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ARTICLE

Rural songs for COVID-19 times? UK folk music's resurgent engagement with the countryside

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic somewhat unexpectedly promoted resurgent interest in the attractions of rural places, not least associated with nature, in many countries for especially urban people. The paper argues that this link was very fecund for many within the broad UK 'folk music' community specifically. After introducing COVID-19's pro-rural turn, the paper gives a brief overview of now substantial music geography scholarship, paying particular attention to what has been studied in respect of folk music, not least its examination of the latter's problematic links to English identities. It argues that folk music's resurgent rural links call for attention. It then introduces how the rural-folk music COVID-19 experience worked at three non-exclusive levels. First, there was rural influence on the music being produced. Second, some musicians were also personally impacted strongly by rural experiences, evident not solely through their music. Third, some musicians developed original rural initiatives that saw audience members also gaining direct rural inspiration, not just via the strong growth in internet-facilitated connections but through direct in-place encounters with the musicians in the rural. Each reading is illustrated by two brief case studies, with the rural-folk combination becoming increasingly alive and more-than-representational. It is suggested in conclusion that there remains a strong 'life' to these rural-folk music connections in less predominant COVID-19 times.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, folk music, more-than-representational, music geography, rurality, UK

> [O]ther threads... contributed to a different wing of the Folk Revival when it came. One was an increased interest in the countryside as an escape from the grime and smoke of industrial existence.
>
> Roud, 2017: 167

1 | INTRODUCTION: A RURAL TURN IN COVID-19 TIMES

A rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic, seen widely across the Global North, was the rural claiming the spotlight as a highly desirable place to be directly experienced in diverse ways (Schorn et al., 2024). Rurality seemingly enhanced further its widely recognised status as a therapeutic and recuperative heterotopic space 'beyond the city' (Halfacree, 2023). In short, COVID-19's threatening cloud reinforced oppositional 'enduring dichotomies of urban and rural places' but, critically, '"urban" shift[ed] from places of sophistication to places of threat[,] while "rural" shift[ed] from rustic to safe' (Malatzky et al., 2020, p. 3).

Strong pro-rural popular disposition came to be expressed, on the one hand, by urban residents visiting the countryside for a fix of 'green Prozac' (Barkham, 2020), not least through walking and seeking connection to nature. On the other hand, more committed 'urban refugees' (Reed, 2021) sought more permanent respite from lockdown stress via counterurban residential relocation (Halfacree, 2023; Schorn et al., 2024). Throughout, rurality's strong association with 'nature' was its trump card (Doughty et al., 2023). As McCarthy (2020, p. 9) put it: 'the natural world is there for us, even in pandemics, even in lockdowns; it is there to console and repair and recharge us, often unrecognised and unacknowledged, but still giving life to every one of us, regardless'.

The present paper argues that it was not only general 'urban consumers' who raised the profile of and drew powerful inspiration from rural places. In addition, many creative artists were both themselves reinvigorated by and, in turn, reinvigorated their audience through rural engagement. Specifically, many UK folk musicians—as the opening quotes suggest, historically not averse to seeking rural inspiration—expressed a strong pro-rural disposition through their music. Moreover, this was not only a turn to draw upon a relatively passive consolidating rural representation, but also implicated a more active human and more-than-human more-than-representational rural (Halfacree, 2023; Lorimer, 2005).

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. First, it briefly overviews social science music research, with some work on folk music specifically introduced. Second, at the paper's heart, three ways in which folk music and rural became more entangled through COVID-19 times are introduced, done largely through reflection on the author's experience of such music during this period. Third, the paper concludes by suggesting that if this fertile folk-music-rural alliance is maintained since COVID-19's lockdown heyday, it has implications for both folk music and rural geographies.

