

REVIEW | PEER REVIEWED

## A Look Into *SPACE*:

### A Self-Experiential Songwriting Journal for Students and Professionals

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#### Abstract

*SPACE: A Journal for (Future) Music Therapists to Explore and Express through Songwriting* is a resource for music therapy students and professionals developed by the author of this article. Rooted in the personal and non-intrusive means of self-experiential learning, this small, spiral-bound journal is meant to supplement, inspire, and encourage learning and growth. Beginning with a brief introduction of basic chord progressions and song forms, the users then journey through a series of logs from inward to outward exploration and from structured to free songwriting.

This article's intent is to provide insight into the author's personal songwriting journey and its influence on the creation of *SPACE* and to present its contents along with examples of its use in hopes that current and future professionals will benefit from this resource.

**Keywords:** *songwriting, education, self-experiential*

#### Introduction

*SPACE: A Journal for (Future) Music Therapists to Explore and Express through Songwriting* is a resource for music therapy students and professionals. Based on my masters' professional project, this resource first materialized at the intersection of my constant need to be creative and my immediate need to finish my graduate program. Influenced by my personal songwriting process and out of a desire to do more than just research and write about songwriting, I decided to create a tangible tool. This resulted in a 100-page PDF file, with songwriting tips, prompts, quotes, and plenty of blank space to reflect, draft, and write, that I defended and submitted to my paper committee. After graduation, I was encouraged to further develop and publish the journal. In September 2019, it was published and became an accessible low-cost resource through Sarsen Publishing based in Lawrence, Kansas. *SPACE* is small and spiral-bound—similar to journals that I used, and still use, for my personal songwriting. However, unlike my originally blank journals, the design and content of *SPACE* is intended to inspire and encourage its users to turn their songwriting from personal to professional.

This article's intent is to provide insight into my personal songwriting journey and its influence on the creation of *SPACE*, as well as to present its contents and examples of its use in hopes that current and future professionals will benefit from this resource.

## Songwriting: From Personal to Professional

While music is now my job, as a teenager it was my obsession. I learned and played as much as I could, but my favorite aspect was listening and creating. My adolescence spanned the early to late 2000s, in which music became easier to access through online streaming, file sharing, and social media. Unlike previous generations, my music consumption was not bound by the determined hit songs on the radio or the available inventory at CD stores. The evolution of the internet and the privilege of owning a computer at home afforded access to any artist or genre, whenever I wanted, with a few mouse clicks at home.

While I consumed a wide variety of genres, I was most drawn to indie and alternative rock. My favorites were Dashboard Confessional, Red Jumpsuit Apparatus, Jack's Mannequin, and Ben Folds. These artists did not appear to fit into the "pop" image or sound, which is presumably why most of their music was not topping the charts every week. Their songs were unabashedly honest and did not always follow the standard form and style, hence being classified as either alternative (to said standard) or indie (for being independent of a major label). This was something I resonated with. I felt an authenticity and vulnerability from these artists, which was especially evident in their lyrics.

These lyrics had emotions, imagery, and wordplay. I listened to songs over and over again and analyzed lyrics to figure out what the writer was feeling or trying to express. By doing this, I felt very connected to the writers and artists. I could identify and empathize with what they were going through, even if I did not know them personally. It was validating to realize that I was not the only one who felt the way I did. It was almost as if these writers and artists understood me, and that I equally understood them. Like most adolescents, "music played a central role" in helping me "work through and explore challenges" (Viega, 2013, p. 27).

The validation from these artists through their music inspired me to start songwriting for myself. I thought that if I expressed myself, maybe others could identify with the same sentiments. There were already stacks of journals and diaries scattered around my room. In these pages were my thoughts, emotions, and dreams, just waiting to be put into song. I began by substituting lyrics to my favorite songs. Then I started to learn the song forms and chord progressions they were using. From that I began to create new melodies and lyrics to fit within those structures. Eventually I felt confident enough to create and record my own music from scratch to share with others. In comparison to the audio quality of software today, these recordings were mediocre. Despite this, my newfound hobby of songwriting gave my teenage self a sense of purpose and identity.

