. Additionally, it helps to avoid unpleasant surprises: for example, when you add a limiter as last on the master track and the effect of the plugin makes you retrace your steps as the whole mix is not working well as before. I could observe this technique during the mixing video course of Salvatore Addeo available on the website “Improve Your Mix”. Another trick that he uses a lot consists of compressing the low frequency band with multiband compression setting the attack and release at slow levels. The compression is about 2 or 3 dB, which are then regained with the make-up gain. In this way, by decreasing the dynamic and increasing the RMS value of that frequency band, the result is a more solid and thick bass (Salvatore Addeo, “Mix genere Pop” <https://www.improveyourmix.com/prodotto/videocorso-mix-genere-pop/>).

## SOFT SKILLS

The idea of introducing vocals by collaborating with songwriters was not mine. When I finished the demo version of the first EP (which was only instrumental), I shared it with professional musician such as my mentor Goetz Botzenhardt and Jamie Searls; most of the comments and critiques were about the emptiness of some parts of the songs and the most common suggestion was to ask to multiple singers to cooperate on different songs.

To introduce some vocals into the EPs, I started by contacting Martina on Instagram as we never met before due to the covid restrictions. Once the first Ep was completely arranged, I sent her the demos and we arranged a zoom call to decide which tracks could be suitable for her vocals. We started by figuring out where they could be included, the main themes and how to match the other instruments in terms of sound and vibe. “A Kiss” and “Mad at You” were chosen. Our initial idea was to manipulate the vocal takes in order to create samples to play through the song, but when I received the first rough demo by Martina, I realized that we could make a more structured vocal arrangement as they sounded more articulated and elaborated than I expected. Despite the songs being already arranged without vocals, we managed to fit them into the tracks without forcing them in or ruining the structure or the transitions between sections.

After that, we met in the studio to adjust and refine the melodies and the lyrics of the demo version and to record the official ones.

This has been a very particular experience for me. I always struggle to push myself forward and come out of my shell. It has probably been the first time that I emailed someone who I have never met before to ask them to collaborate on something.

The other collaboration has been much easier and came more organically. Because me and Cathal were already friends, the idea of working together on “Uaresostrong” came to us very spontaneously. When I was composing the song, I realised from the beginning that it required some vocals. Therefore I created the space needed to fit them in later on, which made it very easy for us to complete the song.

Other soft skills and personal interactions involve a collaboration with a photographer and designer (Nicholas Beard) in order to adjust and make my artwork idea professional, and the recruitment of a mastering engineer (Alessandro Favero) with whom I finalised my mixes.

## FUTURE SKILLS

The main future aim I have in terms of skills is about live performance and the way I want to present my music on stage. Although we are no longer used to speaking about live performance, I still believe that it is an extremely important aspect in a personal project. A live is a great opportunity to develop your fanbase and (usually) the biggest source of income for the artist. As Reverb Nation reports on their blog “Putting on a great live show is a solid way to engage people by giving them a memorable, in-person experience” (Reverb Nation “Why live shows are more important than ever” <https://blog.reverbnation.com/2018/08/30/live-shows-important-ever/>). That is the reason why I have focused my attention on imaging a possible setup to perform live. As my project is mainly focused on electronic music, the easiest answer to the question “How will I replicate this live?” is djing. I do not have any experience with djing, nor do I have the money required to buy the equipment. Additionally, I believe that, unless you are a seasoned DJ, your performance will inevitably revert into a banal and simple live experience with no distinction from the recorded version of the tracks. Therefore, I abandoned the idea of DJ and, after researching how my favourite artists play or used to play live, I focused on trying to figure out an electronic setup as versatile as possible and easy to build up using some of the equipment that I already own. In particular, I have found the video of Four Tet explaining his performance secrets at Red Bull Music Academy very useful, alongside the beautiful message that is fundamental for musical ideas, which is “I don’t know much about Ableton at all, I do not want to sound like anybody else”. (Red Bull Academy, “Four Tet set Break-down and Performance Secrets” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KIvnLBF7vU&ab\\_channel=RedBullMusicAcademy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KIvnLBF7vU&ab_channel=RedBullMusicAcademy)). The heart of my live performance will be the Tascam DP-02CF, a compact multitrack recorder and player that I already own. On this machine, I will store the multitrack exports of my songs assignable to the 8 different channels of the mixer, which will allow me to mute and unmute the single tracks in order to rearrange every song in real-time. The device also features a send return connection to which I will connect my pedalboard and a dedicated knob for each channel. The main output of the Tascam will be connected to a classic four channel mixer for DJs. The mixer will be equipped with a send connection to which I will plug the RC-202 loop station by Boss, and then I will connect the main output of the loop-station to another channel of the DJ mixer. This will let me create instant loops and effects such as reverse, slice or phase shift during the performance. As last, I will have my guitar connected to a loop pedal and then into the DJ mixer to create at the time the main loops of each song. The mixer will be essential to manage every signal independently and in the fastest way as possible.

