

Chris McNulty

Vocalist

Interview by Winthrop Bedford

JJ: Can you talk about your upbringing in Australia? Who or what inspired you to begin serious study and pursue a career as a vocalist?

Chris McNulty: I started writing short stories and poems around eleven years of age. In a way, I found my creative spirit fairly early on. It was a great escape from the mundane. Certainly not much of a culture of books, art, and music flourished in our house, so I guess I created my own. Coming from a family of six, my folks were only able to provide the very basics. I used whatever tools I could access: imagination, pen, and paper – that was it. Reading the Bronte sisters and all those English classics were inspiring, lots of imagination there, some rich visual textures too. I'd heard very little jazz as a kid growing up except for singers like Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett. I was mesmerized by both. Still, in a way it was a great time to be young. I was listening to the music on the radio – Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, Marvin Gaye, Donny Hathaway, Jimmy Hendrix, The Beatles, Cream, Yes, Dylan, The Allman Bros, Aretha, Stevie Wonder, Crosby, Stills & Nash. The list goes on and all of it inspired me but especially the soulful R&B and Motown stuff. The great jazz of that period and earlier was something that I got to about a

particular time, I was mostly singing a capella. There was no accompaniment in those very early days. I had to create my own meter; the drama came from pure spirit. I just sat very quietly and sang. People would stop talking and listen. I guess I was a mixture of brave and shy, if you can believe that someone could be both? I was singing six nights a week by the time I was sixteen and on the road at eighteen, with one suitcase, a few books, and a bag of cassette tapes, often in the company of five or six guys. At that time women musicians in Australia were virtually unheard of. All in all, it made for a fairly tough apprenticeship back in the 70s. The road offered a mix of freedom along with literally zero support. Coming from the strict confines of my family background, freedom to roam in a boundless sea of space and time was certainly a new experience, and yet in another way it had a real shrinking effect on my view of the world. Back then, there were few mentors. Women players were, as I said, literally non-existent. I was surrounded by a bunch of guys most of the time, most of whom had no inclination towards jazz. I got off the road after two long stints and decided that I needed a place to hang my hat for a while. By that time, shortly after my last road tour, a big change had taken place which had a life-altering effect on me. In fact, it changed the course of my life forever. I discovered Billie



here. There's a recording of Carmen's that has been out of print for decades, called *Bitter Sweet* – really stunning, I think with Barney Kessell and Herb Ellis. I just heard her version of "How Little We Know" yesterday on WBGO. I guess that was recorded back in 1959? Carmen was something, but of course Billie Holiday led the way for me and then Sarah Vaughn. Those *Live in Japan* recordings were also my measure of how to move the phrasing around. I still can't believe what Sarah does with "I'll Remember April." I recorded that on my first release here, "Waltz for Debby", and the really bizarre thing is that I sang the same wrong lyrics as Sarah did, because I thought she was God. Thanks, Sarah! [laughs] Anyway, those records were my library. I learned everything from those recordings. I'd never heard of fake books so whatever they sang, I believed to be sacrosanct, and in a way it was and still is. But it took me a while to figure out that the melody that Sarah was singing on "I'll Remember April" was not even close to the original. That taught me a lot, like to go to the written music and check the melody *and* lyrics first. Sounds simple now, but back then and living Australia, it wasn't that obvious. I am certainly forever indebted to those four singers in particular for putting jazz permanently in my heart and for getting me to some difficult stuff very early. Between the studio work, steady gigs, and regular engagements on several national television programs, I was able to make a pretty good living. However, in 1987 I applied for an international study grant through the Australia Council and was awarded a rather modest grant which I decided to use towards study in NYC for three months. With my then-seven-year-old son in tow, I arrived in NYC in March 1988 and as luck would have it recorded *Waltz for Debby* six months later. I actually never returned to Australia to live again. That decision, those choices have come at a huge price. I wanted to be where the real action was, the real music, at the center of it all, and I made some very big sacrifices, some of which I am only now starting to appreciate. You don't always know the effect the choices you make at one stage of your life will have on a later stage. I guess in a weird way it's a bit like composing music – you have a beginning, you sometimes don't have anything else