What I did not realize at this point in my life was that I would be going into music therapy, a profession in which songwriting is an important skill. I was certain that I was going to major in music business, find a day job in the industry, and write and perform songs at night until I became a star. While looking at various college programs, I came across music therapy in a music department catalogue. I quickly dismissed it, but a few months later, I came across a segment about the profession on TV that sparked my interest to learn more and eventually find a program to apply for. I did not know that the connection that I had felt through songs could actually be used for more than just leisure or fame. During my undergraduate courses, I learned that the process and product of creating could be used to support people in their healing, growth, and change. We were given songwriting assignments and I greatly enjoyed the challenge of them. Crafting music and words was a fun experience for me. My peers' experiences, on the other hand, varied from mine. Many of them found the assignment to be daunting and felt discouraged. I often noticed that they would turn in songs that

they were not happy with, and, due to these experiences, were not motivated to continue to write unless it was required for a class.

Later in graduate school, and my first few years as a professional, I saw the same struggles. Although songwriting is a part of music therapy curriculum across the country, the task remains daunting for students during and after a songwriting assignment in their coursework. There seems to be a desire to be “good” at it, but, from my own personal experience and literature reviews, many students and professionals do not think they have enough skill or are scared to share their songs with people (Krout et al., 2010). The only way I got better at songwriting was by songwriting. I was not innately a songwriter, I just took a step and kept writing. Recounting my personal songwriting journey, and my peers’ frustrations with their own, I was inspired to support others to turn their steps into strides. As my final professional project in graduate school, I created *SPACE*, a resource for students and professionals to work on their songwriting skills, with a similar space for journaling and the inclusion of prompts and guides for structure.

### SPACE: A Journal for (Future) Music Therapists to Explore and Express through Songwriting

*SPACE* was created with the hope that it would provide students and practitioners with a personal and non-intrusive means to supplement their education on songwriting, inspire them to continue writing, and provide “a deeper knowing of music, therapy, and self” (Murphy, 2007, p. 53). Bruscia (2013) states:

Experiential learning is an essential approach to music therapy education, training and supervision for many reasons. First and foremost, music therapy is an experiential modality. Its basic premise is that engagement of the client in a music experience provides the foundation or impetus for therapeutic change ... The most effective way for music therapists to learn how music therapy works is to experience it themselves. (p. 66)

Unfortunately, not all programs can afford to offer experiential learning within the curriculum, or not all educators agree “such learning is useful or appropriate at undergraduate level training” (Gardstrom & Jackson, 2011, p. 72; Murphy & Wheeler, 2005). Therefore, this journal may provide a way for students to develop their skills without altering curriculum.

While writing in a journal is beneficial to any student’s growth, a journal specifically for songwriting is particularly valuable for music therapy students. Not only is songwriting listed in the American Music Therapy Association’s professional competencies (2.1 and 4.2; AMTA, 2013) and in the board domains of the Certification Board for Music Therapists (III.A.5.m; CBMT, 2020), but it is also a means to developing as a human being. Ruud (2005) states that “songwriting provides an aesthetic context” that invites people to explore “their own life, their possibilities, their losses and aspirations” (p.10). This allows for unhindered exploration and expression that affords opportunities for change and development, making it an effective approach in music therapy. In addition to addressing psychosocial and emotional needs, songwriting also addresses cognitive and communication needs (Baker & Wigram, 2005) Due to the approach’s ability to address a range of needs, music therapists use it with a variety of populations, such as oncology, palliative care, neurorehabilitation, psychiatry, and autism spectrum disorder (Baker et al., 2009). However, in order to use this approach with future clients, students and professionals would benefit from using the same approach themselves.