2 | MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP, UK FOLK AND ENGAGING WITH COVID-19 TIMES

Historically, in terms of the arts, geography had been more interested in visual media than music (Kearney, 2010; Kirby, 2021). Research centred on music was something of a latecomer but, inspired by studies such as Smith (1994, 1997), Leyshon et al. (1998) and Connell and Gibson (2002), scholarship expressing the notable entanglement of music, musicians and music consumers with place is now well established (Hudson, 2006). Indeed, over two decades ago one of its pioneers concluded that 'music geography has achieved credibility' (Carney, 1998, p. 6), studies covering 'styles, ... structure, ... lyrics, ... performers and composers, ... centers and events, ... media, ... ethnic, ... instrumentation, and... industry' (Carney, 1998, p. 3). How these have been studied is beyond this paper's scope but Kirby (2021) notes a shift away from attending to production of geographical meanings in compositions, not least through lyrics, and regional place perspectives to greater focus on performative and experiential dimensions, thereby 'better attending to the actual "sound" of ... music' (p. 571). There is increased interest in 'practice and performance' (Anderson et al., 2005, p. 640), 'explor[ing] and experiment[ing] with what music is and how it works **as** music in the world' (Wood et al., 2007, p. 868). The present paper fits this more 'lived' perspective.

Although noted explicitly by Carney (1998) as a key area of music geography, folk music remains relatively neglected across the social sciences (Johansson, 2023). This is not least perhaps due to it having strong resistance to clear definition (Winter & Keegan-Phipps, 2013), immediately apparent from genre overviews, such as Brocken (2002), Cohen (2006) or Roud (2017). Nevertheless, its academic study has broadly followed the pattern suggested above for music research generally. Thus, we have studies examining song meanings, not least via lyrics (for example, Yarwood & Charlton, 2009); work linking songs to experiences of place (for example, Halfacree, 2009); explorations of the music's and artists' positionality, not least political (for example, Keegan-Phipps, 2017); linkages between folk music and the (re)production of both place (for example, Anderton, 2019) and person (for example, Revill, 2004); and accounts of folk music's diversification and connection to less 'ordinary' geographies (for example, Holloway, 2022, p. 14). Throughout many of these studies and in accounts of folk music generally, rurality features prominently, from accounts of early collectors' 'imagined village'

(Boyes, 1993; Roud, 2017) to book-length overviews such as Young (2010) or King (2019). As Blackstone (2017, p. 564) observes: folk music '[s]ounds make the landscape "come alive" and they are important to reinforcing and constructing the reality and experience of landscape'.

Folk music's engagement with the rural has been noted often to tie-in with attempts to express national identity, not least in periods when the latter seems uncertain and contested, prompting 'cultural moments involving the definition, redefinition or contestation of the nation' (Keegan-Phipps, 2017, p. 6). Focusing on Englishness, Winter and Keegan-Phipps (2013, p. 3) recognise folk music as 'a significant site for the construction of English identities'. Folk music has, intentionally or usually more passively, frequently reiterated a representation of Englishness as being essentially at home in 'a historically rooted, ethnically pure, green-and-pleasant-land' (Keegan-Phipps, 2017, p. 8). Such association has been appropriated by far right groups, such as the British National Party, much to the dismay and resistance of most folk artists (for example, Yarwood & Charlton, 2009). As Keegan-Phipps (2017, p. 14, 17) observes, for a music still 'notably white', there are clearly political tensions in 'seeking to articulate an indigenous relationship with place' and celebration of a nostalgic, implicitly pre-multicultural rurality.

Nonetheless, analysis of folk music's engagement with the rural should not solely revolve around thorny but critically important political questions of national identity. As Blackstone (2017, p. 575) also noted, folk music 'enables people to cope with problems in modern society' more broadly and this can centrally foreground the rural, not least through emphasising its strong association with 'nature'. Still 'relatively unexplored by geographers' (Johansson, 2023, p. 502), folk music's longstanding countercultural drawing of inspiration from nature (Halfacree, 2009; Johansson, 2023) merits emphasis, including recognising its prominence today within ecomusicological efforts to foreground greater environmental sustainability (Johansson, 2023; Pedelty, 2012). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that folk music and rural connected strongly in uncertain COVID-19 times, as the paper now introduces through the UK example.

