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Music

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baring teen balladry on the radio today, and performers still rarely write their own material. But as the liner notes to *One Kiss* are careful to point out, some of these girls were more than singers, and the girl-group boom enabled them to establish careers as songwriters: among them were Stevie Wonder collaborator Syreeta Wright, a 17-year-old Mary Wells, and Dusty Springfield's biggest influence, Evie Sands, who has two early singles included in the set.

Sands's 1970 debut album for A&M, *Any Way That You Want Me*, reissued for the first time by UK label Rev-Ola in September, picks up where the girl-group box leaves off, tiptoeing into the



post-Woodstock era. On the cover, clad in a dark brown pantsuit and tunic, she cruises a dirt road on her ten-speed, her long hair flowing, the very picture of the carefree and liberated new woman of the 70s. She's not even looking at the camera, as if to imply that she just happened to cruise into the frame in her special carefree way.

While the album consists mostly of love songs, unlike on *One Kiss* not every phrase begins with the word *baby*, and the portrayals of romance are a bit more grown-up. The man and his love are still elusive, but the girl is asking for more than hand-holding: she also wants friendship. On the album opener, "Crazy Annie," she's even the one doing the leaving.

Any Way That You Want Me sold 500,000 copies, but the bigger deal for Sands was the inclusion of "It's This I Am," which she describes in her liner notes for the reissue as a "thrill and personal milestone . . . the first time I had gotten to record and release a song I had written." The rest of the record consists of songs that had already been made hits by everyone from the Troggs to Jackie Ross, but "It's This I Am" is the most memorable moment; the song has since been covered by Beck and Beth Orton, and Belle & Sebastian are such fans that they backed Sands on two dates on her European comeback tour in 2000.

A whisper-quiet, splendor-in-psych drift of faraway strings, electric piano, and indeterminate twinkling sounds, "It's This I Am" is Sands's haunting response to the firm prescriptions set for her and every other girl singer of the era. It's a liberation anthem, and she asserts her dynamism in a rich voice, sure and melancholy: "I'm that great divide / That never was at all / That's neither large nor heavy / That's neither light or small / It always was and will be / Forever through all time / It's here and there and nowhere / Always is / It's this I am I find." She's defining who she is rather than who she is in relation to some absentee heartbreaker boy. And she is beyond definition. ■

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Books

TRIKSTA: LIFE AND DEATH AND NEW ORLEANS RAP NIK COHN (KNOPF)

The Bounce Remains the Same

Nik Cohn tried to influence New Orleans rap but all he got was this lousy nickname.

By Robert Mentzer

White, British, and pushing 60, Nik Cohn never fit in with New Orleans's rap scene, but for a brief period in the late 90s and early 00s he explored its margins as a journalist, talent scout, and manager. *Triksta*, his book about this period, is partly a memoir, partly a meditation on hip-hop, and partly an exposé of what's under the glittering surface of the music industry. But mostly it's a story about hubris: Cohn's an outsider who tried to harness and influence the scene and failed in spectacular fashion to do either.

Cohn, the author of 1968's *Awopbopalooop Alopbamboom* (often cited as the first book of rock criticism), has been obsessed with New Orleans since childhood: he writes vividly and enchantingly about

the city and its music, from his early fascination with Jelly Roll Morton to his first visit there in 1972, while on the road with the Who. Though he later moved to New York, he continued to rent a house in New Orleans for several months each year, describing the city as "the lover I could never be free of." And he knows New Orleans's hip-hop scene, which centers on bounce, a club-centric, bump-and-grind style. Cohn puts on his musicologist's hat to explain that bounce is "patterned on the call-and-response of Mardi Gras Indian chants," but another way to put it is that it's hip-hop with the formal rigidity of a square dance, with the MC commanding the crowd—bend over and touch the floor, now turn around,

now throw your hands up.

Cohn knew the music, but he didn't feel it until the 90s, after he was diagnosed with hepatitis C. Hep C's symptoms include insomnia and exhaustion, but to hear Cohn tell it the diagnosis forced him to live his life in a new, reenergized way. So he catches a parade float in New Orleans blasting a bounce track, Magnolia Shorty's "Monkey on tha Dick," and it connects. "The effect was baptismal," he writes.