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decade later, around the age of 21. I'm still sifting through it, so that's a testament to the other amazing thing – creative music, jazz, if it's real, stands the test of time and remains timeless. Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* is a perfect example. There are of course many others. I think I stopped writing stories as soon as I started singing at around age fourteen or fifteen. I have no idea what drove me to switch from writing to singing. Many of my friends and my sisters especially encouraged me to sing. Some of the encouragement was driven by ulterior motives: "You sing; we get free hot chocolate and crumpets!" Perhaps one of the reasons why my pitch developed in a certain way was that at this par-

Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Carmen McRae and Nancy Wilson – nothing was ever the same for me after that. I stayed put for several years and was able to supplement my career as a jazz musician by steady studio work, as both a soloist and as a vocal group singer singing anything from soap commercials to arranging vocal groups on the spot for country and western artists. All the while I had my jazz trio thing going on. I guess I was around 22 years of age. So after an apprenticeship cutting my teeth on pop, funk and R&B, I found myself completely hooked on jazz. I wore the grooves out on some of those recordings and to this day still believe that's some of the best jazz singing you will ever, ever

for quite a while, you write the harmony and it affects the outcome considerably, you don't always know how or even why. Writing or arranging often comes down to a bunch of decisions. In the end, you're left with your gut instincts, but sometimes the choice, the final decision, comes from way outside the box.

JJ: Could you talk about your experience with Gary Bartz and John Hicks? Were there specific things that you learned from them or which inspired you?

CM: I'd been listening to both Gary and John since I arrived here in 1988, and of course they both played at Bradley's a lot back then. I got to know their playing in a fairly intimate setting, where you could hear every note and see the entire breadth of what John was doing with his hands. Peter Leitch was the conduit for us doing that record, *A Time for Love*, together. At first I felt a little intimidated sitting in amongst those truly great masters, but you know, those cats are some of the coolest cats on the planet. You never got attitude or ego with them. That music was swinging so hard you quickly forgot about your own limitations or fear of having any. In a way, not only do they elevate the music by taking it to a whole other level, they elevate everyone around them including the musicians they are playing with – they make you a better musician. John, he was all beauty. I remember getting together with him for about an hour before that date to run two tunes, "Porgy" and "I Will Say Goodbye." He wasn't familiar with the latter, but just dealt with it as if he was a student meeting the music for the first time. It was pretty awesome to see what a humble and at the same time majestic soul he was. We really didn't rehearse at all. I remember being in the studio and calling "Porgy." The tape was rolling before Gary and I had a chance to even talk through the head, he glanced through the glass – I realized there was about five seconds to get whatever I had to get across – and I just sang out, "Just play anything off the melody. It's just you and me rubato till the time comes in at 'I loves you Porgy.'" That was it. That tune in particular remains one of my most favorite recordings. I'm actually listening to Gary Bartz's *Soprano Stories* right now, which coincidentally John Hicks is actually playing on. The two of them together and apart were and are such unique players who always put such an individual stamp on anything they played. I'm listening to "I Get Along Without You Very Well," when you hear Gary hit that high F to A-flat coming into the top of the second head; you know there's no mistaking that for anyone else but Gary. Every time I listen to him I learn something. It's hard to know how to carry this over to the voice. I don't have that genius but I hope that somehow it goes in there and helps inform how and what I hear. I hope one day as well as hearing a touch of this and that from some great singer or musician that maybe someday someone might hear a touch of Bartz coming out of what I do. That's a long way off, for sure! John Hicks was on my mind a lot these past six months. I really wanted to record with him

again. I left it too late; my plan was to do a straight-ahead piano trio, but I got caught up in writing this string quartet for another originals project and decided to make it for the next one. I'm sorry that I missed the opportunity to get close to his creative genius again before he passed. I hope I can write something for him instead. His spirit was and remains so strong. I'm listening to him playing on the final track of *Soprano Stories*, "Nobody Else But Me" – a very fitting note to end this on. That just about sums John up perfectly!

JJ: When did you begin composing and writing lyrics to songs?

