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RECLAIMING JOY BY SINGING ABOUT SADNESS:  
EXPLORING FEMINISM, FRIENDSHIP, AND RELIGION IN THE MUSIC OF  
BOYGENIUS

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**Abstract:** This philosophical text explores the profound thematic and emotional depths of boygenius' music, composed of Lucy Dacus, Julien Baker, and Phoebe Bridgers. Through an analysis of joy, inspiration, feminism, friendship, and religion in their songs, the text unveils a tapestry of intellectual depth and emotional honesty that resonates deeply with their audience. Highlighting the band's unique blend of joy and melancholy, the analysis reveals how their music turns personal suffering into collective catharsis, offering listeners a transformative experience. The ethereal qualities of their compositions, enriched by diverse inspirations, feminist perspectives, and intimate bonds, create a profound connection with fans, illustrating the enduring power of friendship and teamwork in their collaborative spirit. Ultimately, boygenius emerges not only as a musical force but as a philosophical touchstone, inviting listeners to explore the complexities of human emotion and societal reflection through their evocative melodies and lyrical narratives.

**Key Words:** boygenius, philosophy of music, joy, Deleuze, sadness, spirituality, religion

## 1. Intro

“I’m twenty-seven and I don’t know who I am”

*Emily, I’m Sorry*

The music of boygenius—a „supergroup” comprised of Lucy Dacus, Julien Baker, and Phoebe Bridgers—beautifully intertwines serious thematic explorations with ethereal musical qualities, creating a profound connection with their fans. Their songs delve into complex emotions and societal issues, presenting a tapestry that resonates deeply with listeners, the key words of which can be explored in Figure 1, and the recurrent topics in Figure 2. The band's work is marked by its emotional honesty, intellectual depth, and a unique blend of joy and melancholy, all while maintaining a strong sense of relatedness to their audience. By examining their approach to joy, inspiration, feminism, friendship, and religion, we can appreciate the multifaceted artistry that makes boygenius a compelling force in contemporary music.



Figure 1. Wordcloud created by manual insertion of all the band's original lyrics into a wordcloud tool

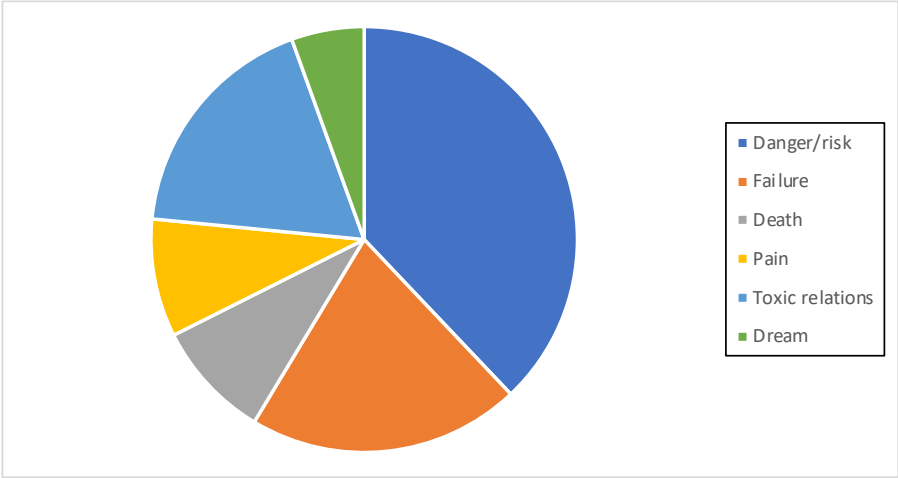


Figure 2. Recurrent topics in the lyrics of Boygenius

Source: personal processing of the author

## 2. Verse

„It feels good to be known so well”

*True Blue*

The difference between joy and happiness is deeply explored in the work of Strasser and Summa. They argue that “joy is felt while we experience the accomplishment of a process, whereas happiness, as an emotional experience based on evaluation, only comes at the end of a process” (Strasser in Summa 2020). Joy accompanies the process through and through, being tightly bound to the present moment, while happiness occurs strictly at the moment of achievement, presupposing an evaluative stance concerning one’s life as a whole (Summa 2020). This distinction is crucial, as it suggests that joy is an ongoing, present experience, whereas happiness is a retrospective evaluation of a process’s success.