3 | FOLK MUSIC AND RURAL: ENTANGLED IN COVID-19 TIMES

COVID-19 has begun to be discussed in academic music scholarship, especially building on how the pandemic threw the arts generally into crisis through loss of being able to perform in conventional ways (Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021; Hansen et al., 2021). For example, Manley-Muller (2021) drew out how musicians, unable to meet during lockdown, increasingly deployed technology for remote collaboration; McNeill (2022) noted music clubs staging online events, some even with virtual queues and toilets; and Cohen and Ginsborg (2021) investigated how orchestral musicians coped in isolation. While none of these studies had any rural dimension, their themes of enhancing existing trends, technology, online performance and coping with isolation all reappeared in a rural context.

While the examples introduced below all centre on UK folk music's creative entanglement with rural during the pandemic, this should be qualified. First, many folk musicians remained throughout strongly urban located, orientated and even celebratory. Second, the pandemic's *exact* 'causal' role in bringing about the interactions and outcomes discussed needs investigation beyond which can be undertaken here. Certainly, though, some UK folk music and musicians became strongly (re-)entangled with rurality during COVID-19 times. Three overlapping ways are illustrated next with two brief examples. While most of these artists were already rural residents when the pandemic struck, such 'background rurality' was increasingly and explicitly foregrounded through the peak COVID-19 years.

3.1 | Music on and of the land

The simplest way UK folk music's rural entanglement was renewed during COVID-19 was through musicians seeking inspiration from immediate experience of rural places, typically home areas. As noted, folk musicians have long sung about rural land and people, perhaps inevitably in a genre drawing strongly on songs from a more rural age (Keegan-Phipps, 2017). However, much music on and of the land stimulated and renewed via COVID-19 times was explicitly present-day in setting, although historical connections and inspirations were still well covered. Rurality was turned to for inspiration and often found bountiful as a therapeutic and inspiring space.[1]

A first example of rurality inspiring, enlivening and adding something of itself to the music produced comes from Edgelarks (https://edgelarks.co.uk). Especially in lockdown when touring was impossible, many musicians simply went home to live and try to work from there (Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021). Edgelarks, the (romantic) couple Phillip Henry and Hannah Martin, exemplified this. Indeed, they were more prepared than many for lockdown experience as their

immediate pre-COVID-19 album, *Feather* (2019), anticipated the experience of creating in isolation through being written in a remote Cumbrian cottage. It also had a broad theme of 'hope' (Henry & Martin, n.d.), again foretelling what was to come.

Under COVID-19 isolation in rural Devon, Edgelarks were far from creatively constrained. They were prompted to have something of a return to their roots (Martin was brought up in Devon), seeking inspiration for all from older songs or 'that mighty survivor … tradition' (Martin, 2020). A selection of what came from this reflective emplacement was brought together on the album *Henry* Martin (2020). Named both from combining the couple's surnames and from an old Dartmoor song, it strongly suggested a desire to embrace place and history. In their predominantly rural location, Edgelarks anticipated a post-COVID-19 'time when we can overcome the distance that separates us, and raise our voices together once more in song' (Martin, 2020). Within this desire to build a foundation for a positive future, rural featured strongly, well expressed in the album's final track, 'The Seeds Of Love':

> experimental … wordless backing vocals that mimic the sounds of birds and insects, the quiet hum of the outdoors, an English arcadia that is currently beyond the reach of many … [and ending] on the most positive of notes, with the words 'give it time it will rise again'.
>
> Blake, 2020, n.p.

In a way, of course, Edgelarks' 'retreat' to rural Devon was predictable as it was their long-term home. However, other musicians were more proactive in seeking affective musical inspiration through 'lives of the rural' (Halfacree, 2006) engagement. An explicit and well-developed example comes from Ciderhouse Rebellion, the instrumental pairing of fiddler Adam Summerhayes and accordionist Murray Grainger (https://theciderhouserebellion.com/).

