

Harry L. Alford:

An Arranger's Story

by Rick Benjamin

Undoubtedly the most under-appreciated link in the musical chain between the composer's brain and the listener's ear is that elusive musician called "the arranger." Most people have heard the term, yet few have more than a vague idea what it means. Basically, an arranger's job is to take an unfinished musical idea — usually a simple melody line — and create from it an artistically satisfying and commercially valuable written score. It is a highly skilled art, requiring a thorough knowledge of harmony, counterpoint, and the technical possibilities (and limitations) of whatever instruments are required. This work must be done while preserving and enhancing the spirit or intent of the original musical idea. And since an arranger must add a considerable number of his own creative ideas to a score, he should by necessity also be an excellent composer. Arranging then, is a very demanding activity. Yet, historically, there has been little limelight for these musical practitioners.

Harry LaForest Alford (1875-1939) was for many years one of America's best and busiest arrangers. Based in Chicago, Alford was the first to create his own large scale freelance "arranging bureau," a revolutionary idea, since at that time (1903) arranging was considered to be, at best, a mere sideline

for under-employed bandmasters or orchestra leaders. He was actually laughed at when, arriving in Chicago, he announced that he intended to make a living exclusively by arranging. However, this ridicule quickly subsided when Alford landed jobs orchestrating the pit-orchestra music for the famous vaudeville comedienne Eva Tanguay (the "I Don't Care Girl"), and notated the songs of balladeer Carrie Jacobs-Bond (whose "I Love You Truly" is still a wedding favorite). Harry Alford elevated the arranger's role from that of a drudging technician to that of a creative artist; his ingenious and quirky arrangements soon made a sensation. Within a few years, just about everyone in the entertainment business wanted their music scored by him. Business boomed, and between 1904 and 1924, his studio turned out over 34,000 separate arrangements! To a generation of professional musicians, the phrase "Arr. by Harry L. Alford" appearing (in small type, of course) on the upper right hand corner of a sheet of music was the hallmark of top quality.

Alford was as versatile as he was prolific. He arranged with equal skill music for jazz bands, ragtime groups, theater and dance orchestras, barbershop quartets, concert bands, and even for drum and bugle corps. Unfortunately, most of his work, created as ephemera, has been lost over the



Harry L. Alford, ca. 1925. (Author's collection)

years, but what survives is a testimonial to his tremendous musicianship. He was noted for his use of unusual harmonies, as well as for his whimsical use of instruments. His work did much to expand the musical vocabulary of the slide trombone (Alford's own instrument) and the drum set (his favorite). Alford's skillful contributions certainly had much to do

fice and at last the big, airy, light copying room — where there are seated, busily at work at rows of desks, an able and schooled body of arrangers and copyists. To these offices come the 'people' from the concert halls, opera, chautauquas, vaudeville and movie houses, as well as the 'composer,' to have their arrangements made. Everybody seems to know Alford.

BULLETIN

THE SHARPS and FLATS THE

"A most important contribution to the literature of American ragtime music."

Magnetic Rag.

Syncopations Classiques. Scott Joplin.
arr. by Harry L. Alford.

1st Violin.

Allitto ma non troppo. div.

Copyright MCMXIV by Scott Joplin.

Copyright assigned MCMXVII to Winn School of Popular Music, 155 W. 125th St. N.Y.
Publishers of Winn Method of Popular Music and Ragtime Piano Playing.

1st violin and leader's part to Alford's 1917 orchestration of "Magnetic Rag." Notice the inventive counter-melody in the second section, as indicated by the small "cue" notes. (Author's collection)

DID YOU EVER SEE OR HEAR OF AN OFFICE OF THIS KIND BEFORE?

An Entire Floor of a Centrally Located City Building
Devoted to Arranging, Copying and
Transposing Music.

THIS is the day of specialists. In the music world but few of the popular composers arrange their own melodies; they are Specialists in melody writing and prefer to entrust the orchestration and harmonization of their productions to people who have made a life study of these branches—in other words, who are Specialists in arranging.

