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EXPERIMENTAL Attitudes

Pianists Matthew Shipp, Vijay Iyer and Jason Moran share at least one thing in common: They've each forged a fiercely individual approach to creating jazz.

By Ted Panken

Photos by Jimmy Katz

You couldn't find three more stylistically diverse pianists," Matthew Shipp said during a freewheeling conversation between himself, Vijay Iyer and Jason Moran last December at Manhattan's Jazz Gallery. On the other hand, Shipp elaborated, this triumvirate, among the most visible speculative improvisers to emerge on the 88s over the past decade, "touch on similar modern themes, but deal with them in completely different ways; between us, we offer a good sense of how fertile modern jazz piano can be."

Enscenced in the back office, the pianists

related their disparate histories. Two common threads emerged. Entering their teens, each heard and felt a deep connection to Thelonious Monk, whose singular tonal personality communicated the possibility of finding a voice on their instrument. Ultimately, such imperatives of self-invention—creating an artistic response to the question, "Who am I?"—compelled them to move to New York.

The quick back-story:

Raised in Wilmington, Del., and once an aspirant church organist, Shipp made the jump to New York in 1984, and joined



forces with such Lower East Side hardcore outcats as David S. Ware, William Parker and Roy Campbell, and, later, post-Third Streamers like Mat Maneri. As the '90s progressed, he seized opportunities offered by "the whole scene of punk rock labels recording 'free jazz' musicians," and, after five albums for Hatology, all acoustic, produced a series of records for Thirsty Ear on which he juxtaposed acoustic recitals and collaborations with electronica and DJ culture.

To borrow art criticism nomenclature, Shipp, a provocateur, positioned himself as a musical situationalist. Conversely, the tag "postmodern" seems unavoidable for Moran, a gently sardonic ironist in the manner of African-American artists like painter Robert Colescott and conceptual new imagist Adrian Piper. James P. Johnson, Afrika Bambaataa, Muhal Richard Abrams and Albert King serve as equally valuable material. Moran studied at the Manhattan School of Music in 1993, joined Greg Osby, then a Blue Note artist in 1997, and in 1999 launched his own succession of seven Blue Note dates, most recently *Artist In Residence*, composed of works from three commissioned pieces.

The son of immigrants from South India and a self-taught pianist, Iyer discovered "the experimental tradition" in an undergraduate course with Sun Ra biographer John Szwed at Yale, where he majored in math and physics. He developed his mature voice in intersection with the various "creative communities" at play in the San Francisco Bay Area between 1992 and 1999. Mentored by Steve Coleman and George Lewis, he developed a rigorously thought-out hybrid, propelling harmonic syntax inspired by such predecessors as Monk and Andrew Hill with complex beat cycles drawn primarily from Camatic and West African music and syncopating them as cogent, surging chants. The most recent iterations of Iyer's systematic formalism appear on *Tragicomic* (Sunnyside) and *Door* (Pi) by the collaborative trio Fieldwork. Parallel to this activity, Iyer has increasingly made it his business to place his vision of abstract notes and tones at the service of the word, as evidenced by a regular association with poet Amiri Baraka, and fully staged collaborations with poet Mike Ladd, most recently documented on *Still Life With Commentator* (Savoy).

Let's discuss how the notion of articulating identity through musical production plays out in the projects you undertake, in the way your ideas developed. Vijay, when I first met you, you were explicit about this.

Vijay Iyer: When I first came to New York, it was more through words. Now it's more through deeds—when this article comes out, there will be 12 albums of my music or co-led projects on which I've articulated the spectrum of who I am. Entering the jazz world, I had to find my place, because there were no precedents



for people like me—the progeny of the first major wave of South Asians who immigrated in the mid-'60s—in this area of music, or actually in American culture at all. Coming of age in the '90s, there was this sense of figuring out just how to be a person in this scene. It took a while before we really started to be visible in culture, except in these clichéd ways. Then Jhumpa Lahiri got a Pulitzer, Mira Nair made *Monsoon Wedding*, everyone knows who Salman Rushdie is, we have *Harold And Kumar Go To White Castle* and so on—all those things are in your face. It's like I can move about the world more freely without having to specify to such a degree why I even exist. I can be more free with the projects I do, and don't feel that has to be answered any more.

