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Music Video Forerunners in Early Television Programming: A Look at WCPO-TV's Innovations and Contributions in the 1950s

Heather McIntosh

Introduction

Around twenty years ago a buzz about a “new” and “innovative” art form crackled through the music industry. This form, music video, paired popular songs with series of incoherent images held together by thin narratives. It became a unique promotional tool for performing artists and their record companies. Cable channel MTV offered an outlet for these videos and in doing so helped fuel the hype surrounding them. The hype focused primarily on the visual—cutting-edge editing, eye-popping special effects, and jolting imagery; the music became almost an afterthought. But, despite the hype, music video was, and is, not necessarily new or even innovative. Instead, it represents a step in the ever-evolving relationship between music and television, one that dates to early 1950s music-variety programming. According to Andrew Goodwin, “We cannot make sense of music video without locating its development within a nexus of far-reaching changes inside mass media” (24). One site for this development is the transition from radio to television in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and programming on WCPO-TV, channel 9 in Cincinnati, offers a creative space within which to explore it. To show how this station’s programming fits in the evolution of music video, I shall consider the early relationship between popular music and radio; the transition period from radio to television and the music-variety genre’s place within it; the innovations of WCPO-TV and its programming in the context of another 1950s music-variety show *Your Hit Parade*; and the visual and aural links between this programming and contemporary music video.

Popular music and radio

Rothenbuhler and McCourt divide radio-programming history into two eras: network and format (368). In the 1920s, before the networks began airing shows and series, live music dominated the radio airwaves (Douglas 153) for it provided an easy, inexpensive way to fill time (Roman 56). Many stations opted for “safe” classical compositions, string quartets, and operas instead of the more popular jazz, though the genre eventually got airplay later in the decade (Douglas 166). When the networks organized programming during the 1930s, music served as a conceptual foundation for many shows. The music-variety genre proved popular

with such favorites as *The Kraft Music Hall*, hosted by Bing Crosby; *Metropolitan Opera Broadcast*; and *The Grand Ole Opry*, a country music show with “fiddlers, pickers, and singers” (Nachman 157). *Your Hit Parade* debuted on April 20, 1935 (Shaw 47). While many shows sought alternatives to popular music, “*Your Hit Parade* was the sole oracle of pop music trends” (Nachman 170). The show counted down the top ten (later top seven) songs of the week according to a purportedly scientific method of calculation. Songs were not sung by their original artists, but covered by the show’s cast, including, at one time or another, Frank Sinatra, Buddy Clark, Lanny Ross, Bea Wain, Dinah Shore, Georgia Gibbs, Doris Day, Dorothy Collins, and Snooky Lanson (Shaw 49; Nachman 170). The March 20, 1948, radio episode, starring Frank Sinatra, featured such songs as “Ballerina,” “I’m Lookin’ Over a Four-Leaf Clover,” and “Beg Your Pardon.” The episode’s sponsor, the American Tobacco Company, spared no efforts in selling its Lucky Strike cigarettes, including spots during the countdown, before the opening theme, and in the orchestra’s name.

The transition from radio to television

Radio’s shift to format coincides with the beginnings of television in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In an effort to develop programming for television, networks began to abandon their radio programming. To make the transition easier, faster, and especially cheaper, many networks adapted their radio shows for television (Rothenbuhler and McCourt 376). Early reactions to the new medium indicate many people viewed television as merely radio with pictures and its programming as a “simple extension of radio shows” (Chester, Garrison, and Willis 58). Since music served as a foundation for many radio shows, it makes sense that “nearly half” of the television series aired during the 1950s fit the music-variety genre (Scheurer 307). Adapting music for the small screen still posed challenges, however, since “television [could not] handle music programming easily—not records, certainly, and even orchestral concerts presented television with problems that radio never had to face” (Chester, Garrison, and Willis 58). A basic question faced TV producers: What do you show with the music?

WCPO and its early programming

Cincinnati holds an important place in the history of broadcasting with the pioneering efforts of its early radio and television stations, and the most relevant to the development of music video comes from WCPO-TV, channel 9. In the early 1950s, three television stations were broadcasting in Cincinnati: WLWT (channel 5), WKRC (channel 12), and WCPO. According to current programming director Jim Timmerman, the staff of WCPO at the time received the charge to find ways to program and air more hours than channel 5 (personal interview, 22 March 2002). Two shows, *The Paul Dixon Show* and *The Dotty Mack Show* (formerly *Girl Alone*), resulted from this charge. Both shows aired locally for extended hours, got picked up nationally by the network for shorter time periods, and featured a similar format: actors pantomiming skits to popular music of the day.