Lucy Dacus of boygenius embodies this philosophy in her personal and artistic life. She emphasizes the importance of joy over being pigeonholed into sadness or depression, seeking the most joy for herself and those she loves (Dacus in Martoccio 2023). Julien Baker echoes this sentiment, describing joy as the “living amends that you do for your community as a performer” (Baker in McNemanin 2023). For boygenius, joy is not derived from perfection but from the radical resistance found in community and the collective experience of making music (Quinn 2023). This approach transforms the mundane and the detours of life into valuable experiences, reshaping time and purpose beyond capitalist constraints (Graves 2023).

Deleuze’s concept of joy hinges on the fulfillment of capacities, where joy emerges from the satisfaction of inherent potentials and capabilities.

Contrarily, sadness arises from the thwarting or separation from these capacities. This view underscores an ethical dimension: Deleuze posits that preventing individuals from enacting their capacities constitutes a form of evil, suggesting that all capacities themselves are morally neutral. He complicates this by acknowledging that power, often associated with joy when capacities are realized, can also carry a burden of sadness, especially when it overwhelms or suppresses individuals, as exemplified in cases like Van Gogh's tumultuous life. Overall, joy for Deleuze is not just personal satisfaction but the profound fulfillment derived from the active realization of one's potentials, amid a complex interplay of power dynamics and ethical considerations: "To rejoice is to rejoice in being what one is, that is, in having reached the point where one is. It's not self-satisfaction, joy is not being pleased with oneself, not at all, it's not the pleasure of being pleased with oneself. Rather, it's the pleasure of conquest, as Nietzsche said, but the conquest does not consist in subjecting people, the conquest is for example for a painters to conquer color." (Deleuze, Parnet, 1998/1999; Agent Swarm, 2013)

The music of boygenius reflects their commitment to exploring deep emotional landscapes and connecting with their audience through vulnerability and honesty. Their songs, described as "blazing with feeling" (Joshi 2023), tackle existential crises, relational dynamics, and the paradoxes of love (Amen 2023). This profound emotional connection is evident in their ability to turn personal suffering into a collective experience of joy, resonating deeply with their listeners. As Willie James Jennings envisioned, joy can be an act of resistance against despair, cultivated even in the midst of suffering (Quinn 2023). boygenius, through their intimate and powerful songwriting, exemplifies this transformative potential of joy, making it a cornerstone of their artistic and communal ethos. To give the readers a visual representation of the way their music expresses a variety of moods and emotions, Figure 3 captures them.

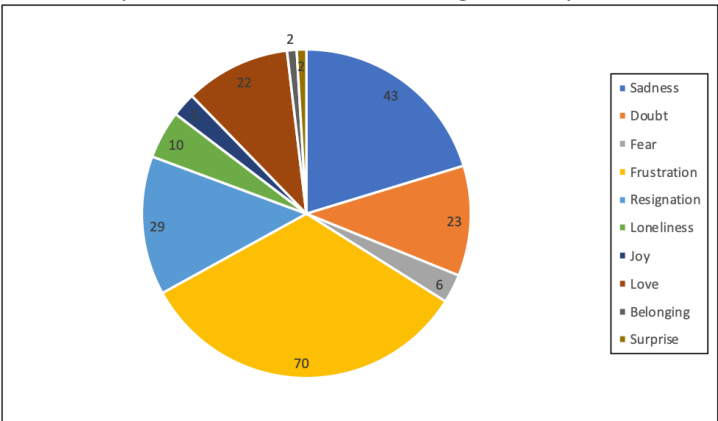


Figure 3. Emotions and attitudes in the lyrics of Boygenius

Source: personal processing of the author

### 3. Pre-Chorus

„It’s a bad idea and I’m all about it”  
\$20

boygenius draws on a diverse array of influences that give their music a unique and resonant quality. Their cover of *The Rolling Stone* replicates the magazine’s January 1994 Nirvana cover, reflecting their deep sense of indebtedness to barrier-breaking predecessors (Figure 4).