Cohn's initial research leads him to Earl Mackie, a Jehovah's Witness whose label, Take Fo' Records, specializes in sex raps. (Mackie's faith prevents him from releasing records advocating violence, but he believes sex is an acceptable theme. "It beats



killing people," he says.) Cohn brokers a major-label deal for one of Mackie's artists, Choppa, and is initially granted a budget of \$250,000 from Warner Brothers to make an album. "I would select producers," he writes, "provide song ideas, hire guest artists and singers and live musicians as required,

and try to keep Choppa's nose to the grindstone." He even writes lyrics: "Bend it over, catch the wall / Wobble wobble for me."

It's not giving away a significant plot point to say that the deal eventually falls through and Choppa defects to Master P's New No Limit Records. Bounce insiders bristle at his attempts to turn a regional genre into a national success. One producer all but calls Cohn a carpetbagger, and Choppa is deaf to Cohn's talk about broader career strategies. "They love me all over," Choppa tells him. "Baton Rouge, Shreveport, Lafayette. Everywhere."

Triksta is full of interactions like this, where Cohn and the artists seem to be talking past **continued on page 28**

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Books

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each other. Bounce's rules are inflexible, and Cohn's ideas simply don't match up with his artists'. Cohn wants an ode to independent women and single mothers, but Choppa just wants another remix of his familiar hit, "Choppa Style." Cohn leaves a voice mail for producer Supa Dave suggesting a change to a bass line, and the message gets played in the studio to riotous laughter. Choppa nicknames Cohn "Triksa" during a pot-fueled studio session, after first calling him "Nik da Trik." Neither name is exactly affectionate.

Triksa is constructed in part from pieces Cohn wrote

for *Granta*, the *Guardian Weekend* magazine, and British *GQ*, and its seams occasionally show—the chronology is scrambled, and the stories of many characters are confined to a single chapter. But the book has a compelling theme in Cohn's relationship to New Orleans as well as his constant grappling with race, particularly race in pop music from the earliest days of rock 'n' roll to the present. He worries that his obsession with black musicians has "some taint of idealization, the flip side of condescension," and that sort of candor keeps *Triksa* from becoming a work of unintentional comedy.

Cohn's in his element when he's looking closely at hip-hop's allure, especially how and why it titillates white audiences. He's conflicted about gangsta rap and devotes numerous pages to his love-hate relationship with it, but for Cohn the hedonism of bounce accurately reflects a very New Orleans worldview: "Fantasy, braggadocio, myth—these weren't just fancy words for lying, but a sort of art. . . . That was how I came to think of New Orleans: my city of beautiful lies."

Triksa was written and printed before Hurricane Katrina, and it's hard to read it now as anything other than

a kind of memorial. Certain passages have an eerie premonitory tone, as when the mother of once bounce producer describes the decay of her neighborhood: "Now there was nothing left, just wickedness and crime, and God was mocked. . . . But he would not be mocked forever, no, God always had the last word."

Katrina also reveals just how difficult a task Cohn created for himself: even the hurricane couldn't rewrite the rules of New Orleans hip-hop. Rapper and Cash Money Records president Lil' Wayne, who was raised in New Orleans, recently released *Tha Carter II* (Cash Money/Universal), which

contains not one reference to Katrina. He had no interest in pursuing new subject matter, he recently told the *New York Times*. "When I get behind the mike, I got a whole 'nother mind frame," he said. "I rap about what they wanna hear." Master P recently addressed the disaster by releasing *Hurricane Katrina—We Gon' Bounce Back* (Gutter Music), an album by bounce supergroup the 504 Boyz, but most of the tracks wouldn't sound out of place on any of No Limit's late-90s releases. Resilience is at the heart of bounce—*Triksa* ends when Cohn gives up the rap game, but the game keeps right on going. **B**



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Books

THE RIDDLE OF THE TRAVELING SKULL HARRY STEPHEN KEELER (MCSWEENEY'S BOOKS)

The Case of the Lost Logorrhic

McSweeney's brings local mystery stylist Harry Stephen Keeler back into print.