Owing to the strong competition in the music publishing business it is necessary to have the best possible arrangements procurable for every number placed on the market, as live leaders will no longer waste their time on mediocre orchestrations and it stands to reason that really high grade work can only be obtained from men with original ideas, a thorough knowledge of the capabilities of the various instruments, and who have had years of practical experience.

This is the reason that this establishment has met with such success. Among the arrangers regularly employed here are several whose names are familiar to every musician in the country as experts in the various branches of this work, and the fact that we number among our regular patrons many of the leading vaudeville stars, the most successful publishers and many of the popular composers, several of whom are no mean arrangers themselves, is sufficient evidence of the quality of our work.

SPECIAL MUSIC PAPER

We use a vast quantity of music paper in this office and finding it impossible to obtain a stock of the proper texture and durability, decided to have a special paper made for us. After considerable experimenting, we succeeded in producing what we consider a perfect music paper, and having had many calls for it from persons using manuscripts from this office, decided to share our good fortune with our brother musicians.

That is how the Universal Music Paper came to be placed on the market. It is an extra heavy paper with just the proper surface for music writing, but on account of the large quantity we use ourselves we are able to offer it at a remarkably reasonable figure. Compare these prices with what you have been paying.

12 Staves, size 9x12, quire 40c. prepaid.

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Order from nearest dealer or send direct.

This 1914 advertisement for the services of the Harry L. Alford Studios was printed on the back of stock orchestrations. (Author's collection)

Amer's best and busiest arrange based in Chicago, Alford was the first to create his own large scale freelance "arranging bureau," a revolutionary idea, since at that time (1903) arranging was considered to be, at best, a mere sideline

prolific. He arranged with equal skill music for jazz bands, ragtime groups, theater and dance orchestras, barbershop quartets, concert bands, and even for drum and bugle corps. Unfortunately, most of his work, created as ephemera, has been lost over the

years, but what survives is a testimonial to his tremendous musicianship. He was noted for his use of unusual harmonies, as well as for his whimsical use of instruments. His work did much to expand the musical vocabulary of the slide trombone (Alford's own instrument) and the drum set (his favorite). Alford's skillful contributions certainly had much to do with the success of many a hit song, including "Some of These Days" (1910), "Melancholy Baby" (1912), "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" (1910), "I Ain't Got Nobody" (1916), "The Darktown Strutter's Ball" (1916), "It Had to Be You" (1924), and "Down By the Old Mill Stream" (1910), to mention but a few.

By 1910 Alford's Chicago studio was a major operation, employing a large staff of assistant arrangers, copyists, clerks, and secretaries (a number of Alford assistants, notably Carleton L. Coby, Ted Ruhl, Fred K. Huffer, and Horace O. Prell, eventually left the company to become successful arrangers in their own right). Every employee was required to be proficient on some band or orchestra instrument, and for a time it was the firm's policy to test each new orchestration by having it performed by the entire office staff before shipment!

Within another ten years, the Harry L. Alford Studios occupied the entire sixth floor of the new State-Lake Theater Building in downtown Chicago. It was the world's largest business "Devoted Entirely to Arranging, Copying, and Transposing Music," and a popular hang-out for musicians and entertainers passing through town. It must have been a quite an exciting place, as described by H.A. Vandercook in the March 1921 issue of the Musical Messenger magazine (Vol. XVII, No. 3): "It is an interesting visit to one who enters the splendid suite of rooms in the big theater building that Harry Alford now occupies. Here are the outer offices, the 'Information' desk, the parlors and the sound-proof trial rooms. Then Alford's private of-

fice and at last the big, airy, light copying room — where there are seated, busily at work at rows of desks, an able and schooled body of arrangers and copyists. To these offices come the people from the concert halls, opera, chautauquas, vaudeville and movie houses, as well as the 'composer,' to have their arrangements made. Everybody seems to know Alford. Everybody seems to call him 'Harry.'"

His clients were among the "who's who" of popular music: ragtime composers Scott Joplin, Charles L. Johnson, Percy Wenrich, and Joe Jordan; bluesmen W.C. Handy and Euday L. Bowman; bandmasters John Philip Sousa, Arthur Pryor, Patrick Conway; Ringling Bros. band leader Merle Evans; early jazz/novelty music figures such as Earl Fuller, Wilbur Sweatman, J. Russel Robinson, and Roy Bargy; and songwriters Irving Berlin, Shelton Brooks, Chris Smith, Abe Olman, Leo Friedman, Fred Fischer, and Harry Carrol.