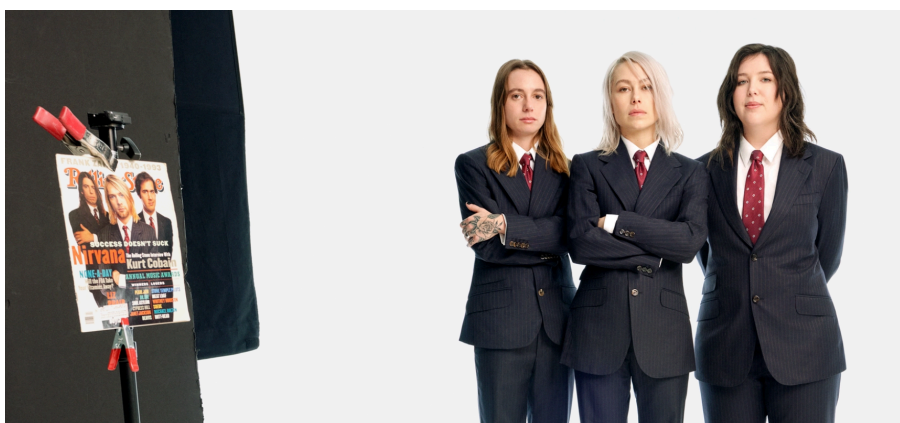


Figure 4. Photoshoot at *The Rolling Stone*, replicating the pose of “Nirvana”

Source: <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/boygenius-julien-baker-phoebe-bridgers-lucy-dacus-the-record-interview-1234660514/>

This homage extends to their lyrics, where they reference figures like Joan Didion and Sheryl Crow, and authors such as Octavia Butler, Mary Oliver, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Frank Herbert, who inspire them with their themes of radical change and the urgency of preserving what remains in the world (McNemanin 2023). The eclectic influences in their music are apparent in tracks like “Revolution 0,” which features a Sgt. Pepper-like locked groove at the end of “Letters to Poet” and in the album’s title, “The Record,” drawing a parallel to the Beatles but with a distinct twist (Quinn 2023).

Julien Baker’s near-drowning incident during a Malibu writing trip inspired “Anti-Curse,” a song that incorporates references to other boygenius tracks, like “Salt in the Wound” and Bridgers’ “Savior Complex,” and tops off with Bridgers’ favorite Joan Didion quote: “Was anyone ever so young?” (Martocchio 2023). “Anti-Curse” delves into a poignant reflection inspired by a real incident where the author nearly drowned at a

public beach. The poem captures the profound experience of being out of one's depth, both physically and metaphorically, as waves shoot through the mind like a pinball. The vivid imagery of salt in the lungs and the struggle for breath conveys a sense of vulnerability and acceptance of mortality. The narrative unfolds with a mix of introspection and humor, exploring themes of friendship, self-awareness, and the inevitability of death: „There we were/ Was anyone ever so young? Breaking curfew with illegal fireworks/Unpacking God in the suburbs”

The speaker swims back, symbolizing a return to self after a brush with mortality, and contemplates the power of words as both an anti-curse and a blessing. The poem becomes a deeply personal exploration of resilience and the transformative nature of near-death experiences.

Their song “Not Strong Enough” builds on a line from Sheryl Crow's “Strong Enough” and showcases Bridgers’ phase of being inspired by Frank Black. Bridgers explains the song’s theme as a struggle with self-perception and the conflicting feelings of inadequacy and self-importance (Martoccio 2023). In “Not Strong Enough,” a black hole opens in the kitchen, symbolizing a sense of chaos. The speaker reflects on their inadequacy, both in relationships and in dealing with personal struggles. The repeated refrain “Always an angel, never a god” suggests a perpetual sense of falling short, and the poem concludes with a contemplation on home and solitude. The lyrics encapsulate themes of emotional complexity, longing, and a struggle with personal limitations.

The album includes playful and serious elements alike, from the nod to the Beatles conspiracy theory in “Revolution 0” to the deep emotional narratives in songs like “Emily I’m Sorry” and “Letter to an Old Poet.”