As well as being all instrumental (except when Grainger's daughter Jessie accompanies them with vocals of her poetry), Ciderhouse Rebellion's music is largely improvisation. The significance of this taking place within a rural context came through especially strongly during COVID-19. First, there was the *InCider Sessions* 2020 series of videoed performances (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXbKf4H35Qc) and *InCider Sessions* (2020) album, which evolved later that year into the *al fresco OutCider Sessions* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXbKf4H35Qc). Second, the duo took rural inspiration further with their Arts Council supported *Ironstone Tales* project's *Genius Loci* albums. As the title suggests, these recordings drew inspiration from the individual character or 'spirits' of rural places. As the duo put it on Facebook (14 May 2021), the project 'allow[ed] the sense and the feel of a landscape to flow through our subconscious, and out through our improvised music'. Springing from six 15-minute films (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CD3DazRYj4), where they 'set off on foot until they happen on a spot where the spirit of place pulls upon their musical antennae' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-K1fONpQSI), *Genius Loci: 1. White Peak* (2021) drew from Derbyshire's White Peak (Blake, 2021), while *Genius Loci: 2. The Valley of Iron* (2022) was rooted in Rosedale on the Yorkshire Moors, 'a haunted, lonely spot once part of the now-forgotten ironstone industry' (Fish, 2021).[2] All paid considerable attention to past human emplacement in the rural areas covered, but was also fundamentally grounded in more-than-human encounters with these places.

3.2 | Music and musicians on and of the land

Ciderhouse Rebellion's rural *genius loci* inspiration impacted personally on them, as is clear from their commentary. However, other folk-rural engagements suggested rural place as still more highly impactful on the musicians themselves as well as on their music. Again, such transformation has been observed before, notably those pioneering late 1960s and 1970s countercultural 'back-to-the-land' migration (Halfacree, 2009, 2022). In COVID-19 times, however, rather than wholeheartedly 'going back to the land', rurality diversely impacted on folk musicians' everyday lives in more modest but nonetheless meaningful ways.

Such impacts can readily be appreciated from listening to many episodes of the *Folk on Foot* (https://www.folkonfoot.com) podcast. '[L]aunched by the broadcaster and former BBC executive Matthew Bannister… bringing together his three passions: folk music, walking and telling stories in sound' (https://www.folkonfoot.com/about/), the diverse musicians covered explicitly discuss the impact of place on their music during a 'walking interview'. While the series started before COVID-19 (August 2018), and also covers urban places, it nonetheless clearly draws out the importance of rural living for many musicians. For example, the episode featuring the already-discussed Edgelarks (https://www.folkonfoot.com/episodes/edgelarks) centred on a walk, with performances, during the pandemic (2021) to the atmospheric Scorhill Bronze

Age Stone Circle site on Dartmoor, Devon, a place the couple frequently visited (ibid.). Both the discussion and the four performances resonate very strongly with rural landscape and its ancient history, the musicians specifically emphasising the importance of belonging, having a sense of emplaced rootedness and the influence of places such as Dartmoor on their music.

Scottish folk singer and guitarist Karine Polwart has also featured on *Folk on Foot* but before COVID-19. Her episode drew attention to the large musical community in Pathhead, Midlothian, where she lives and also how important nature was to her songs (Ferguson, 2013). This was strongly reinforced through COVID-19. At the pandemic's height, tied to home place, being 'on the land' clearly impacted strongly on Polwart's everyday life and music. This is well expressed in her 2020 episode of *Folk at Home* on BBC Radio 3 (BBC, 2020). Besides emphasising deep love for nature and humanity (which also comes across strongly in her online newsletters; Polwart various dates), Polwart speaks of how her garden moved from a backdrop to becoming central to her life during lockdown and through what she also felt as a politically tumultuous time.[3] She talks of how lucky she is to have it and be affectively pulled in for tidying and cultivation; previously, she had largely ignored it. With her young daughter, she cultivated this space and found it expressive of a wider realisation across Pathhead of the importance of local spaces and of people connecting with one another via land and locally grown foods. All helped Polwart 'think … about the people you live amongst' (quoted in BBC, 2020) and her detailed local geography, an appreciation she hoped would be sustained after COVID-19.

However, it was not just Polwart as a person that a detailed rural grounding impacted on during COVID-19. Her music showed similar influences. Notably, the album she recorded locally and released with fellow Pathhead resident, pianist Dave Milligan—*Still as Your Sleeping* (2021)—expresses a strong sense of grounded social and environmental issues in both her own songs and covers (Gilchrist, 2021). As Polwart (2021, p. 21) put it, much of her 'writing, especially in recent years, has been steeped in a sense of place'. Similar inspiration also fed into other (post-)COVID-19 projects, from her contribution to the *Spell Songs* (2021) album celebrating McFarlane and Morris's (2017) nature words and illustrations, to *Seek the Light*'s 2022 'weaving together spoken word, song and instrumental music in a spirit of awe, reverence and solace [for the] wonders of nature' (Scottish Chamber Orchestra, 2022, n.p.).