By John Marr

Between 1924 and 1953 Chicago native Harry Stephen Keeler published about 50 of the most exuberantly odd mysteries ever written. Set in a seemingly alternate universe thick with eccentrics—and exclamation points—Keeler's novels feature a dozen or more disparate plot strands woven together through an astonishing agglomeration of weird wills, lunatic laws, crackpot contracts, idiotic oaths, and some of the most outrageously beautiful, layered coincidences ever put to paper. The *New York Times* could but marvel, of one forgotten title, "You cannot possibly dream of anything half so bizarre as the yarn Mr. Keeler has strung together."

Although he enjoyed moderate commercial success early in his career—one of his books was the basis for a Bela Lugosi film, *The Mysterious Mr. Wong*—Keeler was long out of print when he died in 1967. But after his death, a small cult began scouring used-book stores for titles like *The Skull of the Waltzing Clown* and *The Mystery of the Fiddling*

Cracksman. Articles celebrating his demented aesthetic began to appear in publications ranging from the *Journal of Popular Culture* to the *New Republic*, and his fame started to grow. This winter McSweeney's Books formally launches a Keeler revival with its reprint of *The Riddle of the Traveling Skull*, originally published in 1934. It's the first Keeler to see print in America in more than 50 years.

Even the staunchest fan will admit that Keeler is not for everyone. Consider this typical sentence, from the first chapter of *The Riddle*:

"For it must be remembered that at the time I knew quite nothing, naturally, concerning Milo Payne, the mysterious Cockney talking Englishman with the checkered long-beaked Sherlockholmsian cap; nor of the latter's 'Barr Bag' which was as like my own bag as one Milwaukee wienerwurst is like another; nor of Legga, the Human Spider, with her four legs and six arms; nor of Ichabod Chang, ex-convict, and son of Don Chang; nor of the elu-

sive poetess, Abigail Sprigee; nor of the Great Simon, with his 2163 pearl buttons; nor, of—in short, I then knew quite nothing about anything or anybody involved in the affair of which I now became a part, unless perchance it were my Nemesis, Sophie Kratzenschneiderwumpel or 'Suing Sophie!'"

This is the sort of prose that led one reviewer to accuse him of writing in Choctaw. But if you can see a certain loopy beauty in the ornate syntax and rampant semicolons; if you can sense the touch of a genius in the creation of Legga the Human Spider and the Great Simon; or if you're just wondering how the hell it can all come together coherently, Keeler is a sublime pleasure.

The Riddle of the Traveling Skull opens with narrator Clay Calthorpe returning home to Chicago from a business trip to Asia. He's worried about a potential entanglement with "Suing Sophie," a middle-aged missionary who files breach-of-promise suits against every man who crosses her path. However, she's soon relegated to the back burn-



er when Clay opens his bag and finds inside, instead of his toiletries, a trepanned skull.

He quickly deduces that he must have switched bags with a clergyman on a Broadway street-car. However, this is no ordinary trepanned skull—and in short order Clay is mugged and relieved of the object by a mysterious Chinese man, inexplicably jilted by his fiancée, and inadvertently involved in blackmail directed against his employer and potential father-in-law, Roger Pelton.

To untangle the mystery, Clay sets out on an odyssey through

Keeler's beloved "London of the West"—a thoroughly skewed Chicago. One memorable sequence finds him hunting for clues in a cemetery dedicated to circus freaks. He finally determines that the skull belongs to a man Pelton murdered 20 years ago. The skull contains incontrovertible evidence of Pelton's guilt and is now in the hands of a blackmailer intent on his ruin. But after spotting the "Sherlockholmsian" hat and a ventriloquist's dummy outfitted as a cockney costermonger in Pelton's butler's room, Clay is prepared to unmask the blackmailer.

At this point, two-thirds of the way through the book, the publisher issues a "Challenge to the Reader." An insert announces, "Stop! At this point all the necessary clues have been presented to make it possible for you to determine the identity of the blackmailer. CAN YOU DO IT?"