### Journal Format

*SPACE* begins with a basic introduction to the elements of songwriting. Chord progressions are categorized by level of difficulty and song forms are historically explained (see figure 1 for example). Following this introduction are five different experiential sections: self-exploration, life stages, emotional expression, music, and clinical popula-

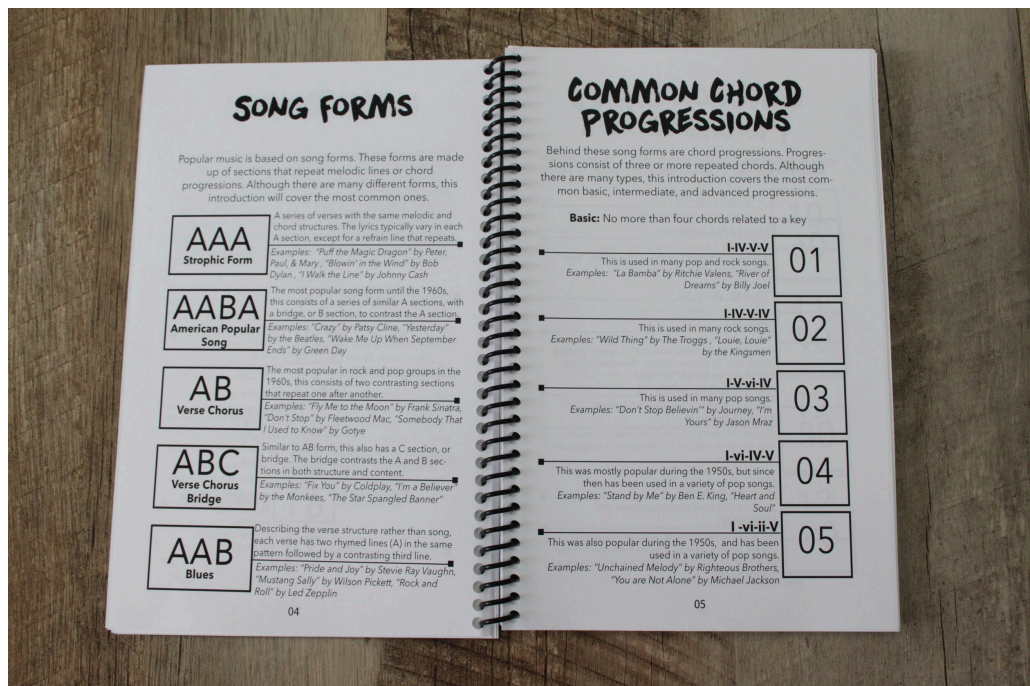


Figure 1

tions. Each of these themed sections contain four writing prompts, termed in the journal as “logs.” Inspired by Bruscia’s (2013) improvisational self-inquiry project, these logs encourage the user to explore these themes with various writing prompts, song forms, and chord progressions.

The self-exploration section consists of logs about current feelings, being, and relationships. The life stages section consists of logs about past and current periods in life. The emotional expression section consists of logs about joy, anger, sorrow, and love. The music section consists of logs based on musical elements of melodic theme, rhythmic theme, lyric substitution, and electronic loops. The clinical population section consists of logs about mental health, hospice, pediatric hospital, and school settings. As the sections progress, the directions decrease, giving students more freedom to explore songwriting.

### Journal Use

Though I learned much about myself through journaling and songwriting during my adolescent and young adult years, there is still new emotional and mental territory to explore. As I grow and change, so does my understanding and expression of self. In this section, I will share personal entries and songs from *SPACE*. The purpose in doing so is to provide an example of how people could use this journal.

The first log I completed was *Log 2: Being*. The prompt was “Journal a paragraph on where you are in life.” The designated song form alongside the prompt was AABA with a chord progression of I-IV-V-IV. Figures 2a, b, and c, show pictures of my entries and process. For my log, I wrote:

I feel like I’ve been in an incubator for the past year or so. Wanting to get out, but maybe not being ready or able to handle it. Maybe not “not able” ... I am able. Just maybe having precautions about leaving or moving. I was a premature baby, so I have a bit of a penchant for wanting to get out into the world first and then having to wait and be patient with myself.