3.3 | Music, musicians and musical consumers on and of the land

Folk music consumers may be impacted by the rural either through simply listening to musicians' outputs or in an enhanced way via the earlier-noted growth of online encounters with musicians-in-place that developed strongly during COVID-19. However, things go further when an audience experiences directly what the artists encounter. From a COVID-19 sensitivity, expansion of such encounters further reflected the noted resurgence of (urban) rural interest generally for consolation and inspiration (Halfacree, 2023).

Sam Lee is a relative newcomer to folk music, but since his urban childhood has appreciated the countryside and nature, attending Forest School Camps and gaining wilderness survival teaching from people such as the celebrity Ray Mears (Barkham, 2021). Rural nature as a 'concert hall' had impacted on him for many years (Broughton, 2021). Furthermore, in 2008, Lee met Scottish Traveller and ballad singer, Stanley Robertson, who took him on as pupil (Thoroddsen, 2013). From this start, Lee increasingly saw folk music as a 'hybrid of the old and the new' (ibid., n.p.), dynamic and innovative, and not just conservative recreation. Such an attitude set him up well to draw inspiration from nature with his music but also to devise novel nature-folk encounters, notably *Singing with Nightingales*.

Beginning in 2014, *Singing with Nightingales*[4] was constrained when COVID-19 hit before being considerably boosted via Lee's pandemic experiences (Broughton, 2021). While COVID-19 forced him to cancel concerts to promote his *Old Wow* (2020) album, Lee still 'had a wonderful time' (quoted in Barkham, 2021, n.p.) via drawing inspiration from spending more time in rural nature.

The resurgent *Nightingale* sessions, held between mid-April and late-May when the males sing, involve 30–35 paying guests plus Lee and a guest musician. Meeting at dusk near where the birds are found (southern England), after a walk and dinner around a campfire, nightingale encounters occur. Described by Broughton (2021), the latter involve the group listening to the birds singing before the guest musician accompanies them. Finally, Lee takes over, singing some of his own or traditional songs, such as *The Nightingale*. Overall, when justifying some avian anthropomorphising in these encounters, Lee argues (in Broughton, 2021) for the strong temporary convergence of human and more-than-human.

The *Singing with Nightingales* experience demonstrates direct rural nature inspiration on folk music—implicating rural locations as well as the birds. It is also experienced beyond the woods, after COVID-19 encouraged Lee to develop

the ability to present much of it live online (Barkham, 2021). It has also strongly impacted on the life and disposition of Lee himself—and his guest musicians. Immediate musical consumers are a further integral part of the experience, their clear pleasure expressed well by how *Singing with Nightingales* events sell out fast, but also through how Lee's larger organisation, the Nest Collective, has had considerable success with other innovative folk-nature experiences, transcending rural–urban division (www.thenestcollective/about).

A second example of benign rural convergence of music, musicians and consumers stays in southern England, around the Wiltshire home of folk duo Ninebarrow. While nature epitomised by the nightingale featured especially strongly for Sam Lee, for Ninebarrow a very strong sense of rural place predominates.

Ninebarrow members Jon Whitley and James LaBouchardiere were brought up in Dorset but, in spite of early musical interest and strong place connection, left for university and careers as teacher and medical doctor, respectively, before returning 'home'. Return was consolidated by Ninebarrow's formation in 2012, the name taken from a down in Dorset's Purbeck hills, and strong music focus from 2016. However, with both also keen walkers, in 2018 they came up with the idea of Ninebarrow Musical Walking Holidays. As with *Singing with Nightingales*, this developed strongly in the pandemic's wake (www.ninebarrowwalking.co.uk/), albeit that it only caters for around 20 people at a time in May and June, partly because Ninebarrow retain live touring, with many summer bookings.