The Paul Dixon Show aired in both prime-time and daytime hours. The prime-time edition ran from August 8, 1951 to September 24, 1952 on ABC, though the variety show began locally in 1949. The weekday edition ran from February to May 1952 on ABC and then from October 1952 to April 1955 on Dumont. The show



Figure 1. Musicians like this accordion player pantomimed playing in time with songs on *The Dotty Mack Show*. Still courtesy WCPO-TV, Cincinnati.

featured Paul Dixon, who “contorted his face and mouthed the words as the top singers of the day sang their big hits on record” (Brooks and Marsh 788–89). Other cast members included Len Goorian, Wanda Lewis, and Dotty Mack, who later was replaced by Sis Camp. I watched one partial episode of this show; its segments were interspersed with interviews of cast members during a WCPO 50th anniversary special broadcast on December 17, 1999.

The Dotty Mack Show began as *Girl Alone* on February 16, 1953; the fifteen-minute program ran on the Dumont network until June 1953. In July 1953 the show was expanded to half an hour, and Bob Braun and Colin Male were added to the cast. The title was changed to *The Dotty Mack Show*, and it aired on ABC until September 3, 1956 (Brooks and Marsh 278). I watched two complete episodes of each show in the WCPO archives.

Your Hit Parade made the transition from radio to television during the 1950s. It debuted in July 1950 and ran until August 1950 on NBC, and then ran from October 1950 to June 1958, still on NBC. From October 1958 to April 1959, the show aired on CBS. The television version retained the radio version’s countdown format, with show singers still covering the songs, but “the 1950s video version was a more elaborately produced affair, with each number framed by an inventive, often gimmicky, dramatic or comic device” (Nachman 171). I watched a sampling of episodes dating from 1951 to 1956, all of which are available on videocassette through online auctions.

Television sound and image

The television sound and the television image are inextricably linked; each depends on the other to convey a complete message and create a form for music

video. According to Gow, form is “the overall relationship around which a music clip’s aural and visual elements are structured” (44). The salience of this relationship varies depending on the closeness of the song’s lyrics to the images. Tight (and, some argue, dull) translations try to create a literal representation of the lyrics, while loose (and, some argue, more creative) translations start with the lyrics and move beyond them. Sometimes “there may not even be any relationship between the way the record sounds and the style of video” (Lynch 54). The aural-visual relationship serves as the foundation of the form, and separating how sound and image function in these programs illustrates how the two parts work together.

Many critics privilege television’s image, but television sound plays a more important role than we may think. According to Rick Altman (570), television sound serves several functions, including providing information even without the image, conveying the sense that the most important information will be cued by it, and offering a means of providing continuity. The importance of sound increases when we consider the relatively low picture quality of television, especially during the 1950s. Sound clued viewers in to what they might be missing, for it “tend[ed] to carry the details” (Ellis 128–29).

Sound’s function in early TV variety shows varies little because of their similar formats, but some variation does occur. Music—popular music—often functions as the primary sound, but the shows use it in different ways. Continuing its radio format, *Your Hit Parade* follows a countdown with show singers and a house orchestra performing cover versions. *Girl Alone*, *The Dotty Mack Show*, and *The Paul Dixon Show* allow the original singers to perform their own songs via record, and the shows’ stars lip-sync the words in their place. The use of lip sync offers an advantage in guaranteeing better sound, for using recorded music rather than live musicians ensures a greater quality and control. And the lip sync need not look artificial: “When specially composed and recorded music and single camera shooting are used, the artificiality of lip-sync can be well hidden” (Burns and Thompson 14).

Sound on these shows goes beyond the music, however. The *Your Hit Parade* omniscient announcer, Andre Baruch, tells the audience the song title and artist, the song’s place in the countdown, some words from the sponsor, and the stars’ names. The show’s sponsor, mostly Lucky Strike cigarettes but also Richard Hudnut hair care products and Crosley televisions, inserts its jingles and commercial messages throughout the shows. Another sound includes a harp chromatic scale before the start of each countdown song. The cast of singers also performs “So Long for a While” and “Be Happy, Go Lucky” to close each episode.