Jason Moran: Good for you. I'm not there yet. I grew up in the South, in Houston, in this black neighborhood. We weren't country club, but my younger brother and I played a lot of tennis and golf, playing with kids that didn't look like us, but we'd also play with kids who did look like us in national black tennis and golf tournaments, and see this representation of yourself. But I still wasn't necessarily seeing it in music, until Wynton Marsalis came to Houston and my parents, who took us to almost every jazz concert that came to Houston, took us to see that, too.

After I moved to New York, I started hearing these conceptual questions about what it is to be African-American. Not to say that they weren't being addressed in Texas. But with all the diverse minds in New York, you get a certain insider mentality about what else is happening around America, and you think, "Come on, you all." I started looking at my roots like that: "Come on, you all!" So in my recent Thelonious Monk project, I made a point of going back to the plantation in North Carolina where Monk's grandparents were slaves. We videotaped ourselves walking through that field, and we tell the story of Archibald Monk owning Monk's great-grandparents to help the audience put together how the name Monk gets on the back of Thelonious. I wanted to remind myself. That's the wall I keep bumping up against.

That factors into how I've been forming a lot of my music, these taped interludes between songs that I play in front of, and that we sometimes play with, trying continually to express the diversity of the things that influence me. Hopefully I'll arrive at this point where Vijay is, where I don't constantly have to prove to myself that I'm real. I feel I take certain gigs sometimes just to prove to myself that I can do this or I can do that. Much like Jean-Michel Basquiat talking about painting in Interview, saying, "Oh, no, I

really can draw." He wasn't thinking about proving it to you through his paintings, but he said, "No, I really can," and that was the end of it. I'm trying to get to that point where "I really can play."

Matt, during the '80s you got involved in a scene that articulated a particular outcast esthetic, which you've evolved in a systematic way.

Matthew Shipp: Right. And an un-Cecil Taylor way, which is important. It's funny—this is the third or fourth generation influenced by Monk. The first Monk-influenced generation includes Randy Weston, Mal Waldron and Cecil Taylor, diverse voices who all paid homage to Monk but created original voices of their own. Just how diverse the continuum of this music is, how much space it contains for multiple voices and ways of approaching things, for different branches and roots, is a testament to that pyramid that goes from Duke Ellington to Monk on down.

Now, before I address the idea of identity and production of sound: I am consciousness. We are all consciousness. Consciousness is energy. It's never been created and will never be destroyed. It goes through transformations. In other words, like everyone else, I have been here since forever. The quest of being a musician is taking my pure consciousness and applying it to the pureness of the ebony and the ivory that makes up the piano. Hopefully I am pure mind and the piano is pure vibrations and mathematical frequencies, and my understanding of it and its understanding of me can create some type of language that is hoisted out because I happen to be here on this planet—in this energy vibration—right now.

I'm not coming out of the void and playing the piano. There is a history to the music, and with talented musicians who make it to a certain point, you take for granted that a natural understanding of that history is operating within that person's subconscious mind. But my idea of identity is to forget everything I know, try to be the pure essence of consciousness that I am and push down the notes that would denote that.

A lot of study and craft goes into what comes out.

Shipp: Yeah, so what? I do a lot of studying and craft, but I am retarded also. I am partially retarded, and I am partially an erudite musician. The balance between being erudite and retarded can never be defined.

You mentioned that developing a voice in a non-Cecil Taylor way was important.

Shipp: It's important. I don't want to sound like Cecil Taylor. He did what he did, so why would I want to sound like him?

Iyer: I've almost never heard anybody actually sound like Cecil, except in surface ways.

Shipp: Yeah, but the surface ways are what critics pick up on, and that's what they say, and then that ends your career, basically. From what I know of Vijay and Jason's work, I can't say, "You come out of this and this." We've all checked out Andrew Hill, Jaki Byard. Critics have put so much emphasis on Cecil Taylor, but many other streams occurred in piano in the '60s, whether Paul Bley, or ...

Iyer: Andrew [Hill].

Shipp: Whether Don Pullen, somebody more of the '70s. Whether it's ...

Iyer: Muhal [Richard Abrams].

Shipp: Even Bill Evans and his trio. There are so many streams to draw from in developing your own voice when you're picking materials that are cognate with your soul.