Since he remained a freelancer throughout his career, Alford's work was issued by a plethora of publishing companies, from one-song outfits (like the Cecil C. Nixon Music Co. of Whitefish, Montana), to the the major league firms; the catalogs of Jerome Remick, Will Rossiter, Melrose Bros., Leo Feist, F.J.A. Forster, Sam Fox, Carl Fischer, and Waterston, Berlin & Snyder all contained Alford arrangements. In 1913 he even began his own publishing venture, the Alford-Colby Music Library (renamed the Harry L. Alford Publishing Co., Inc. in the 1930s), which issued some of Alford's original numbers, as well as those of a few his employees.

But Harry L. Alford did not devote all of his time preparing music for publication. During his career he was more noted as a composer of original musical accompaniments for vaudeville artists. He had hundreds, perhaps thousands of clients, ranging from the illustrious (like Eva Tanguay or Sophie Tucker) to the obscure

BULLETIN

SHARPS and FLATS

FROM HARRY L. ALFORD'S GREAT ARRANGING OFFICES

Vol. 1 CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, APRIL, 1923 No. 2

SHARPS and FLATS

HARRY L. ALFORD
120 North State Street, Chicago, Illinois

SMALL PUBLISHER PUTS OVER WINNER

Popularizes Rejected Song and Then Lets It With Big New York Firm

USES ALFORD ARRANGEMENTS

Being unable to place his number with the latter publisher in whom it was offered proved to be only the first step to success in the case of "Vernonia" an auto-orchestrated waltz written by Edwin Tolman, of Milwaukee, and now being published and featured by Irving Berlin, Inc., of New York.

Having written "Vernonia" and unable to place it, the publisher of the magazine in which it was published, Mr. Tolman decided to back his composition in all with the movement necessary to proper exploitation. Realizing that without an adequate and usually correct arrangement of his song the best chance he had to make a serious attempt to break into the market, the composer took advantage of the facilities and large experience of the Alford office to obtain the most effective and modern arrangements that could be made.

It was realized to offer his own composition in a form that would create the most favorable impression possible. Mr. Tolman polished the song and orchestrations in thoroughly attractive form and began the local exploitation of his waltz locally. He promoted it nationally through advertising in the different musical magazines, and in the various leading vaudeville organizations. He then having the number, such as it was, made a record for the big name publishers and sent it up and take notice. The first record made was a success and the record for the first time in its history has made a 1923 week end record and a glowing tremendous national revenue as a result of the record.

Not only has "Vernonia" made an established record in the record business, but it has also made a record in the vaudeville business. It has been featured in the most popular vaudeville acts in the country, and it has been featured in the most popular vaudeville acts in the country, and it has been featured in the most popular vaudeville acts in the country.

It is a fact that the record business has never before seen a waltz that has made such a record in the record business, and it is a fact that the vaudeville business has never before seen a waltz that has made such a record in the vaudeville business.

BIG FELLOWS FEATURE SYMPHONICS

Famous Recording and Dance Orchestras Demand Exclusive High-Class Arrangements
PUBLIC IS ENTHUSIASTIC OVER NOVEL EFFECTS

The popular demand for better dance music in the large hotels, clubs and amusement gardens has led not only to the engagement of higher-priced orchestras who have set a high standard of good music, but indirectly has created an entirely new art form, the "Symphonic" dance arrangement, which is sweeping the entire world. A song poem in four-foot time may be artistic and complete as a Strauss waltz, and as far above the popular dance tunes of a few years ago as Hamlet is above the comic supplement of a Sunday paper.

The taste of the public is improving. People are no longer satisfied with mere "tunes." They will want "novelty," but it has to be embellished with harmony and constantly shifting time color. In other words, the public wants good music—real music—to dance to, just as much as in the theatre or in church.

To supply the demand with what they want in the great modern of modern high-class orchestras, they must have special arrangements made by specialists in their exclusive property, since they will not have these competitors using the same material.