Dotty Mack sings nothing on either *Girl Alone* or *The Dotty Mack Show*. Aside from the music, *Girl Alone* offers no sound other than a spoken vocal interlude. In one episode (1953, archive number 488), Mack mouths the words to “Painting the Town with Tears,” by Jeanne Gayle, and “Did Anyone Call?,” by Rosemary Clooney (see Figs. 5–7). Between these songs she speaks these lines in a voice-over:

That I may hear your voice, I lie quite still. Surrounded by the reaching echoes that bring on the night. The wind moves a branch that quickly becomes the sound of taffeta as you draw near. The curtains part gently. You have stepped into my room. Speak to me.

Both episodes I saw featured a vocal interlude like this, spoken in a poetic, longing voice that relates not directly to the song lyrics but to the “girl alone” theme

suggested by the title. Lyrically, these lines might function as a spoken “bridge” between the songs in order to provide a sense of flow with the images on the screen.

Sound used in *The Dotty Mack Show* more closely resembles *Your Hit Parade*. An announcer opens the show with the series title name, the stars’ names, and this line: “Two guys and a doll bringing popular records to life through the art of musical pantomime.” The program also includes product sponsorships; one episode features spots for Welch’s Family Wine (a product also placed on the set). While *Girl Alone* uses more soulful ballads, this newer version offers a greater variety of songs, including some rock and roll mixed in with the other middle-of-the-road music. Some titles include “Just Another Polka,” by Jo Stafford, “Soda Pop Hop,” “Rip It Up,” and even “See You Later, Alligator” by Bill Haley and His Comets. The addition of male cast members to the pantomime troupe for this show expanded the options for song choices.

The Paul Dixon Show also leans toward pantomime, but instead of an omniscient announcer, Paul Dixon steps in as an early version of a television disc jockey. In the partial episode I saw, Dixon announces the song’s titles and where they came from, in this case from the album for MGM’s 1953 musical *The Band Wagon*. Dixon introduces the songs this way: “Now, of course, we don’t have the millions of dollars that MGM put into these productions, but we’re going to give you our little dollar-and-forty-two-cent version of the productions in this show” (1953, archive number 533).



Figure 2. Paul Dixon puts a shine on Len Goorian’s shoes as he mimes “A Shine on Your Shoes,” a song from the MGM musical *The Band Wagon*. Still courtesy WCPO-TV, Cincinnati.



Figure 3. Paul Dixon stands on the set miming "A Shine on Your Shoes." Behind him appears a chair on a riser with a block and towel for shining someone's shoes. Still courtesy WCPO-TV, Cincinnati.



Figure 4. An early version of a video jockey, Paul Dixon puts the record on the player and moves the needle into place. The record, however, does not turn. Still courtesy WCPO-TV, Cincinnati.

He then reads the title of the song, puts a record on the turntable, moves the needle into place (though the record does not turn), and runs to take his place among the other stars ready for the skit to begin (see Fig. 4). Songs lip-synced for this episode include "A Shine on Your Shoes," "Louisiana Hayride," and "I Love the Weasel," all of which do appear on the movie's soundtrack.

Many of today's music videos originate from soundtracks, and these videos often feature clips from the movie mixed with clips of the artist performing. In the Dixon episode, an entire show stages songs from a musical, wherein the songs were performed in the first place. The extra layer of interpretation went a step further with the possibility of using the skits as commercials for the film; according to Sis Camp, "They were considered for commercials to send out to the markets to promote the film" (*WCPO 50th Anniversary Special*, 17 Dec. 1999).

According to Allan, "the starting point for the production of a video must be the music," including its lyrics and its sound (7). The task of adding visuals is achieved through music's "highly plastic means of signification" (Wolfe 430), which leaves plenty of room for interpretation. Layers of meaning occur in the lyrics, instrumentation, key, and tempo (Goodwin 56–57), but the visuals may extend beyond a song's meaning, a commonplace feature of video (Goodwin 85). The novelty of adding images to sound challenged the creative artists on these early TV shows, and their efforts relied not only on the music, but also on pantomime, sets, and costumes.