Moran: There's this polarization of the form. If I have 12 piano students at Manhattan School of Music, they end up playing something that, on the surface, I would define clearly as a Brad Mehldau sound—harmonically, rhythmically, touch-wise, tone, etc. Now, I enjoy Brad's music just like any other good piano player. But I also feel: Know the path Brad chose to get where he is, know all his influences. You'll find these

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ENCOUNTERS OF THE MONK KIND

IYER

"Monk's *Live In Tokyo* totally mystified me. I had no idea what was happening, or why that was even permissible, but it struck something deep within me. I thought, I need to find out what's happening here. That set things in motion in a particular direction. Especially because I was self-taught, something in Monk resonated in me, because every sound he makes sounds like it's come through this hard-won process, like this life-long search for sounds in the instrument. Later, that movie *Straight, No Chaser* came out, and I saw him in action. That struck me even more deeply. I felt that connection."



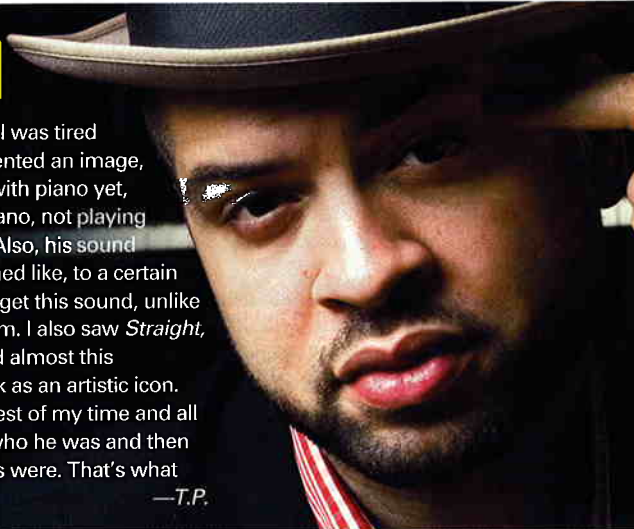
SHIPP

"My mother went to high school with and was close friends with Clifford Brown, who was from Wilmington. She had also met Thelonious Monk. Even though she was more into Erroll Garner and Ahmad Jamal, she understood Monk's figure and place and in the music—his figure as an iconoclastic type of genius who created his own world. She used to talk to me a lot about that, although like a lot of people, she didn't understand his music. Being that she wasn't a jazz-head, even though she had a lot of jazz records, it's interesting, looking back, how she understood his essence—that he used his own universe with a quest that set him apart."



MORAN

"I heard Monk at 13, when I was tired of Suzuki piano. He represented an image, which I hadn't associated with piano yet, like a black man playing piano, not playing Mozart, not playing Bach. Also, his sound seemed accessible. It seemed like, to a certain degree, you actually could get this sound, unlike Oscar Peterson or Art Tatum. I also saw *Straight, No Chaser*, which imparted almost this Hollywood validity to Monk as an artistic icon. So I started spending the rest of my time and all of my money finding out who he was and then who all these other pianists were. That's what led me to this." —T.P.



people, and when you start to interpret them, they'll start to come out in thousands of ways—as they have with us.

In the classical world, you would never be allowed not to learn Bach, Beethoven or Mozart. You can't only learn Stravinsky's piano works, and have no technique to play any Handel or Haydn. In jazz piano, it seems you're allowed not to have to deal with some of the history. Not that you have to be able to emulate it note for note. But I want you to know the feel from 1916, 1926, 1936 and up to now. Then you move forward, and get to the place where you decide, like what Matt said, which I thought was beautiful, "which notes do I press down at the new point?"

What's been the impact of jazz education on musicians adopting an experimental attitude?

Shipp: Jazz education is the one cottage industry in jazz making money now. Let's just leave it at that!

Iyer: I just started teaching at NYU, and it's been interesting to watch where these people are coming from. In one of my first lessons, a student who hadn't checked out Monk asked, "What's a good Monk album to get?" It speaks to Jason's point: Why was someone given a pass to bypass this entire stream of stuff? But some of these students have also asked me, "How do you combine all these influences and still have it come out like you?" I'm like, "Well, that's the question, basically. You have to ask yourself that. I can't give you the answer." For me, it's mostly about being omnivorous about what you check out and learn from.