“Emily I'm Sorry” delves into a tumultuous emotional landscape, narrating a journey marked by dreams, contradictions, and the need for forgiveness. The opening scene of Emily asleep in the backseat, seemingly peaceful but haunted by a dream of danger, sets a tone of internal conflict. The speaker's admission of making things up as they go along suggests a lack of control or certainty, yet there's a vulnerability in the acknowledgment of becoming someone only Emily could desire. The imagery of heading straight for concrete in a nightmare and the desire to return to Montréal for a fresh start convey a sense of urgency and a search for meaning. The repeated apologies to Emily, acknowledging a tendency to go astray, highlight a sincere remorse and a desire for reconciliation: “Emily (Emily), I'm sorry, baby/ You know how I get when I'm wrong (You know how I get)/ And I can feel myself becoming (I can feel)/ Somebody I'm not, I'm not, so”. The speaker grapples with identity, admitting uncertainty at twenty-seven, yet expressing clarity about desires.

“Letter To An Old Poet” explores a complex relationship, where expressions of love coexist with harsh realities and a sense of superiority.

The speaker's acknowledgment of the other's specialness is met with a rebuke of selfishness. The dynamic unfolds with moments of tenderness, including a kiss in the dark, and juxtaposes them with harsh critiques and a claim of superiority. The speaker's ambivalence towards the other's pain, exemplified by an indifferent reaction to a fall down the stairs, adds layers to the emotional landscape: „But you're not special, you're evil/ You don't get to tell me to calm down/ You make me feel like an equal/ But I'm better than you and you should know that by now”

The poem concludes with a declaration of readiness to move on and find happiness, symbolized by walking into a room without searching for the other person and contemplating the full moon with memories of a dog. The sense of waiting for a change adds a poignant note to the overall narrative.

Their closing track, a tribute to “Me & My Dog,” addresses anxiety and the journey towards healing, shifting from a desire to escape reality to finding contentment and peace (Werner 2023). “Me & My Dog” portrays a relationship's shared moments and vulnerabilities, with the couple finding solace despite disruptions. The transformative impact of the relationship is evident in moments of comfort and embarrassment. The poem reflects the speaker's struggle to maintain composure and the belief in the transient nature of challenges. Expressing a desire for simplicity and escape, the reference to a spaceship journey with only the speaker and their dog suggests a longing for a less complex existence. The poem ends with a dream that leaves the interpretation open-ended, capturing the emotional nuances of intimacy, vulnerability, and the yearning for simplicity: „I wanna be emaciated/ I wanna hear one song without thinking of you/ I wish I was on a spaceship/ Just me and my dog and an impossible view”

boygenius' ability to translate their varied inspirations into their music creates a rich, relatable continuum that resonates deeply with their fans.

#### **4. Chorus**

„I didn't wanna be this guy”  
*Me and My Dog*

boygenius actively engages with feminist and activist themes, subverting traditional gender roles and expectations in rock music. Their album “The Record” challenges the stereotype of “sad girl music” and “male angst,” signaling that “the gendered lanes of rock have been torn up and that new, more expansive roads are possible” (Quinn 2023). The band name itself is a critique of overconfident men who receive undue praise, as they aim to be treated like their male counterparts in the industry (Martoccio 2023). The production of “The Record” involved many women,

reflecting their commitment to equality and collaboration. Each member, identifying as queer, contributes equally to the creative process, with no single frontwoman, ensuring everyone's ideas are valued (Martoccio 2023). They express frustration over the emphasis on their gender and reject virtue signaling, wanting their work to be recognized for its artistic merit rather than extraneous identifiers (Martoccio 2023).

boygenius crafts songs that delve into internalized notions of masculinity, seamlessly blending earnest quotes like “And I am not an old man having an existential crisis at a Buddhist monastery writing horny poetry” from their track “Leonard Cohen” with the ability to gently roast those same figures in the next line, showcasing their unique blend of sincerity and wit (Joshi 2023; Martoccio 2023). “Leonard Cohen” narrates a quirky incident on an on-ramp, where a serious request to listen to a song leads to driving the wrong way on the interstate. The shared embarrassment becomes an opportunity for the two to exchange personal stories, revealing vulnerabilities:

„Leonard Cohen once said, “There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.”/ And I am not an old man having an existential crisis/ At a Buddhist monastery writing horny poetry/ But I agree/ I never thought you'd happen to me/ I never thought you'd happen to me”