Pantomime works well in pairing a visual with music. Pantomime is an art that dates to ancient times and continues to enjoy some popularity in theater today. We usually associate miming and pantomiming with silence, similar to the stereotypical street performer stuck in a box who mouths "help" but no words come out. Mime acts, however, often are accompanied by some kind of sound, such as a chorus, a narrator, or instrumentation (Leabhart 2). Any sound thus originates somewhere other than with the mime performer. But the most important part of the miming is the "presentation of the subject matter within the framework of the plot," which usually is done on a bare stage (Alberts 6). This art translated well to early television: "The early literature of television production constantly emphasized the necessity for naturalistic performance, frequent close-ups, and simplified, naturalistic staging" (Boddy 83). The close-ups reduced the need for elaborate sets.

Pantomime is a basic feature of almost any music video and is increasingly used in live musical performances. It appears in the artists' lip syncing of a song and in the gestures artists or other cast members make as a part of the narrative frame for a video's plot. In all three WCPO shows, the visualization of the song is not done by the actual recording artist, but by the shows' cast. Instead of the recording artists mouthing the words, as done in *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*, the casts do, creating a sort of "performing cover." While music videos attempt to hide this pantomiming in order to privilege the depicted live performance, the WCPO shows, especially Dotty Mack's and *The Paul Dixon Show*, emphasize the pantomime, even calling attention to it via the announcer or the host. Through the pantomime comes direct address, which, coupled with a close-up, conveys a sense of immediacy that is reinforced by the first-person lyrics of a song (Ellis 132–34). The performer becomes a guide through the maze of imagery (Burns and Thompson 19), and in the case of pantomiming, this guide is a surrogate. Pantomime provides a convenient frame for creating one aspect of the visual, the character movement—but what about a narrative or premise to guide these actions? Did

these shows begin with the songs and then create the narratives, or did they start with the images and then choose the songs?

Your Hit Parade began with the countdown of its songs before adding the visuals. As a network program, it had a fairly elaborate budget to create lavish sets and costumes for its stars and backup performers. One episode (1 March 1952) goes from a beach setting, complete with sand and backdrop, to a rather elaborate country-and-western number with five different costumes among the almost thirty performers on the stage. Another episode (9 June 1956) builds each production number around a vacation theme, including Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" sung in a haunted house scene—a place one is more likely to avoid than to frequent on a vacation! In general, each number gets staging similar to a production number in a musical, complete with all of the extravagances of spectacle except Technicolor.

Girl Alone begins a different way. The premise, as stated by the title, sets the scene for Mack, who in one episode arrives home from a date and in another episode turns out the lights in her apartment before retiring for the evening. The set stays the same from episode to episode: an urban, upscale apartment complete with upholstered couches and armchairs, art on the walls, a telephone, a writing desk with a picture on it, and several lamps (see Fig. 8). A "window" provides a view of the city lights beyond. Mack moves around the apartment as she mouths the words, and in both episodes she pauses at the desk to look longingly at a picture of a gentleman on it—supposedly, the man she left to be the "girl alone." With this setup, the song's lyrics likely needed to fit in with the theme; something like "Sixteen Tons" or "Rock Around the Clock" would seem out of place.



Figure 5. "Did Anyone Call?" mimes Dotty Mack to Rosemary Clooney's song into the telephone during an episode of *Girl Alone*. Still courtesy WCPO-TV, Cincinnati.

The Dotty Mack Show, at least in the two episodes I saw, uses one larger set to accommodate several songs. One episode (1956; archive number 487) features a city street with a soda fountain; both provide backdrops for “Soda Pop Hop,” “See You Later, Alligator,” and “Sixteen Tons.” Another episode (1957; archive number 169) features an Italian-style restaurant complete with a band “playing” in the corner; Mack mouths one song, “Just Another Polka,” as she dances with a gentleman, and Male and Braun perform another song while sitting at the tables on the screen right. The set’s flexibility allows for a variety of songs’ stagings. While the more rock-oriented “See You Later, Alligator” and “Soda Pop Hop” seem to fit well in this loose set, “Sixteen Tons” appears out of place. The lyrics of “Sixteen Tons” detail the difficult life of a coal miner—a far cry from the relatively carefree life of shared sodas and sock hops.