Again, it gets back to identity, which is why I thought Jason's comment on the Mehltau school emerging among young players today was interesting. They're identifying with him as a person, in a way.

Are most of these students white? Is that why they're identifying with him?

Iyer: That's a factor. People see somebody who they imagine they could be like some day. It's funny how these things work. Well, why couldn't you be Jason Moran? Or Matthew Shipp? Or why couldn't you be anybody?

Shipp: They know they can't be Sun Ra. (laughs) Not that crazy.

Iyer: But I insist that these students of mine really imagine, what's holding you black ... back ... (laughter) There you have it. I meant to say: What's holding you back from engaging with this material, or imagining that you could manifest something of similar scope or depth? Does something make you think that you could never touch that, but instead you can touch this? What about you separates you from this person? We all hold as an ideal everything that Matthew said about pure consciousness, but also there are these barriers that a lot of people can never get rid of.

Shipp: Well, that's the key. What made Monk who he was is that he had no barriers. He was, some people call it crazy. Maybe he had a natural screen that blocked off the world. I think talent is as much a passive as an active thing. It's not just how much you know. It's how much that's not important you can screen out to get to your essential self. Thelonious Monk obviously got to his essential self.

Iyer: People have to realize that they're learning to be an artist, not a tradesperson, because there's no trade left. Are you paying \$50,000 a year so you can play \$50 gigs for the rest of your life? Now it's really whether you have something in you that's dying to get out that will be articulated through this craft.

Let's discuss the challenge of doing what you do in the world of digital reproduction, and the ways your own musical production intersects with technology.

Iyer: Those are different things. The question of technology and the music industry is different from the question of technology and the arts. Music is technology to human aims. Pianos and saxophones are machines. These are interfaces between the human and the non-human, and somehow we find ways to express ourselves through these things. The use of technology in music is a continuation of what's been happening since people banged on rocks.

As to the role of technology in music production—or music proliferation—we're in a period marked by what a friend of mine called "the hyper-inflation of content," where recorded music means less and less. The emphasis is shifting more to live performance, and everything else becomes parasitic to that. This is a nice place to be in as a performing musician. Finally, in a way, it's coming back around to what it always was.

Shipp: The digital thing will play out differently for jazz musicians than in rock or other arenas. Traditionally, jazz musicians established public identities through a series of albums, with cover art and liner notes, and people could relate one album to another. It remains to be seen whether that can happen with MySpace, which scares me. If CDs eventually go completely out of fashion, and we're left with digital downloading, that clearly will be a paradigm shift from the culture of buying albums—getting educated at the record store when the guy who knows you like this Sonny Rollins record tells you to check out Sonny Criss, or whomever.

Blogs and forums serve that purpose in cyber-communities.

Shipp: But you're downloading one tune, which there's a lot to be said for. Maybe I'm just an old fart at 47. The blogs and so on obviously are generating a new culture, but I don't know how actual careers can be generated within that framework.

As the "baby" of the group, Jason, what are your observations?

Moran: I refer to my career as the fairy tale. I did a lot of hard work, but at pivotal points, I received opportunities that other people didn't get, which I've taken advantage of. Whether it was being asked to play in Greg [Osby's] band, and I had a passport, and could go on that European tour, which forged this strong bond with a great saxophone player who was on Blue Note. Then I started recording for them, and then we started working more, and people started writing about me. It bled into, "Here's a record deal," and then the first record, the second record, the third record; then, "we'll continue to let you do whatever you want." I have an idealized version of what your career as a musician can be. The music instills the fuel. If Charles Lloyd calls you for a gig, playing with Charles Lloyd will fuel you for a while, because he can play his ass off. What do you do behind him as a pianist becomes the real question.

You've had calls from Wayne Shorter, Dave Holland, Paul Motian with Chris Potter.

Moran: That's what I mean. It's all a fairy tale to play with people with whom I never imagined I'd get a chance to play. On the other hand, to keep your position, you have to continually go forward. Any old cat I've talked to, whether Jaki Byard, Andrew Hill or Muhal, said, "You'd better keep working; you'd better study, practice, write, constantly challenge yourself." Andrew told me to set myself up financially. He said, "You need to buy a place, and then buy another place outside the city."