For the song, I used an acoustic guitar and wrote in the key of A. An audio recording of the final song, entitled “Incubator.” is available at <https://soundcloud.com/gabby-banzon/incubator-voices>

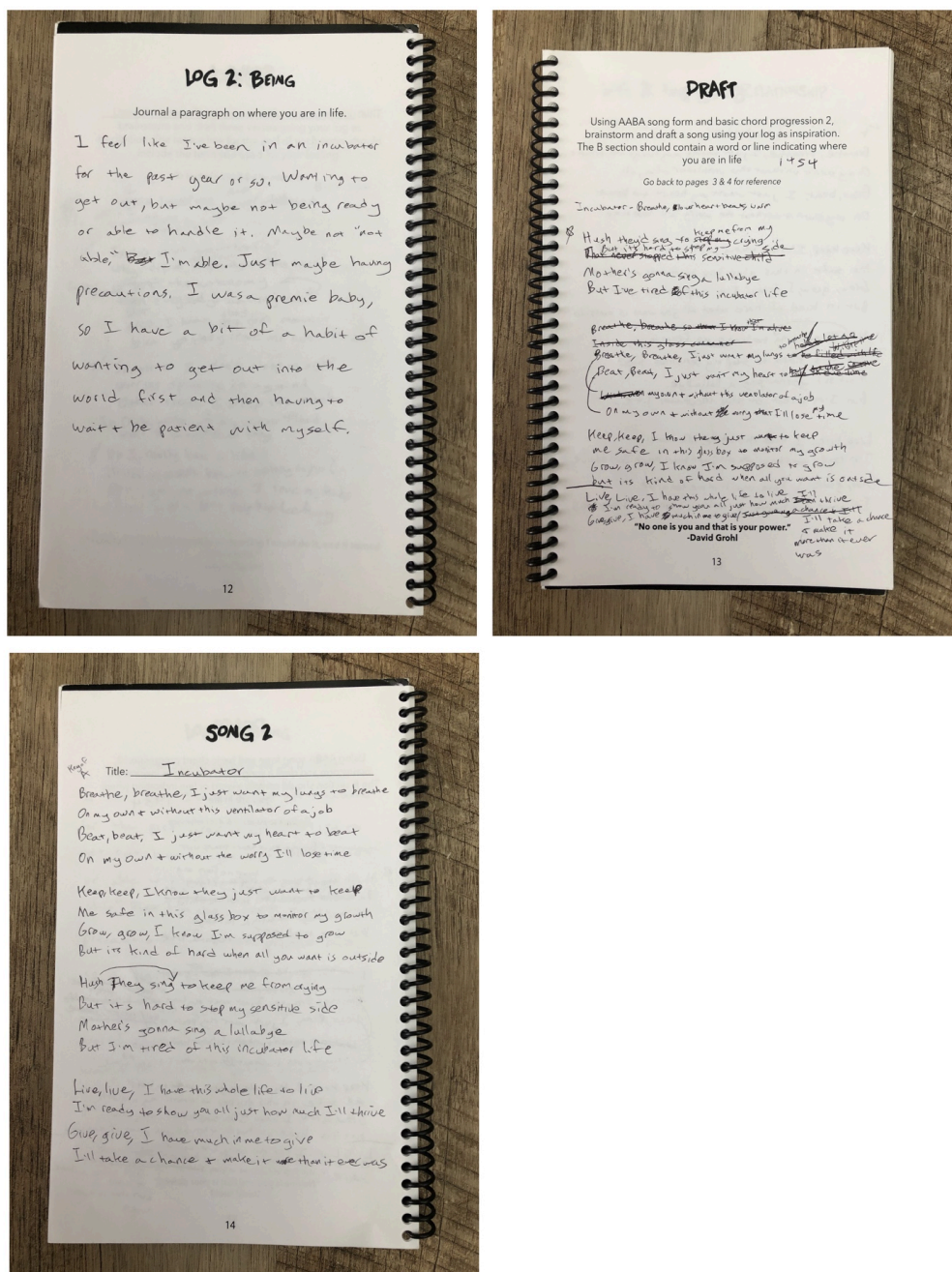


Figure 2a, b, c

Below are the lyrics:

Breathe, breathe, I just want my lungs to breathe  
 On my own and without this ventilator of a job  
 Beat, beat, I just want my heart to beat  
 On my own and without the worry that I'll lose time

Keep, keep, I know they just want to keep  
 Me safe in this glass box to monitor my growth  
 Grow, grow, I know I'm supposed to grow  
 But it's kind of hard when all you want is outside

They sing, "Hush," to keep me from crying  
 But it's hard to stop my sensitive side  
 Mother's gonna sing a lullaby  
 But I'm tired of this incubator life