While *Girl Alone* and *The Dotty Mack Show* begin with a theme or a set, Len Gorian did some of the design and choreography based on the songs used on *The Paul Dixon Show*. According to Gorian, “Each one of the records became a little vignette, and I would choreograph that, set a scene for it, arrange for the scenery to be put together” (*WCPO 50th Anniversary Special*, 17 Dec. 1999). He describes how all the scenes for a certain episode were painted onto a roll of paper, and to change scenes, the crew just pulled off the paper of the last scene to reveal the new one. Gorian then would get some set pieces to put in front.

The setting for the song “A Shine on Your Shoes” demonstrates a somewhat literal, though fun, interpretation of the song. The premise is simple: Dixon pulls Gorian aside to shine his shoes and make his day a little better. The set includes a chair on a riser and a bench for Gorian’s feet (see Fig. 2 and 3). Dixon uses a



Figure 6. Dotty Mack mimes a song while walking through the *Girl Alone* set, which stayed the same from week to week. Still courtesy WCPO-TV, Cincinnati.

couple of simple props, including a newspaper, a rag, and a container of shoe polish; he also wears an apron over his shirt and tie.

The camera dictates how we see images, and its use in WCPO's early programming displays some innovative applications. Sometimes the camera movement is timed with the music and the lyrics. In *Girl Alone*, the camera follows Mack through the apartment as she pantomimes to songs (1953; archive number 488). She walks past the couch, sits down on the chair, and picks up the telephone. The camera slowly moves in to a close shot of her face and eventually backs away. During high notes and climaxes in the songs, the camera moves in again on her face and stays with her during the notes and then backs away as the notes fade. When Mack addresses the song to the man in the picture, the camera moves in on his face and then pulls away when she puts the picture down.

The Dotty Mack Show offers a rather creative cut during the song "Sixteen Tons." For most of the song, the camera maintains a medium shot of the taller man miming the lyrics to the shorter one, but, when the tall man moves in to look more menacing, the camera cuts to a shot from below and between the men, showing us a close-up of the acted intimidation. "A Shine on Your Shoes," performed by Paul Dixon, also demonstrates the use of two cameras in a rather unique way, at least vis-à-vis the conventional music video. At a point in the lyrics when Dixon is not miming words and the music changes to a two-bar syncopated rhythm that sounds like a galloping horse, the camera cuts from a long shot to a medium one, giving us a view of Dixon's face as he cocks his head and smiles during the short gallop. When the lyrics start again, the camera cuts back to a long shot to show us Dixon dancing and mouthing the words. When the galloping starts again, the



Figure 7. Dotty Mack mimes a song to the picture of the man she supposedly left to be the "girl alone." Still courtesy WCPO-TV, Cincinnati.

camera cuts back in. This pattern is repeated four times; usually in music video, cameras show close-ups of people singing or lip synching, but this instance demonstrates the opposite.

Music video

Differences between music video and these 1950s music-variety shows abound. Television then was broadcast live, but videos are shot on tape. One or two cameras showed us these programs with minimal cuts or movement, while some rock videos use dizzying cuts almost too quick for the eye. Technological limitations of the time brought television programming home in black and white, while now video directors can choose to use black and white for effect, not out of necessity. The songs then were performed in the context of a show, while individual videos generally stand alone. All three of WCPO's shows used singers and performers other than the stars, while most videos—George Michael's *Freedom '90* is an exception to this—use the original artist to perform the song.

A significant difference occurs in the playing of instruments. Instruments are a staple feature in music videos, especially in rock and metal ones. Usually, performers either play them or fake playing them—Robert Palmer's videos with the mannequinlike women probably best illustrate the latter, with models portraying Palmer's "band." In *Your Hit Parade*, the Lucky Strike Orchestra provides the instrumentation, and the musicians within it do play their own instruments. Several songs (2 May 1951; 15 Sept. 1951) also feature the vocalist paired with a group of musicians, and the camera dissolves between shots of the drummers,



Figure 8. The set of *Girl Alone*: an upscale, urban apartment. Still courtesy WCPO-TV, Cincinnati.

cellists, violinists, and pianists performing. No musical instruments appear in *Girl Alone*. In *The Dotty Mack Show*, we find some musical instruments, though the actors fake playing them. In the “Just Another Polka” sequence (1957; archive number 169), an accordion player gestures to the song but fails to get the fingering and the squeezing of the box to match time with the music (see Fig. 1). In *The Paul Dixon Show*, two skits show no musical instruments whatsoever, though in another we see Len Goorian sitting at a piano with others dancing around it. The back of the piano faces the camera, so we cannot tell if Goorian plays it or not.