If an older cat tells you something that's smart, then heed their advice. Jaki Byard sent me 50 stride tunes. "Hmm! Maybe I should learn this stuff. Maybe I should be able to understand how this is built, and find the freedom within that." Their advice over my years in New York helped me use the Blue Note position to the best of my ability. You might listen to my records and say, "This guy is still doing some silly shit; how do they let him do that?" I don't sell a bunch of records. But they've given me the opportunity to record what I want to record.

Shipp: They think you're going to be historically important. Pat yourself on your back!

I want to talk about the ways your attitude toward creative music intersects with popular culture.

Shipp: Among people in our age group who play, no one grew up just listening to jazz. That's over. Why block out any part of the world we live in? We're all part of a shared pool of language, so just the fact that it exists influences your subconscious mind anyway. There's no divide with any music. There are things I don't like, but I love all forms of music, and I try to learn something from every musician who

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sings their song from their heart, whatever it is—a country song, a hip-hop song, a jazz song.

For example, if someone in the '70s or '80 was addressing the vernacular, they'd most likely be addressing blues or funk. Now, in the '90s, you hear a lot of people covering things by, say, Björk and Radiohead, bands that express a different sensibility, maybe less rhythmic.

Shipp: You mentioned modern jazz musicians who are playing Björk.

Iyer: A lot of them are doing it.

Shipp: Obviously, Radiohead, after Brad Mehldau covered them. During the '90s, when alternative rock labels were recording my circle, and people like Henry Rollins or Thurston Moore from Sonic Youth were publicly coming out that they were big jazz fans, "alternative music" became a big umbrella term that took in many things, from post-punk to kind of free jazz. Sun Ra did concerts with the MC-5; Iggy Pop had Don Cherry on an album. Within that realm of alternative music, people like Björk or Radiohead aren't like traditional rock musicians, and that sensibility does carry over to jazz.

Iyer: In a way, everybody in the West has access to all music at all times. So to say that you're influenced by X or Y doesn't mean anything. To what extent have you engaged with that person or that music to say that? There's this conflation between being an artist and being a consumer. That's not the same thing. Just because you downloaded it or bought a CD doesn't make it you. So-called "engaging with popular culture" has meant collaborating with people who are more in that world than I am. I co-produced Imani Uzuri's record, which is this soul-rock-electronica-theater piece-opus kind of thing, and I've worked with Mike Ladd, and I got to work with Dead Prez. I wanted to see

what would happen. I was interested in these people as people, in what they had to say. The key component is the spark that emanates from that person-to-person interaction.

Shipp: Vijay gave a potent image about everything being available. I'm thinking of an image I got from a book of Monk sitting next to a radio for eight hours straight, changing the stations, soaking in everything. All the information, all the vibrations, all the different genres of music have been available through broadcasting; it isn't just a present phenomenon with downloading on the computer. The great musicians have been open-minded.

In the press section of your web site, Jason, there's an excellent interview where you spoke of wanting to do a collaboration with Ghostface Killah.

Moran: In a lot of jazz-hip-hop collaborations, I've often thought that not enough attention is paid to what actually makes jazz great and what makes hip-hop great. What happens if you extract just those great things and put them together? I thought about Ghostface Killah with solo piano—what does he rap about without these hard drums and this incessant sample? So a couple of weeks ago, at Stone, which Vijay curated, I took some a cappellas of Ghostface. I was like, "I have these, and instead of talking about it, I'm going to do my deed."

I played one of his love songs, and played some Kurt Weill behind it. All of a sudden, I actually had sympathy for what he was talking about, whereas before I didn't really care. At the end, he's like, "I'm on my knees, begging you, please come back to me." It's this terrible love song. I took another song of his called "Run," which is essentially the same topic as the old slave song, "Run, Nigger, Run," and

played the song "Run, Nigger, Run" behind him doing the lyrics. It's all about running away from your overseer—or, nowadays, it's running away from the cops. Then you see how they charge each other politically.

Some people are experimentalists by nature. They have theories about what something might sound like, aren't sure how it will sound in front of people, and aren't afraid of that. But then, there's a lot of talk in jazz about experimentation, but little actually is acted upon. In schools, there's no experimentation class. There's an improvisation class where they tell you what to play, which defeats the purpose of what it is to be a real artist and to be a real musician.