Live, live, I have this whole life to live  
 I'm ready to show you all, just how much I'll thrive  
 Give, give, I have much in me to give  
 I'll take a chance and make it more than it ever was

Another log I completed was *Log 12: Love*. The prompt was “journal a paragraph on your experience of love.” The designated chord progression alongside the prompt was I-I7-IV-iv-I-II7-ii7-V7 and your song form of choice. Figures 3a, b, and c show pictures of my entries and process. For my log, I wrote:

Connecting with and loving people has never been hard for me. I have an inherent care and wish for well-being for people. “Agape” in Greek, if you will. But romantic (Eros), has been hard. So, whenever I say it in that sense, I have to really mean it. I don't say it unless it truly is the case. Nor do I want someone to say it back unless it's really meant. The most recent person in my life getting to that point and sense never said it back. And I'm glad for the honesty. I thought he would get to that point of meaning, but before he did, we realized maybe we shouldn't. Learning to unlove a person sucks.

For the song, I used a piano and wrote in the key of C. An audio recording of the final song, “I Shouldn't Ask.” is available at <https://soundcloud.com/gabbybanzon/i-shouldnt-ask-voices>

Below are the lyrics:

I wasn't lying when I said I love you  
 You never lied, but never said it to  
 Me. And I know and you know we both tried  
 But that didn't stop the tears in our eyes

I think this pillow still smells like you  
 I can't really tell, it's been a day or two  
 Cause I still haven't been able to breathe  
 I wonder “Have you been able to breathe?”

But I guess I shouldn't ask  
 Because I don't need to know  
 See it's kind of hard for me  
 To unlove and let go

I saw a skit on SNL the other day  
 I saw a car like yours parked a block away  
 I keep on seeing things reminding me of you  
 I wonder if you're reminded too

## Conclusion

As noted in *SPACE*'s subtitle, its content is intended for those entering and already in the music therapy field. Music therapy educators may include the journal as required text for courses, assign individual logs to students, process personal experiences, and discuss future clinical implications. Professional music therapists may work through the logs to develop personal songwriting skills, to explore and reflect on themselves, and to incorporate and adapt for clinical practice. For example, in a therapeutic songwriting group I facilitate, we listened to and discussed favorite songs of individuals within that group. Through discussion, the theme of “freedom” kept re-occurring, providing content for the development of a new song by the group, similar to how a journal entry in *SPACE* would provide content for a new song by an individual user. The group then listened to song forms of their favorite songs and determined the song form they desired for their song with support from myself and other staff present. After determining form, the group drafted, chose, and finalized lyrics using their ideas from discussion and music using sound loops from a digital audio workstation.