Blanks are helpfully provided for the reader to write down a guess, but the answer is: of course not. The solution to a

continued on page 31

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Letters

continued on from page 3

cial comic section. It will be popular in comics and cartooning circles, and the only ad revenue there is if there's an arrangement with the holders of the print advertising on the page of ads included in the block to shell out a little extra based on downloads. In this case, yes, the Web would not be making any money for the *Reader*.

Now past the issue of whether bloggers prevent money from flowing to the print media or actually help it, there's the issue of whether online journalists can do anything besides link to print sources (and help the revenues of the print

sources who have an online revenue model). Is there original journalistic content online? Of course. Check out *Chicagoist.com*. While they link to some print-originated material, they do plenty of original work in areas print publications gloss over.

Chicagodailynews.org should be up and running before too long and will be specializing in original material. You can hardly be online for half an hour without accidentally tripping over political commentary. Liberal, conservative—whatever—the commentary is out there. Print columnists expanding their output online, people who are online only. The value of the

political commentator is determined by the individual reader, not the editor, and certainly not by whether the commentator's words are on paper or a screen. It is freedom of what you want to read.

Newspapers and magazines have revenue models that are based primarily on advertising. Alternative weeklies like the *Reader* are based exclusively on advertising. Web pages are based primarily on advertising, with a few entering into the realm of subscription and another set reaping the benefits of selling merchandise that complements their product and/or topic area. The product is not so different; the medium the prod-

uct is distributed in is a little different. The Internet is also a much more inclusive and robust distribution system.

I hope Mr. Lenehan can quit wailing like an infant with soiled diapers and learn about the different types of ways to distribute a news story and to get a check for it. The model is changing, and you can either adapt or go have a drink with those nice young men from the buggy-whip factory.

Todd Allen

Adjunct professor of e-business
Columbia College

Michael Lenehan replies:

Over here at the Buggy Whip Gazette we are very grateful to

Professor Allen for so patiently sharing his e-business expertise, particularly in the area of advertising, a subject we know very little about. I fear, however, that my humble attempt at humor has eluded him in a variety of ways, of which I'd like to address just one: With capital letters and a great deal of condescension, Mr. Allen informs us that blogs provide FREE ADVERTISING for newspapers and generate traffic for their Web sites. In his eagerness to deliver a lecture, he seems to have completely missed my point about the Wonkette item in question, which was precisely that it did neither. Forgive me for repeating myself, but Wonkette linked to Sploid, a sibling blog, and to a page on Yahoo News. The item made no mention of the *Houston Chronicle*, which originated the story, or the AP, which delivered it to Yahoo.

Damn the Health Taliban

After reading Ben Joravsky's piece on Chicago's smoking ban [The Works, December 30], I found it odd that he fails to mention the fact that "second-hand smoke" damage itself is about as proven as "intelligent design." Or the fact that despite humanity being aware of possible damage from inhaling smoke since the first caveman tried building a fire within the cave, not to mention the fact that citizens have many choices of places to go that don't allow smoking, some people feel Big Mother needs to step in and form the Health Taliban.

But since the conservatives have their own pseudoscience justifying the War on Drug Users, liberals need some too, evidently.

John Biederman

DailyLimerick.net

Ben Joravsky replies:

My point was that the city started with the assumption that secondhand smoke is dangerous then did nothing about it.