Could each of you speak to the roles that narrative and the blues, whether the blues-as-such or a blues sensibility, factor into what you do?

Shipp: Narrative has everything to do with what I do, however you define it. As a teenager, I had an intense subconscious relationship with Sun Ra. I met up with him in some astral realms and got some instructions about who I would become. So Sun Ra was a big influence in how I see my role on earth, and I paint my narrative essentially as a universal musician. The soul knows no race. The soul is pure electromagnetism, an invisible essence. But as far as my blueprint on this planet at this time, I definitely am an African-American musician who partakes of that continuum.

My mentality is similar to that of Sun Ra or the Art Ensemble—Great Black Music, and, as in Sun Ra, with a look to the future and a look to outer space. Outer space means outer psychic space. I don't plan on boarding Apollo 18 and going to Jupiter or something. But I explore psychological and spiritual realms on the piano, and

I'm carving out my own niche within it.

Moran: As a late teenager or in my early 20s, I didn't believe any of that when I heard musicians talk about telling a story. But I've grown up a bit. I spoke earlier on what defines me, or what makes me real. I also wonder what chords and what sounds make me real. Does my band also make me real? Which songs do we play that really tell our narrative? Looking at songs, even song titles or song composers, expresses where I am, or who I am. James Weldon Johnson tells me who I am. Albert King tells me who I am.

I have my own mythology about what blues represents, because I grew up in the South, and some of my relatives played with Albert King. Something about blues musicians using words to tell a story—down-and-out, happy, sad, etc. All the range. About drinking or a big-legged woman. What is a “big-legged-woman” chord? What is a “big-legged-woman” groove? Then, how do you sum up love? I get in touch with the narratives that Duke Ellington made about Harlem and that Louis Armstrong made about New Orleans, and how they could say this without any words, and then that frustrates me, because I don't know if I am able to be as clear as they were compositionally or tone-wise. So I have relied on some techniques of sampling people's voices to say the things that I don't think the audience wants to hear me say personally.

There's a great interview with Monk and Hall Overton from the New School, where Hall Overton asks Monk, “Can you tell me about some of your compositions?” Monk has explained some things up to this point, so it isn't that he's not being verbal. But he says, “Rather than say it, can I just play it?” Hall is like, “No, say it. Talk about it.” Monk says, “I want to make music that is good for me to play, and I want my audience to enjoy it, and I don't want any criticism from the other musicians.” That sets up this place where we sit in current jazz piano, a place where you are able to tell these narratives, which are your personal ones. Somebody might say they're open for criticism, but it's open more for discussion. It's trying to find that place where you can tell your story freely. Black people weren't able to tell their story here, and some are still coming to grips with how to tell that story.

Iyer: Narrativity and identity are sides of the same coin. Stories come out of the fact of who you are, which is emblemized by what you do. So when I choose to engage with the history of jazz piano, or the song “Imagine,” or a Bud Powell song, or “Hey Joe,” these create juxtapositions that radiate in a certain way because of what some might perceive as a dissonance. “What does he have to do with that? What's that relationship?” The same thing happens when you title a song. You can't force a narrative, but you can create a situation that invites the audience to reconsider their relationship to you, or the song, or whatever. That's happened so much in the jazz tradition. For example, Monk radically reworked songs like “I Should

Care” or “Carolina Moon.” It is that song, but at the same time something very different. That conjures up these stories in an articulate way that words can't.

With the blues, the same question arises, because one might ask, “What does he have to do with the blues?” That's an interesting question. I spent years working with Amiri Baraka's band. We'd play, and he'd do his poetry, which was incredible. One of his deepest poems he called “Why Is We Americans?” That is what the blues is. It emerged from this moment in time where individuals were reflecting on this

new predicament, like, “We're not slaves, but what are we? Why is we Americans?” That still echoes today. The question hasn't gone away. You could even take away the “why?” Now it could be “Is we Americans?” If you look at New Orleans, that's a good question. But that dynamic resonates now throughout the entire hybrid landscape of this culture. My new album is called *Tragicomic*, which is a term Cornell West uses to talk about the blues. We're at a tragicomic moment in history, and in American history in particular, where you have to ask yourself that question: Why is we Americans? **DB**



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