The reference to Leonard Cohen's quote about cracks allowing light in adds depth, suggesting that knowing each other's flaws doesn't diminish the connection. The poem concludes with a reflection on unexpected love, echoing Cohen's sentiment about the transformative power of imperfections.

boygenius is also vocal about broader social issues, from abortion rights to trans rights and anti-colonialism, using their platform to advocate for change. Their songwriting often reflects their activism, merging joy and rage, and tackling themes of dissatisfaction and desire (McNemanin 2023). Bridgers, for instance, has publicly condemned the Supreme Court, calling its judges “irrelevant old men who are trying to tell us what we should do with our bodies” (Dumler 2023). The band's provocations include performing in drag in conservative areas like Tennessee as a protest against anti-drag laws (Dumler 2023). They are aware of their privileges as middle-class, white, and increasingly famous artists, mindful not to become “tourists in other people's oppression” (Irish Times 2023). Their activism and music resonate with a generation, articulating complex emotions and pushing for a more inclusive and equitable world.

## 5. Verse

„If you rewrite your life, may I still play a part?”  
*We're In Love*



The bond between the members of boygenius transcends traditional definitions of friendship, evolving into a form of intimate collaboration that defies categorization. Their song “True Blue” showcases visual displays of intimacy, mutual communion, and sensuality, illustrating the radical nature of their connection. “True Blue” tells a vibrant story of a relationship's evolution, from a desire to feel alive on the beach to the transformative move to Chicago. The narrative captures the intimacy of being known well, overcoming conflicts, and finding self-identity in the presence of the other person. The refrain emphasizes the enduring, tough, and “true blue” nature of their love. Overall, the song beautifully explores the complexities of connection, from shared experiences and hurts to a comforting acceptance that withstands the passage of time. This relationship goes beyond mere friendship or siblinghood, embodying something transcendent and hard to describe—something that is uniquely boygenius (Quinn 2023). This deep bond is captured in lyrics like “If you rewrite your life, may I still play a part?” which speaks to the intimate connection that ties this group together (Quinn 2023).

To give the readers an idea about the richness of topics and concepts from their songs, see Figure 5.

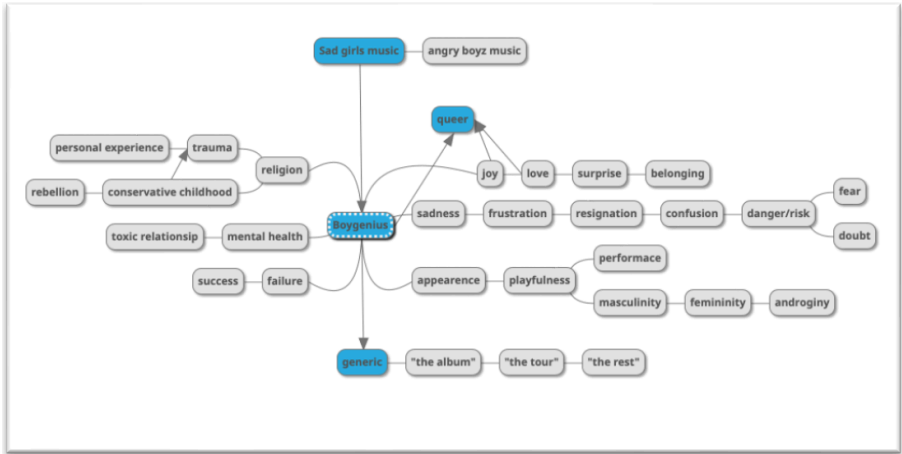


Figure 5. Mind map with the topics and concepts from boygenius songs

Source: built by the author using Mindmap.com,

<https://atlas.mindmap.com/2023/11/099d3480856611e0aa7ea96bb7329e88/boygenius/index.html>

The song “We’re In Love” takes a more introspective turn, expressing vulnerability and the recognition that love has the power to break hearts: „You could absolutely break my heart/That’s how I know that we’re in love/ I don’t need the symbol of a scar/ So put down the knife We’re not swapping blood”

The rejection of symbolic scars and the emphasis on stripped-down vulnerability suggest a genuine connection beyond superficialities. The narrative unfolds with a mixture of self-awareness and uncertainty about one's mental state. The final verses reveal a vision of the future, expressing a desire for continuity in a changing world and a hope to be remembered in small, meaningful details. The poem captures the complexity of love, intertwining moments of introspection, insecurity, and the enduring recognition of shared experiences.