The Ninebarrow experience takes place largely over three days, albeit covering five as guests arrive the day before and leave the day after. On each of the main days, the duo take the group on scenic but relatively easy walks of around 5–7 miles relatively close to the 4-star rural hotel where all stay. Both musicians mingle and chat with their guests but also stop in a couple of notable places on each walk to play a song. For example, when I went in 2022, one was performed in St Aldhelm's Chapel, near Worth Matravers. Back at the hotel, a folk musician guest plays an early evening set before dinner, another playing a set afterwards.

Although a tightly planned and focused walking-music-food experience, rurality clearly impacts strongly both on Ninebarrow's music and on them as musicians, again consolidated via COVID-19 through their heightened realisation of the importance of rural Dorset as place (Ninebarrow, n.d.). Ninebarrow seek to make their music come alive in rural place, whether 'in the field' (further expressed online in numerous Wandering Minstrel broadcasts; https://www.ninebarrow.co.uk/minstrels) or from them and musical guests playing intimate hotel gigs. Throughout, moreover, paying guests are not solely there for music (and food), but also to engage with rural, nature and history. The whole experience draws on a strong sense of rural place, encountering land and nature via the medium of folk music and musicians.

In summary, this third category consolidates a shift from representational towards more-than-representational (Lorimer, 2005) rural, with rurality a clear 'player' actively shaping all involved—music, musicians, audience—as it becomes more embodied and of-the-moment. It is a rural entangled and combined in strong affective expression, no longer just backdrop or 'reducible to text' (Revill, 2004, p. 202) but an active player for all involved.

4 | CONCLUSION: RURAL FOLK MUSIC FOR *POST*-COVID-19 TIMES?

Blackstone (2017) saw a developing 'movement' from the 1980s of folk music providing 'a resource for managing identity' (p. 571). The present paper suggests this direction was consolidated through COVID-19 times, helped considerably by the music's grounding in a celebrated 'anti-COVID-19-enhanced' *rural* place in particular. Furthermore, such grounding did not generally aim to provide some romantic 'veil over the surface of reality' (Brocken, 2002, p. 144), probably via a problematic 'pre-multicultural rurality' (Keegan-Phipps, 2017, p. 17), but instead expressed and celebrated a mixture of 'physical environment, historic associations and specific circumstances … [as] sources of inspiration' (Johansson, 2023, p. 518). Such affirmation came through in the music, the musicians' lives and, in some instances, direct audience experiences.

Finally, a key question to ask concerns the extent to which the strong folk-rural associations introduced above are continuing and developing now that COVID-19 and possibly also the rural is no longer so central in everyday life (Schorn et al., 2024). As widely noted, folk music's popularity and evolution has tended to come in historic waves (Brocken, 2002). So, is the rural influence still strong? And how is it evolving? This is for future research to explore, but sustained prominence *is* suggested by, for example, the links of noted UK folk artists such as Johnny Campbell, Robin Grey and Sam Lee with strongly 'rural' campaigns, such as for greater land access for walkers (Campbell, 2024; Grey, 2024; Hooper, 2024): rural and folk music post-COVID-19 still seemingly resonate strongly.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable - no new data generated, or the article describes entirely theoretical research.

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ENDNOTES

[1] What could have been included here but rather merits its own paper was the notable boost in popularity given to sea shanties during the pandemic. This was particularly stimulated by the 2021 online *TikTok* success of the 'Wellerman' shanty, performed by Nathan Evans, then via the Longest Johns online Wellerman Community Project with its 6500-strong 'virtual choir' (Green, 2021).

[2] This body of work is consolidated further through *Ironstone Tales* (2022), attributed to Words of a Fiddler's Daughter as it foregrounds Jessie's words.

[3] Her sense of political tumult fed directly into the choice of song she performed for the show, namely Leon Rosselson's *The World Turned Upside Down*, celebrating radical seventeenth century back-to-the-land Diggers.

[4] Inspirational for *Singing with Nightingales* were cellist Beatrice Harrison's 1920s BBC radio broadcasts of accompanying the birds (Broughton, 2021), plus an estimated 570 folk songs with 'nightingale' in the title (Barkham, 2021; also Lee, 2023).

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