Some of the best of these arrangements are made, and new sets come to the hotel or garden where they play, because the musician arranger knows what the public wants, and they are first in their vicinity with new ideas and effects. They want something exclusive instead of the regular printed orchestration.

Did it ever occur to you where these well-known orchestras who play for the big phonograph companies get the startlingly clever and original arrangements that you hear on the records? Are they happy accidents, or are they built up by some one who knows, just as a novel writer or creator of a feature film is built up? It is exclusive material that has broken the records for dance music's salaried,

and made fortunes for certain hotel and garden management—special orchestras made by a lot of extra talent to play.

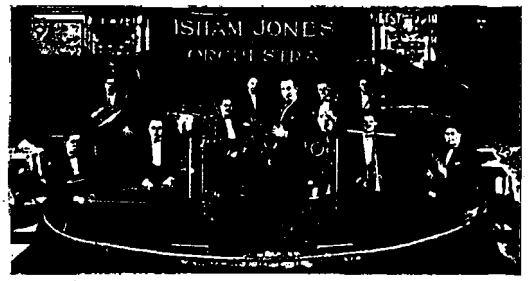
These arrangements are based on themes from the old masters, on folk-songs and ballads, and, in some instances, are built around original melodies. They are popular music in the broadest sense, just as Mendelssohn's popular music—melodies appeal to everybody. They are good music in the sense that they are constructed by writers with the long training and natural ability to evolve an orchestral rhapsody on a given theme in a musicianly manner, intelligible with smooth-flowing counterpoint and a suggestion of the rich harmonic dress of modern symphonic writing, but still with the practical understanding of the necessity for the well-orchestrated dance rhythm.

The managers of the great metropolitan hotels, many of whom consider music for the entertainment of their guests as important as Cuisine and Service, are beginning to realize that even an elaborate orchestra is not enough to give their guests the best of the best.

They have been building these symphonic arrangements for the past several years for most of the more successful hotel orchestras, such as the Sherman Hotel, Chicago; the Hotel Chase, St. Louis; the Wisconsin Hotel, Milwaukee, etc.

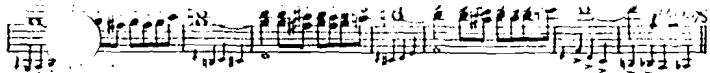
As these arrangements are exclusive, we will refuse to play any orchestra in each city. If there is as yet no other orchestra in your vicinity using these special arrangements of ours, and you are interested and would like to hear more about them, or would like to try one over, let us hear from you, and we will see that you get prompt service, and guarantee that you will want to add your name to our list of regular patrons.

HIGHEST SALARIED RECORDING ARTISTS



The honor of being the highest-salaried organization of its kind goes to the famous Jones Orchestra of Chicago's College Inn. On the latest visit to the Brunswick Laboratory for their recording, the orchestra recorded many Alford arrangements made especially for them, among them being "Sweet One," "Foster Around," and Leo Feist's new dancing, "Crying For You," which promises to equal or excel the popularity of "My Shrimp Is Cray Green," by the same writers.

Cover of April 1923 Issue of Harry L. Alford's SHARPS and FLATS magazine. (Courtesy Vince Giordano Collection)



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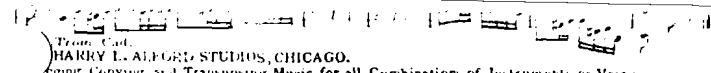
Novelty band and orchestra arrangement of an Irving Berlin march. Notice the "cued" notes indicated solos for different instruments. (Author's collection — Author Rick Benjamin is leader of the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra and has an extensive sheet music collection.)

I Ain't Got Nobody

1st Violin
Moderato
MEDLEY FOX-TROT
Intro: "NEUTRALITY RAG"
YOUNG & WARFIELD
Arr. by Harry L. Alford

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D. S. al Fine

Harry Alford's extremely successful 1916 dance orchestra arrangement of "I Ain't Got Nobody." (Author's Collection)



From the
HARRY L. ALFORD STUDIOS, CHICAGO.
Arranging, Copying, and Transposing Music for all Combinations of Instruments or Voices

1st cornet part to Alford's original ragtime travesty on Donizetti's sextet from the opera, "Lucia di Lammermoor." (Author's collection)

Kansas City Blues

Trombone
FOX TROT
E. L. BOWMAN
Arr. by Harry L. Alford

Pub. by J. W. Jenkins Sons Music Co., Kansas City, Mo.