CM: I didn't find my way back to writing, then in the form of music, until around 25 years of age – perhaps a decade or so after I gave up writing stories for singing at age fifteen. If my memory serves me correctly, I think even then I was hearing way outside the box, moving through a lot of tonalities, but I didn't know what I was doing. Instead of developing that, I started focusing on writing lyrics to some of the instrumental music I was studying at the time – tunes like Dolphin Dance. Soon afterwards I began collaborating with other musicians on compositions and started to combine the two. I still didn't know how to document the music in the correct manner. That came much later; it's been a long journey! I started getting more serious about composing in a way where I could score for myself around six or so years ago. I guess juggling several day jobs and raising a child on my own just took way too much energy. Perhaps starting with "Pablo" on *I Remember You*, which I wrote in 2000, was when the tables started to turn. Since then I have been learning more and more about composition and trying to document my ideas whichever way I can – always starting on piano, then switching to a computer program such as Sibelius, and then perhaps integrating Pro tools with the help of Paul Bollenback. All have been challenging but at the same time empowering. I am not a piano player, but I write everything from the piano. The computer program really helps me realize the music I am writing in a rhythmic way. The harmony I write is fairly untraditional, so often times I can't always play every component of an original tune in perfect time. The voicings are often specific for the melodies and sometimes a challenge for me to master on piano.

JJ: What is the source of your inspiration for composing – or ideas for lyrics in general – and for specific tunes, your own as well as tunes written by other composers, such as your lyrics to the Miles Davis classic "Blue in Green"?

CM: Well the source is a bit of a mystery. Something has to motivate you – or you have to force the motivation. It depends on the situation. I may have to motivate myself and other times, someone like Paul Bollenback will ask me to write something and then I really have to dig in. Paul Bollenback has also been a real source of inspiration technically. He is such a well-

schooled and awesome musician, a great educator with a tremendous capacity for digging deep. I guess most people think that creative artists must be driven by an inner urge to express something from deep inside and as true as this is, I also know that so much is informed by the external. So, the source is a combination of forces from within and without. Something can be profoundly affecting to one's spirit but that doesn't necessarily translate to wanting to write about it, either compositionally or lyrically. At the same time when something does affect me enough to write about it then I will definitely do it, as was the case with *Lullaby for a Young Boy* on this new release. The lyric was informed from an article I read while visiting Baltimore. A short synopsis appears in the accompanying booklet on the *Whispers the Heart* CD. I am drawn to composing for many reasons. There's a positive and a negative: I didn't come out of any academic background but I also didn't inherit some of the restrictions that may also come from a schooled environment. Put another way, I haven't learned all the rules so I am constantly breaking them, sometimes much to the chagrin of my musical partner. But seriously, he and most of the musicians playing my music most times find it really refreshing and interesting. It still has its own strong logic; the melody and harmony do work. The struggle is also an integral part of the mystery too. For me, lyrics always come after the musical piece is completed. I may have an idea, a sense of what it might be saying. The music often starts to tell you – the melody, the harmony, the rhythm – is it joyful, solemn? Everything informs the sense of things, so I wait, and then I wait some more. The lyrics can be strangely there and then not there – it doesn't make a lot of sense, I know. Well as I said, it's all mystery. The lyrics come when they come. You can work and re-work a lyric and it can be a huge struggle, especially when you consider that in my case, I have already written the musical piece. The syllables are already locked in; if you change or add a syllable it can alter the flow of the melody enormously. Sometimes one eighth-note or one rest can change the breathing, the rhythm, the flow of a part of the melody. Sometimes a lyric can fall from the universe, nearly like it's given to you, wrapped up in ribbon – it truly can be like that. I think "Blue and Green" came in one evening. That's what I mean: the lyric can already be there or seem like it is anyway, waiting for you, anyone, to discover. Or it can not be there at all and then it feels like you have to dig into every corner of the universe to find one word! In the end I am careful to respect the music that I wrote originally. But as someone recently reminded me, you can alter a song and keep reworking over a long period of time. I haven't done this consciously but I'm sure my writing is coming out of a certain way of hearing. It may stay like that for another ten years and then all of sudden I may be catapulted off into a whole other way of hearing. The compositions will reflect that for sure.

JJ: Let's discuss your newest CD, *Whispers the Heart*, and how it developed. What kind of the

rehearsal or preparation do you undertake in learning a song, and in preparing for a recording? Did anything happen in the studio that was out of the ordinary?