The project of boygenius is a testimony to the power of enduring friendship and teamwork. Democratically curated and effusing palpable enthusiasm, their collaboration stands as a beacon of aesthetic commonality and mutual support, reflecting the magic of working together harmoniously (Amen 2023). The deep adoration Bridgers and Dacus have for Baker is evident, with each releasing songs rumored to be dedicated to their close friend, further highlighting the profound personal connections that underpin their music (Ly 2023). This collective spirit and profound friendship not only define their music but also serve as a powerful example of the transformative potential of genuine, collaborative relationships.

## 6. Bridge

„Always an angel, never a god”  
*Not Strong Enough*

Lucy Dacus, adopted and raised devoutly Christian in Richmond, Virginia, attended church four times a week. She reflects on her upbringing through her music, particularly in her album “Home Video,” which is described as “a richly literate queer coming-of-age narrative within Southern evangelical culture” (Quinn 2023). Dacus openly discusses her departure from organized religion, stating, “I don't go to church. I think about God, whatever that is; I think about all the same questions that people are asking in church” (Wood 2021). This exploration of faith is shared with her bandmates. Julien Baker, also from the South, grew up in a conservative religious environment in Tennessee. Her faith, a central theme in her life and music, has evolved over the years, marked by a gradual detachment from traditional liturgy and practice (Peirson-Hagger 2021). The bond over their Southern, religiously rooted backgrounds is a significant aspect of Dacus and Baker's relationship, reflecting their shared experiences of navigating queerness within these confines (Martoccio 2023; McNemanin 2023).

The themes of faith, death, trust, and relationships are prevalent in their music, posing important questions and exploring profound personal and existential topics (McNemanin 2023). Julien Baker credits artists like

Sinead O'Connor for broadening her understanding of belief systems beyond her evangelical upbringing, recounting her childhood confusion and curiosity sparked by O'Connor's controversial act of ripping up a picture of the Pope (Irish Times 2023). The members of boygenius frequently engage with and reinterpret religious imagery and concepts, such as Dacus' interest in tarot readings and her proclamation of "having revelations," which underscores her role in interpreting collective experiences (Quinn 2023). Their work delves into the complexities of reclaiming and redefining religion on their own terms, as highlighted in songs like "Satanist" (Werner 2023).

"Satanist" playfully explores unconventional themes, asking the listener to embrace satanism, anarchism, and nihilism as alternative lifestyles: „Will you be a satanist with me?/Mortgage off your soul to buy your dream/ Vacation home in Florida:/ The collateral the devil's repossessing from me/ Trying to score some off-brand ecstasy"

The lyrics humorously depict the absurdity of mortgaging one's soul for materialistic dreams and engaging in rebellious acts. The poem transitions from satanism to nihilism, finding a sense of relief in the idea that if nothing matters, then stupidity is holy. The verses convey a mix of satire and existential reflection.

Through their music, they navigate the intricate interplay between their evolving beliefs and their identities, offering a nuanced and personal perspective on faith and spirituality.

## **7. Outro**

„Who would I be without you, without them?"

*Without You Without Them*

In boygenius' music, the exploration of joy and happiness is not just an academic exercise but a lived experience. Strasser and Summa's distinction between joy and happiness—joy being a present, ongoing experience and happiness a retrospective evaluation—finds a vivid illustration in their songs. Lucy Dacus' emphasis on joy and Julien Baker's view of joy as a community act underline the band's commitment to this emotional philosophy. Their music, described as "blazing with feeling," turns personal suffering into collective joy, offering a transformative experience that resonates with their audience.

The ethereal qualities of boygenius' music, enriched by diverse inspirations, feminist themes, and a profound sense of friendship, create a deep connection with their fans. Their collaborative spirit and intimate bonds are not only reflected in their songs but also serve as a testament to the power of enduring friendship and teamwork. This profound personal connection, combined with their activism and intellectual depth, ensures

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that their music remains a powerful, relatable force for their listeners. By navigating themes of joy, sorrow, love, and social justice, boygenius has crafted a unique musical identity that resonates deeply with those who engage with their art.

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