Trombone part to Alford's band and orchestra arrangement of "Kansas City Blues" - 1915. (Author's collection)

Lead Me to that Beautiful Band

Pub. for BAND MARCH Pub. for PIANO
Band and Orchestra may be played together

1st VIOLIN

GOETZ & BERLIN
Arr. by Harry L. Alford

divisi
mf
Tron.
Pizzicato Solo
Clar. Solo
Cello Solo
Cornet Solo
Violin Solo *espress*
Tron. Solo
Drum Solo
Grandi
divisi
D.S.S.S.

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Novelty band and orchestra arrangement of an Irving Berlin march. Notice the "cued" notes indicated solos for different instruments. (Author's collection — Author Rick Benjamin is leader of the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra and has an extensive sheet music collection.)

I Ain't Got Nobody

1st Violin
Moderato

MEDLEY FOX-TROT
Intro: "NEUTRALITY RAG"

YOUNG & WARFIELD
Arr. by Harry L. Alford

LUCY'S SEXTETTE

A Ragtime Travesty

1st Cornet in Bb

on the "SEXTETTE from LUCIA"

HARRY L. ALFORD

5.
mf
Tron.
Tron.
1
2
1
2
1
2

This ending for concert use
Tron. Cont.
THE HARRY L. ALFORD STUDIOS, CHICAGO.
Arranging, Copying, and Transposing Music for all Combinations of Instruments or Voices.

1st cornet part to Alford's original ragtime travesty on Donizetti's sextet from the opera, "Lucia di Lammermoor." (Author's collection)

Kansas City Blues

Trombone

FOX TROT

E. L. BOWMAN

Arr. by Harry L. Alford

Not too fast

Cello Horn



Band.

and start-art," then 'Keeffe on On," and th DeWitt y." Buck arch," folr sion of i their set World Be nel Bogey and they sual "Fat esented a tle John's er" (or as Angeles "Wrought e festival r, "Down

nd of the rted their "Gettysreat solo valve eue set was ony Prin" but dis-

ing Jelly Roll Morton's "Wolverine Blues." Then they played a N.O. funeral tune, "Didn't He Ramble," and a vaudeville act song of the 1917-1925 era, "Walking The Dog." Next came the story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band with the ODJB 1917 jazz classic, "The Original Dixieland One-Step." Storyville in New Orleans was closed, and a migration of musicians began to Kansas City, Chicago, St. Louis and other cities where there was work for them — the Frogs played "Farewell To Storyville." Jelly Roll Morton's "Black Bottom Stomp" was played close to the original Morton recording, and "Making Whoopee" was arranged in the Paul Whiteman big band style that included a violin, flute and baritone. Morton's "King Porter Stomp" was arranged by Jimmie Lunceford for the Benny Goodman band, and the Hot Frogs gave that a whirl. The resurgence of trad jazz on the West Coast by Lu Watters, Bob Scobey and Turk Murphy was demonstrated by a fine version of Turk's "Trombone Rag."

As near as I am able to remember,

(like the Chinese acrobatic troupe that rehearsed on the staircase of Alford's home). He had a great sense of the theatrical, and he would not take on a new client unless he had first seen his (or her) act. Many budding vaudevillians must have benefited from his criticism; young George Burns went on to fame and fortune (in 1923) upon heeding Alford's advice to "let Gracie do the funny stuff." Vandercook's Musical Messenger article goes on to describe an encounter with a regular client:

"In comes a team from one of the vaudeville houses. One of them calls for 'Harry,' and, getting his attention, the performer will sing the usual vaudeville words in Harry's ears: 'Dome — dome, domeity, dome — .' Alford understands. The man has a 'new tune' running in his mind and wants it arranged for his act. Inviting him into the sound-proof room, where the piano is situated, Alford seats himself, hears the 'artist' hum over the melody, and takes this tune down from the voice as rapidly as the court reporter will write in shorthand. Using great diplomacy here and there, Alford will 'rub out' this and 'change' that, and soon will make a presentable melody out of a mere nothing. 'Can I have that arranged by five o'clock, Harry?' he asks of Alford. 'Sure,' says Harry, and he will make one of his famous shorthand scores of it all, hand it to the foreman of the copying room, and — it's done — on time."