Swift Justice

Dear Michael [Lenehan],

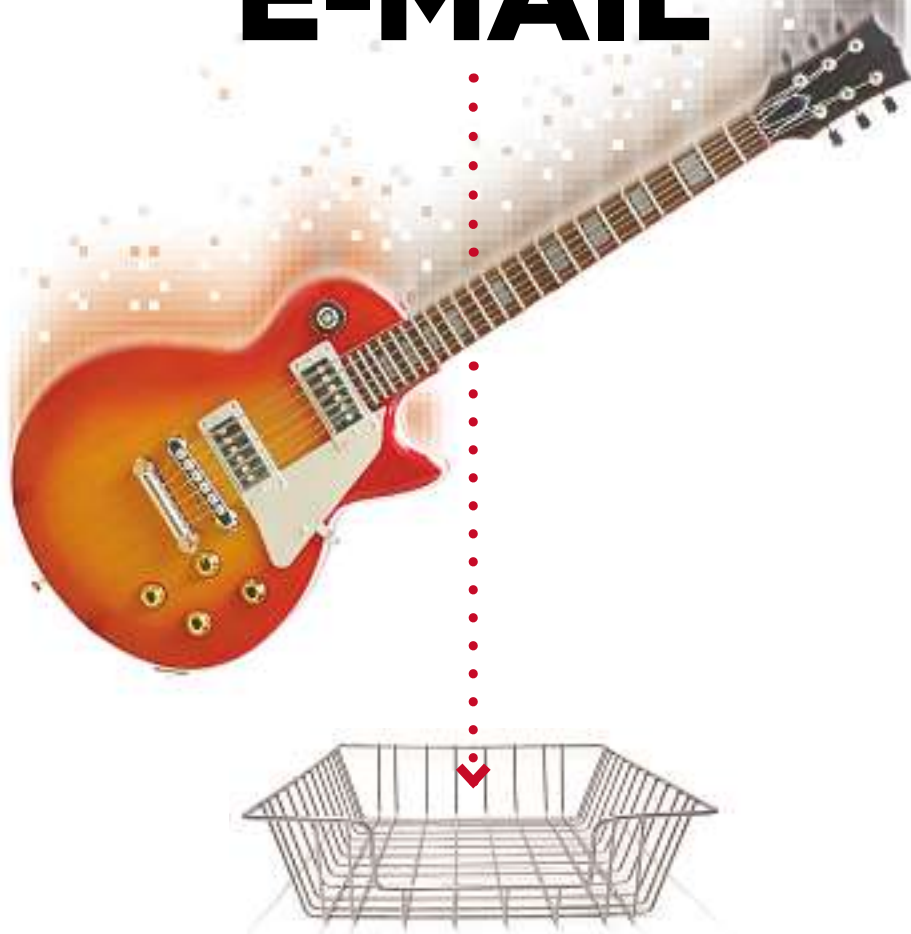
I enjoyed your piece in the latest *Reader* ["A Year Without Journalism," December 30], and your modest proposal for a year's sabbatical for journalists. As I'm sure Swift would've agreed, perhaps those daughters (and sons) of reporters and writers who are unsuitable for lives of prostitution can be eaten.

Fred Donini-Lenhoff

River Forest

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Books

continued from page 29

Keeler mystery is impossible to divine from mere clues, and Keeler had a penchant for introducing twist upon turn upon complication right up to the final page. Clay's impeccably reasoned solution quickly crumbles when the truth comes out; the final answer involves so many unlikely coincidences and almost avant-garde literary devices (including four characters who all turn out to be the same person) that it's almost postmodern.

It's not too surprising that this sort of tomfoolery didn't play too well in post-World War II America. As cold war paranoia set in, mysteries grew increasingly straight and serious and the popularity of hard-boiled writers like Mickey Spillane and Erle Stanley Gardner skyrocketed. Even Ellery Queen swapped his pince-nez for a psychology textbook. Against this buttoned-down backdrop—when a “cult writer” meant someone like Kafka—Keeler must have appeared hopelessly screwy, if not downright un-American. But with the line between high and low culture now so intractably blurred, his time may have finally come. **B**