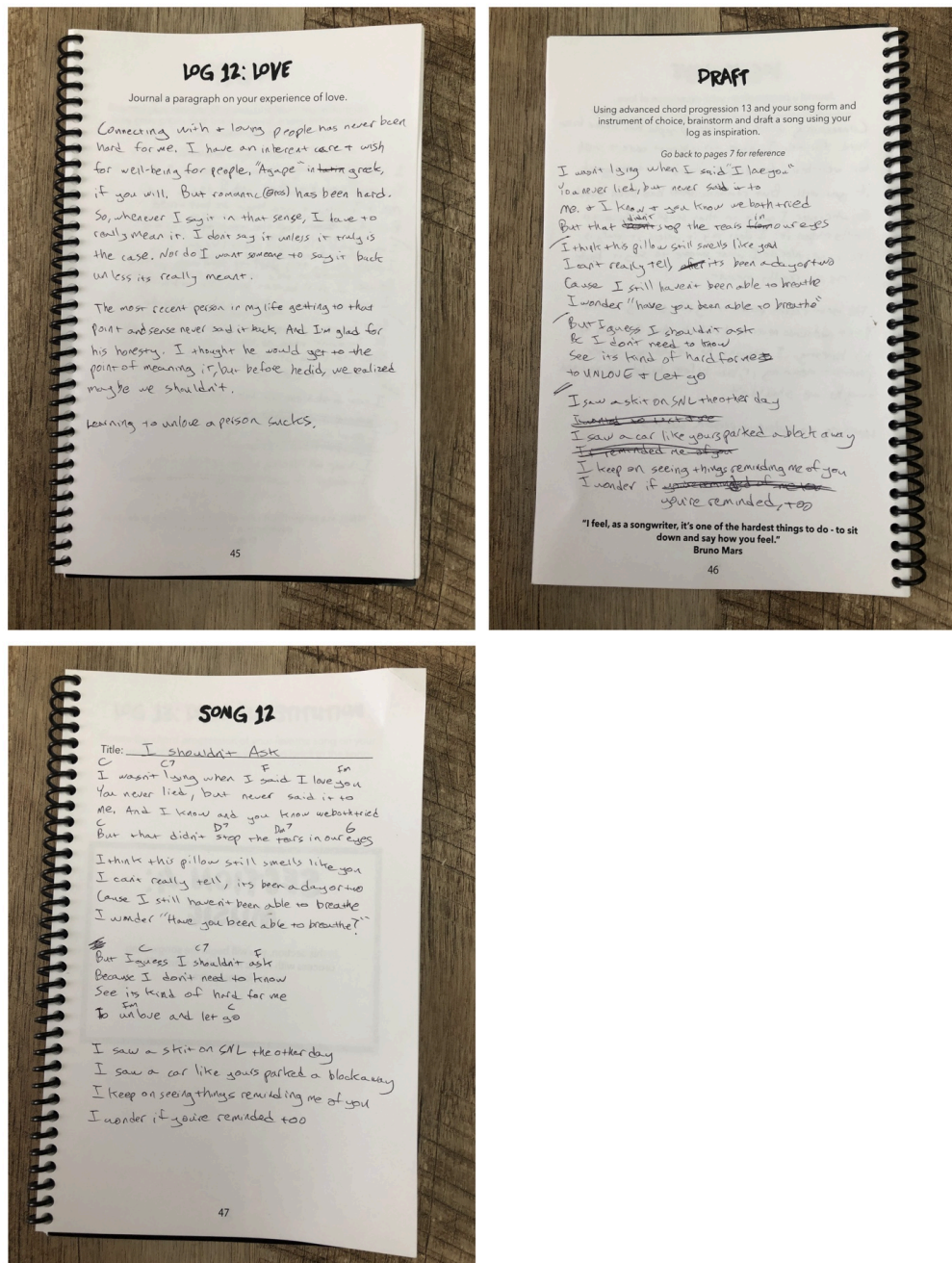


Figure 3a, b, c

While the journal’s present form is tactile and compact, my future aspiration is to expand into a low-cost e-book version to allow for increased accessibility, digital distribution, page extraction, and physical printing. The e-book format would include a fillable PDF or document format to allow its users to type up, instead of write out, their reflections and songs. In addition to expanding the format, I hope to expand its content in both culture and language. Created in the context of an American music therapy program, the content of the journal lends itself to Western music styles. While multi-cultural courses aim to teach on the influences of history and traditions on cultural styles from around the world, writing presents a different challenge from understanding and learning repertoire. I would like to learn from and collaborate with music therapists who come from different backgrounds than myself and/or speak and work in non-English speaking areas. With these collaborations, my hope is to work together to develop different iterations of this journal. The iterations would include publications in primary languages or dialects of a country or region that are inclusive of the pop

musical styles and approaches of its culture, as well as a comprehensive version, combining the diverse iterations and gearing it towards western music therapists striving for cultural humility in their therapeutic songwriting work.

Currently, *SPACE: A Journal for (Future) Music Therapists to Explore and Express through Songwriting* is available both in individual and bulk. It may be purchased on Amazon and through Sarsen Publishing.

## About the Author

Gabrielle Banzon is a music therapist currently residing in Atlanta, GA. She received her Bachelors in Music Therapy with a minor in Music Technology from Georgia College & State University in 2014, and her Masters of Arts in Music Therapy from Texas Woman's University in 2017. While she currently works with adults with various disabilities and acquired brain injuries, her other clinical interests include songwriting, music production, mental health, community approaches, and theories/philosophies. She currently serves on the International Relations Committee for AMTA, manages and co-hosts Clinical BOPulations the podcast, and presents regionally and nationally.

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