The peak of Harry L. Alford's career also marked the high point of the ragtime craze (ca.1908-1915); his extensive work in this musical style certainly did much to assure its commercial success, public acceptance, and survival in printed arrangements down to our time. Surprisingly, Alford claimed he did not really like ragtime — he much preferred the standard military march.

"Ragtime seems to have come to stay," he wrote in 1913, "Its speedy decline was predicted when it first became popular, and wise ones have



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new breed of songwriter and composer, one much more capable of harmonizing, notating, and orchestrating his own melodic ideas. The age of the one-finger-on-the-piano "melody man," so dependent on the skills of an arranger, was drawing to a close. This tendency must have been caused by the increased availability of musical education, and perhaps even by the wish for greater "artistic standing" for the writer of pop tunes via the use of traditional European compositional methods — after all, Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms *always* wrote out their own music! Surely economics also played a factor, as it was certainly less profitable for the "composer" to hire someone else to finish his compositions.

Finally, as improvised musical styles became increasingly important, the written score — and the arranger — continued to lose importance. By the middle of the 1930s, the pioneers like Alford, J. Bodewalt Lampe, Frank Klickmann, and Mayhew Lake, had given way largely to a new generation of arranger who was, once again, more of a slave (like D.

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"Ragtime seems to have come to stay," he wrote in 1913, "Its speedy decline was predicted when it first became popular, and wise ones have been looking for its downfall ever since. But it refuses to go."

An enthusiast of the avant garde, Alford through the years stayed abreast of emerging trends in all fields. He reveled in the everything new, arranging early "jass" and blues tunes, building an ultra-modern house (designed by Frank Lloyd Wright), and composing his own numbers, one of which included a part for electric drill! In the 1920s Alford did a considerable amount of orchestrating for dance bands (Isham Jones' Orchestra and the Oriole Terrace Orchestra were regular customers), the phonograph (for the Victor, Columbia and Brunswick companies), and for the emerging medium of radio. Even during the Depression, when the music trade was at a virtual standstill, Alford remained busy fostering America's burgeoning high school and college band movement. Inspired by his years of experience with vaudeville and the musical stage, Alford even went on to help invent the ubiquitous football half-time show! During the early 1930s, he really came into his own as a composer and publisher, creating the beloved band marches "Purple Carnival" (for Northwestern University), and "Glory of the Gridiron" (for the University of Illinois). He also found the time to edit and publish his own monthly music magazine, *Sharps and Flats*, which apparently enjoyed considerable circulation within the music industry.

But popular culture changes quickly, particularly in the intensely competitive field of commercial music. As the century unfolded, there came a

compositional methods — after all, Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms always wrote out their own music! Surely economics also played a factor, as it was certainly less profitable for the "composer" to hire someone else to finish his compositions.

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Harry L. Alford was a devoted family man, a member of the Masonic order, and a musician known and admired throughout the nation. He remained vigorously at work until the end of his life, continuing to strive for "the concord of sweet sounds." After a brilliant 40-year career, he suffered a fatal heart attack in his sleep on March 4, 1939. He was 64. On his desk was his last composition, a newly completed march entitled "A Step Ahead."

Although deeply saddened, Alford's daughter, Ruth, and longtime secretary, Lillian Pettingell, determined to carry on the business. They kept the Alford Studios in operation for another year (with Ted Ruhl as chief arranger), and the publishing venture going for a few more, but even the forward momentum of past successes could not sustain them without Mr. Alford. Today, more than half a century later, his name is still fondly recalled by those "in the business," surely a sign of the respect and esteem in which he was held. He was an inspiration to a generation of American musicians, many taking to heart his motto, "Anything you have a real desire to do, you have the capacity to do. Believe that, act upon your belief, and there is nothing you aspire to within your individual talents that you cannot become."

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