CM: I think musicians in general often like to leave things to the last minute. Not sure why – perhaps we like the adrenaline rush pushing us, but I am definitely one of that kind. I prepare, but it's almost always under the gun. I started writing and really focusing about six weeks before the recording date, though I had the skeleton of several parts of each of my tunes together. Paul Bollenback and I really know how to dig in and get the work done, and believe me, it *is* work! Running this record company, Elefant Dreams, and sharing the producing and creative roles can be a real challenge. There's no one else but us, save for a few assistants from time to time. Paul will often set up a Pro tools file for the originals while I am working on the final form of each tune and refining the score in a computer program such as Sibelius. We can then get an idea of what the whole thing might sound like with some real and midi instrumentation, which can help if you are writing for a larger ensemble with a bunch of instruments such as horns and strings. It's also great to be able to cut and paste different ideas for vamps and figures. That can be kind of fun after scoring something for days on end. For me, the work of finishing a composition, making final decisions on the arrangement and scoring it can be long and tedious, so getting to a different component is always refreshing. I don't always get a chance to start focusing on the vocal side of things until after all this composing and scoring work is done. With *Whispers the Heart*, I found that all three original compositions took a lot of work to complete. Writing a string quartet for one of the originals and one standard was more than challenging, but I'm really glad I did it. The final result can be most satisfying – if it works. The musicians on the date were all amazing. I am always astounded by the ability these musicians in particular have, in reading down some complicated piece of music and in one or two takes, not only nail the heck out of it, but play it their way. The vibe that players like Ingrid Jensen, Paul Bollenback, Dave Pietro, Frank Wess, and Tineke Postma put on some of those solos is truly mind-blowing. Then you have someone like Ed Howard who was like the rock of Gibraltar – ridiculous. So having players of this caliber on the date made it very sweet indeed.

JJ: What can accompanists do to make it easy for you and enhance your performances?

CM: Dig in and really listen to the phrasing and what I'm trying to do on my choruses. The musicians I just mentioned already do that so I really find I get a lot of support – they wouldn't be where they are if they didn't know how to listen and abet. I don't want musicians playing it too safe but on the other hand I also need someone who has a well developed sense of space – some of it has to do with getting used to each others' styles – where he/she hears it, time-wise. In the



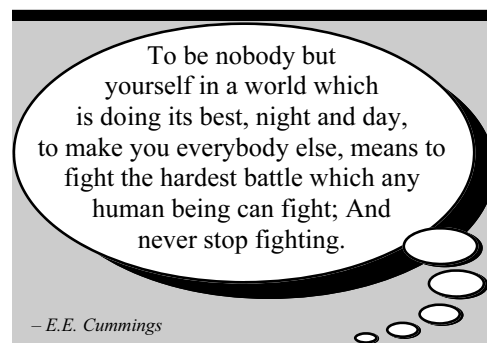
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end it's really about a good match. Paul Bollenback and myself do a lot of duet work together in many and varied settings. You can hear how naturally locked in we are after about two bars. We've had the advantage of playing together a lot. That's a real luxury. It doesn't happen that easily by chance but it can. I play with great players all the time. I can't tell someone how to play at this stage of the game. I call players for the unique stamp they bring to the music, and have to accept that the outcome may be slightly and sometimes largely different from what I had in mind. There's a real art to knowing when to step in and direct and when to let the thing develop and evolve to something new and unexpected. I am still shy after all these years, so I come to the table with a reserved set of demands. Maybe that will change and I'll become more dictatorial. [laughs] I truly believe you have to have a clear vision and a willfulness to create the music, but then a willingness and trust to let it be what it's going to be. You always want the magic, but sometimes it's a struggle to get it. In a way I have never liked the word accompaniment. There are two or three or more players playing together at any one time. The magic is in listening together first, then whoever is the main focus on each chorus – be it vocalist soloing with the lyric or without, flugelhorn, sax, guitar, piano, bass, or drums – the empathy has to be there to enhance what the soloist is doing. The melody can be a little hidden, barely alluded to, not played at all; the harmony re-worked, but I believe the song is in there somewhere and the melody is a strong component of any song. You can bury it with all sorts of rearranged voicings or altered harmony, but in the end the thread for me is that you recognize that the song has a form and the form comes from the melody.