Ink Well by Ben Tausig

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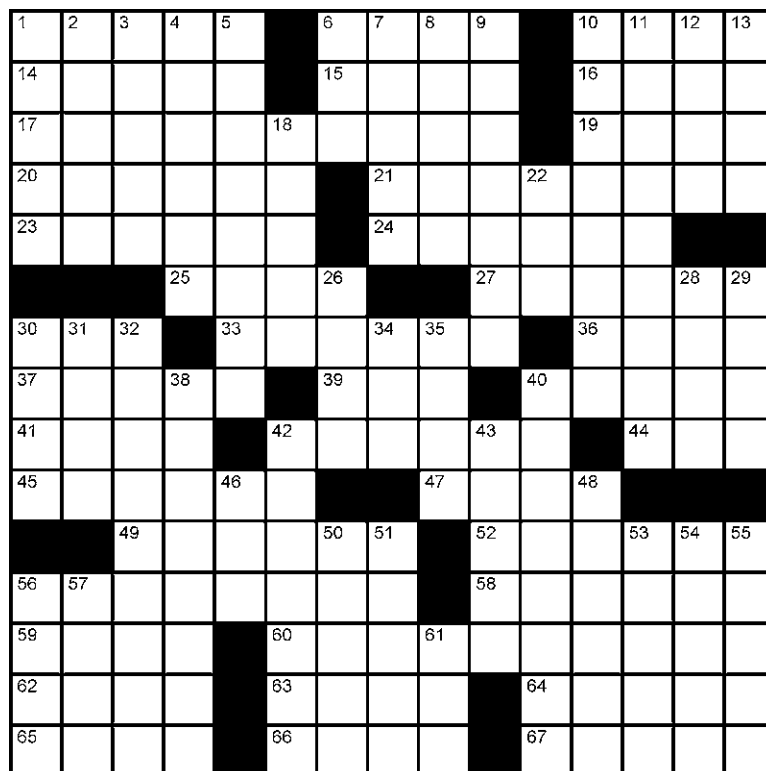
ACROSS

- 1. “No problemo!”
- 6. Quarters in college
- 10. Genghis or Chaka
- 14. “___ a drink . . .”
- 15. Trice of hip-hop
- 16. Reprehensible
- 17. Driving instructor?
- 19. Premade waffle option
- 20. Riffs
- 21. <
- 23. Take down the aisle, in a way
- 24. Really
- 25. Not busy
- 27. More sore
- 30. Chi. summer hours
- 33. Add slack
- 36. Plus-size model
- 37. Stand-up responses
- 39. What a swish misses
- 40. False start?
- 41. Early garden

- 42. Arbitrator who calls strikes
- 44. Puncture sound
- 45. Buckle up
- 47. Four: prefix
- 49. Greenpeace target, at times
- 52. Desisted
- 56. Mr. or Ms. Right
- 58. Hit the big time
- 59. Smart
- 60. Crepe paper?
- 62. Ancient South American empire
- 63. Land of limericks
- 64. Halloween 2005 nominee
- 65. Stern's opposite
- 66. Went platinum, perhaps, but probably not gold
- 67. Phone company that merged with Bell Atlantic in 1996

DOWN

- 1. Cuban, e.g.
- 2. Battery terminal
- 3. Carter and Gwyn
- 4. Flouts
- 5. Nuts
- 6. One may lead the blind
- 7. Division symbols
- 8. Out of bed
- 9. Seinfeld, notably
- 10. Bitches
- 11. Joint publication?
- 12. Seaweed, e.g.
- 13. Dodge model
- 18. Playground retort
- 22. Pouch
- 26. Apple problem
- 28. Big Aussie birds
- 29. Bolsheviks
- 30. Child, notably



- 31. Subversive art movement
- 32. Rap sheet?
- 34. Nurse
- 35. Give off
- 38. Civil War battleground
- 40. Perpetual child
- 42. Like a model in a life-drawing class
- 43. Play the highlight reel
- 46. Wing
- 48. Nearly never
- 50. Type of tower
- 51. Bottled spirit
- 53. Protest strategy
- 54. Online party-planning resource
- 55. Dry out, so to speak
- 56. “Get ___!”
- 57. Litter's littlest
- 61. Not to mention

LAST WEEK: SOUNDS LIKE LOVE



IMPROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP



The Emmy Award-winning producers of **Taxicab Confessions**, in association with **Dr. Laura Berman**, are creating a new Showtime TV series to help couples solve their relationship issues. Couples will spend a week at the Berman Center in Chicago and their experiences will be filmed for this series.



Dr. Laura Berman, Ph.D

The **Berman Center** is a state-of-the-art facility dedicated to helping couples repair their relationships and enjoy a happy and healthy sexual life. Dr. Berman has helped thousands of couples solve their problems and build stronger relationships.

If you and your partner are struggling with relationship conflicts or sexual issues, you are eligible for this opportunity. Couples chosen will be flown to Chicago to participate in a free week long workshop that will help you and your partner achieve the closeness, communication and sexual intimacy that is missing from your relationship.

Call 1-800-854-0018

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