But even with all of these differences some similarities exist between the WCPO programs and music videos. For one, all use some type of lip sync and pantomime. A thin narrative—sometimes related to the song lyrics and sometimes not—gets imposed on the visuals, though not in straight performance videos (see Gow 45; Lynch 54). For the most part, contemporary, popular songs are used, and dancing or some other kind of movement fills the frame.

One of the larger issues driving the production of music videos is promotion. Most music videos are made to sell the artists (see Allan 6; Lynch 53). According to Allan, “Performing in videos gains distance from actual performing through lip synching and miming; generally, what we hear and see are the artists acting out the recording as a means of selling themselves and the recording” (6). The WCPO shows, however, work more with product placement. In one episode of *The Dotty Mack Show*, a bottle of the show’s sponsor’s product, Welch’s Family Wine, sits on the table, and both actors hold a glass of it. *The Paul Dixon Show* touts tunes from a musical, *The Band Wagon*. Neither show uses the original artists to sell the music; they employ stand-ins instead.

Another issue concerns the role of popular music, especially rock and roll. Most early videos on MTV were “rock” videos, either mainstream or metal. The music-variety genre aired on television at a time when rock and roll was growing in popularity, and the middle-of-the-road music offered by most of these shows did not appeal to younger audiences. What appealed to them even less was the stable of singers doing covers of the songs, especially when they could buy the record and get a musical performance done by the actual artist. Both *Your Hit Parade* and *The Dotty Mack Show* included some rock and roll in their lineups, but the discord of Snooky Lanson singing “Heartbreak Hotel” jarred viewers (Burns, “Visualizing” 145). Brooks and Marsh describe Dotty Mack’s attempts: “Although Dotty gamely included such records as ‘Rock Around the Clock’ in her repertoire, the sight of pleasant young people pantomiming to Bill Haley or Elvis Presley records became slightly ridiculous” (278).

Beyond the 1950s

Though popular during the respective golden ages of radio and television, the music-variety genre has faded from popular memory, but scholars continue to explore it in the context of music video. Gary Burns considers Dick Clark’s show *Where the Action Is* as a precursor to contemporary music video. The show featured a regular cast doing covers, occasional guests lip synching their own songs, and location shooting instead of studio staging. He concludes it was “a link between what [he] would call ‘primitive’ and ‘mature’ manifestations of popular music on television” (Burns, *Where* 31). A later example of the genre was *Solid Gold* (see Wolfe), an early 1980s show hosted by Andy Gibb, Dionne Warwick, and Marilyn

McCoo. Artists lip-synced their own songs, or the Solid Gold Dancers would perform their interpretations of them. Each song was numbered a part of a countdown similar to *Your Hit Parade*. Another show was *Puttin' on the Hits* (see Sorkin 168), wherein contestants would dress and perform like popular artists and lip-sync those artists' songs. One of the more original performances included an enactment of the Michael Jackson and Paul McCartney duet "Say, Say, Say," wherein one person dressed on one side like McCartney and on the other side like Jackson and turned from side to side depending on which vocalist was singing on the record.

Music and television programming share a relationship that began with the rise of the new medium in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. The WCPO shows *Girl Alone*, *The Dotty Mack Show*, and *The Paul Dixon Show* helped root the seeds of music video's evolution. Despite technological limitations, some innovative use of camera occurs in these shows. The convention of pantomime—lip sync—begins to acquaint audiences somewhat with its acceptability. The shows use narrative, closely related to the lyrics or not, to visualize the songs and make them more interesting for the viewer. Attempts at promotion also appear. Early 1950s popular music appealed both to parents and their children, but the emergence of rock and roll drove a wedge into the widening generation gap. And the awkwardness of rock and roll on *Dotty Mack* and *Your Hit Parade* hints that a new form, or at least a change in the old one, was needed. These changes provided the next steps in the evolution of music video.

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