## COMMERICAL AIMS

Regarding the commercial aspect and the promotion of the project, I have researched some labels to which I feel most aligned in terms of vision and previous releases. Especially in London, many electronic music-based labels can be found, so I selected the three labels below, which are the ones I feel closest to:

Ninja Tune is one of the world's leading independent labels. Founded by the duo Coldcut, it is now a global music institution with an incredibly diverse roster of artists (Ninja Tune, "About Us" <https://ninjatune.net/about-us>)

I discovered the label by listening to some of their producers such as Bonobo and Floating Points. It is definitely my first choice, but I am conscious that it is really improbable that they will listen to unsolicited material, as I believe that they receive hundreds of mails and links from emergent artists.

FatCat Records is an independent label based in Brighton. Mainly focused on electronic, contemporary classic and post-punk, it would be a big opportunity and great environment to grow up.

As last, Tru-Thoughts founded by Robert Luis and Paul Jonas, is probably the less of the three. Despite this, it has developed a great reputation for releasing different genres and high-quality of music.

I know that it is extremely difficult to get signed by a label, especially after your first release as a solo artist and especially if you are aiming at important, established labels. Luckily, in 2021 you don't need a label to publish your music and start to create your fan base. There are many digital distributors available, such as Distrokid and CD Baby. Therefore, my next steps will be to publish the first EP as soon as possible, and then to start playing it live and promoting it by myself. The promotion will be done on Instagram and through contacting people that I feel could be useful for my project. Another future aim is to look for curators and editors, trying to get in contact with them. By playing live, I hope to be able to create connections with people working in the music industry. (DITTO, "How to Promote your Music Independently in 2021", <https://dittomusic.com/en/blog/how-to-promote-your-music-independently/>)

This will be an experiment for me to see where I can go by myself, with my own knowledge and my own skills. I will be focused on grow up as an artist under every point of view. The second EP will be published later on, pondering my decision in relation to what I will have achieved at that point.

# CONCLUSION, FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

These EPs have been an incredible journey for me and I am immensely proud of the effort that I put in them. In terms of collaborations, I learnt a lot, I learnt how to choose the right people to work with and how to include someone else into my world and my ideas. Because of this, the experience of working with songwriters has definitely been the best one in the project. I am happy with the skills that I managed to achieve and with how much I have improved since my previous works, especially for what concerns my production and mixing abilities. I have gained more trust in my potential: only a year ago, I would never have imagined that today I would be able to make such a well-organised piece of work come to life. I can in all honesty say that this is my most intimate and heartfelt idea of music and I could not be happier about it. I am glad that I was able to achieve the expectations I talked about in my written proposal. I am conscious that the EPs are not perfect yet, and that the second one in particular could be improved a lot in terms of mixing, but I am conscious of where I am lacking and I strive to improve and always learn more. Despite this, I think that my project could find its place in the music industry. By looking at what inspirational artists have done before and their career path only, I understood that there are no rules to be followed in the music industry. There are more desirable genres than others but that should not be perceived as a limit or a constriction.

## CREDITS

### A Side

- 1 A Kiss – Lorenzo Martelli (Producer), Martina Stramaccioni (Singer, Songwriter)
- 2 Faint - Lorenzo Martelli (Producer)
- 3 Breathless Interlude - Lorenzo Martelli (Producer)
- 4 Away Again - Lorenzo Martelli (Producer)
- 5 Mad at You - Lorenzo Martelli (Producer), Martina Stramaccioni (Singer, Songwriter)

## B Side

1 What if You Need me - Lorenzo Martelli (Producer)

2 Uaresostrong - Lorenzo Martelli (Producer), Cathal Reynolds (singer, Songwriter)

3 people Interlude - Lorenzo Martelli (Producer)

4 She doesn't care - Lorenzo Martelli (Producer)

5 Outro - Lorenzo Martelli (Producer)

Mastering – Alessandro Favero

Artwork- Nicholas Beard, Lorenzo Martelli

## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Here is my personal development plan to outline my goals, my strengths and how I will improve my areas of weakness.

| Goals                                             | What do I need to do before                                                                                                                                                                                                               | When do i want to achieve this | What obstacles might get in my way                                                                                                                 | How can I improve my chances                                                                                                                                                                    | What do I expect                                                                                                                                                 | Where am I now?                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Create an initial fanbase by promoting my project | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Release my first EP</li><li>- Figure out and practice on my live setup</li></ul>                                                                                                                  | End of the 2021                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Struggle to find live gigs</li><li>- Struggle to reach enough people and capture their attention</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Submitting my work to label and A&amp;Rs</li><li>- Being constantly looking for opportunities</li><li>- Being more active on Social Networks</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Positive feedbacks</li><li>- A total of 10.000 listens for the first EP in the next 2 months after the release</li></ul> | I have worked hard these months to produce the best music material that I could, I am now on the position of being confident to share it |
| Gain my networking skills                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Release my first EP</li><li>- Create media contents such as photos and videos to support my project and give a more professional look to my social network pages</li><li>- Prepare a CV</li></ul> | 1-2 years                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Procrastination, as there is not a precise deadline</li><li>- Lose the focus</li></ul>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Submit my works to people who works in music industry</li><li>- Applying for assistant and internship roles, to be able to meet professionals</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Interviews</li><li>- Collaborations</li><li>- Job opportunities</li></ul>                                                | I am now looking for creating new connection and make more solid those I have                                                            |

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