JJ: Could you talk about one or two memorable experiences on the road – perhaps a funny anecdote or something that might have provided a lesson?

CM: There are so many. Well, I guess the trips to Russia were pretty memorable; funny I'm not so sure. I'd say the first one in particular: we were in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and then two places in Western Siberia – Tomsk and Novo-

kuznetsk. We were literally mobbed by a crowd of screaming fans in Tomsk, a thought somewhat bizarre because I thought that only happened to rock stars. Hey, it was fun! Afterwards when we actually got to speak with some of them, I was completely blown away by the level of intellect these kids displayed for their age – they were all perhaps between the ages of 16-22. Their questions and their language skills were pretty remarkable and they spoke English eloquently! I was later reminded of the great Russian intellectuals who were force-marched across the plains into Western Siberia. Many of the ones who survived settled in Tomsk. I realized later that those young kids were most probably their direct descendants. First impressions always stick hard and I was really taken by the whole place, the vibe, the enormous landscape – especially since we drove from Tomsk to Novokuznetsk, a five-hour drive, in the middle of a Russian winter! On top of all that we were there during the hostage crisis that happened in Moscow. I have to say that after experiencing September 11th first-hand, even if from five miles north, to then have the “immaculate” timing to be in Moscow during another terrorist attack was kind of large, emotionally. We'd been having the most amazing time, too. The people, the normal everyday Russian people were just incredibly warm and strong. Then this thing happened, and we were off-loaded in the middle of a blizzard on the tarmac on no sleep. Delirious was an understatement. No one would answer our questions about why we were all being off-loaded. This, I guess, was at the time that they grounded all flights and went in and raided the theater. It was a pretty bad scene all around. Thank God for the Russian



To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; And never stop fighting.
– E.E. Cummings

vodka, no one knew what was going on. We didn't find out what really happened until we landed at back at JFK. But, life happens, you can be in the wrong place at the wrong time, you can be born in the wrong country, to the wrong parents even. I'm still here as luck would have it. I guess you take your chances when you travel to far and distant places. But hey, you could also just as easily be living a very safe life, not move from your block and end up getting hit on the head by falling rock – or more likely an air-conditioner if you live in NYC. This almost happened to me a couple years ago, while sitting at the piano in my apartment! So I say have an adventurous life, it's a whole lot more exciting even if the stress shaves a few years off at the end!

JJ: What suggestions can you give to young musicians about developing their careers and finding success in today's music business?

CM: It's a tough question. In a way, it's so much harder to get an apprenticeship playing live these days. The focus has turned towards college campuses for this kind of experience, which in itself is not a bad thing. The level of playing that many young students of this music display is extremely high. Their knowledge and ability, for instance, to play in all sorts of odd-meter times and count is astounding. However, there are many more players too. The question is: Is there enough work to support the enormous amount of time and money that goes into developing your craft and then your career? And it does cost! In a way you nearly have to take that out of the equation. But how do you encourage this, knowing that you also have to survive? It's getting harder and harder for young artists to do this, as you see many more 20-, even 30-year-olds are still living at home. NYC has become a haven for the rich and wealthy – the kids who can afford to live downtown independently are not paying their bills independently; their parents are! For the kids who come from humble beginnings and can barely dream about getting to college, the concept of living in the East Village no longer exists – the rents are now too high. I've seen so much change in 30 years. The environment and opportunities change as a result. You have to play with other musicians. Of course you have to practice to refine your skills, listen and learn, stay dedicated, focused. It's difficult at the best of times, but now there's so much else going on around you, there's so much glamour around pop music. The incentives to play jazz and then go through the hardships of surviving can be and often are insurmountable. We did this when we were young and out on the road. It was just 100% music, and lots of fun in a way, though still hard. Now the struggle is defined so much by dollars both in the business of music and the personal pursuit of creative attainment. I certainly like the idea that there's a lot more study these days. An environment that can support and sustain the pursuit of academic skills is of course a good one. We had none of that – there were very few opportunities to do it that way back then. Not academically speaking, any-

way. Now you have very few opportunities to do it the other way. On the other hand, there's so much that young and even older musicians can do. You can make your own records and do amazing things, so it's always a matter of trying to weigh up how to get there from here. Best advice I can offer is: how good or great do you want to be? If you aspire to the highest place, then be prepared to sacrifice a lot. If you have limited resources, find other players who aspire to the highest level. Each will give the other the inspiration to reach higher. The energy of creating music together is addictive and hugely sustaining. Great jazz musicians know how to tap into that energy source. A creative life is well worth striving for, but living the life remains the challenge. In the end it's a huge privilege to have it and it comes at a price.

JJ: What are the characteristics that distinguish an artist's own sound, and how would you characterize yours?

CM: I can only talk about the voice on this subject, as each instrument has its own set of limitations to master. For me the characteristics that I believe define uniqueness as an artist would be as follows: natural pitch and rhythm, breath control, technical prowess, pureness of tone, an organic approach to creativity and improvisation, an ability to listen to what's going on around you and enhance or elevate that music at one and the same time, a commitment to never sacrificing the music for the sake of drama or cleverness, composing and/or arranging your own material. I aspire to these qualities and try to encompass these ideas and approaches in my artistic pursuit, but it's not for me to say if I have mastered them all. In a way I hope not, because there's always something to learn every day. I have a list a mile long, just wish I had a few more lifetimes to fit it all in.

JJ: What books and thought has influenced you significantly? What are you reading?

CM: I've been reading a little bit of Ernest Shurtleff Holmes – he has some really cool ideas on existence and the path to fulfillment. His thing is really spiritual but also draws from some traditional religion. Very logical, but his concepts, though not simple by any means, can be applied rather easily. I've not read enough to know where it's taking me, but it's had an impact – I need to practice his methodology. Anita Brown, the great orchestrator-composer turned me on to him and I am really indebted to her for that.

JJ: If there is one for you, what is the connection between music and spirituality?

CM: The main thread is through creativity. Playing, sharing, giving the gift of music definitely gets you in touch with something that to me encourages empathy with other human beings. It's communal – all music is. Just the fact that we as jazz musicians, love to explore, hear, or play other forms of music and are informed and motivated by that exploration, reinforces this

fact. This is much to the chagrin of some really narrow-minded journalists out there who seem hell-bent on trying to dictate what we should be doing with this music based on a premise that has nothing to do with the time we are actually living in. In a broader sense, music has no boundaries: it does not divide and separate, lock people out, say one is better than the other, one truer than the other – though I guess some jazz purists and classical snobs might be guilty of that! [laughs] But generally speaking music heals and softens, uplifts or engages the spirit. It brings people together. Human beings are more likely to commit random acts of kindness than random acts of violence, though you'd never know that from watching the news or television. In the end I think what defines our spirituality is not how many times we pray or go to church, but how much we care and how much we act. Spreading a culture of meanness leads to a collective poisoning of the spirit. I hope that whatever is going on here and elsewhere right now will come to an end soon and the folks who carry this burden will disappear and take their meanness of spirit with them. Playing music, listening to music, writing, dancing, painting, doing anything creative does more to develop a sense of balance and joy in people's hearts than anything I can think of. I think happiness gives people a chance to explore real spirituality. Unhappiness, despair, brutality only leads to a warped sense of it. Morality and integrity should come from an inner urge to seek spirituality. It starts with what we teach and show our children and one would hope that by example they will follow. Creativity – the use of the imagination – comes from a similar place. You have to be willful about it; you have to struggle for it. It's a journey of discovery about yourself but the end result, you hope, is something that brings pleasure and joy and comfort to others. That's a whole other kind of spirituality.

JJ: What words of wisdom have you received from a teacher or mentor? Is there a quotation or fragment of wisdom that has inspired you or that you abide by?

CM: I feel like I've received so much from so many over the years. Here's a quote I like but don't always find easy to live up to: "Before you speak, ask yourself, is it kind, is it necessary, is it true, does it improve on the silence?" I've also had this hand written note that I've managed to carry with me for close to two decades. It's an excerpt from Kierkegaard's *Letter to Jette*, written in 1847. "Above all do not lose your desire to walk... I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it..." That works for me – it's not that spiritual but in the end if I walk, it helps my spirit feel good. Walking is a good thing for the soul. So is swimming and running; anything that makes you breath deeply or laugh.

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