

REGGAE ACROSS THE AMERICAS

Reggae Roots and Reggaeton

by Mike Clark

Apart from those special trips to Jamaica, many *Reggae Festival Guide* readers have sweet memories of tropical Latin paradises and get-a-ways in Mexico, Central America and Brazil. Almost always Bob Marley is there with us. We hear him in the disco or dancehall at night, on the beach or on the radio during the day. But to listen to popular media, one would think that reggaeton is the only thing happening musically in Latin America. Is there any more to reggae in Latin America than "La Gasolina?"

Here's the good news. Roots reggae is alive and well in Latin America. It's hot, it's conscious and tens of millions of people across the region are listening to the vibes. Indeed, "reggae Latino" artists have taken Bob Marley's music and message and exploded it in a frenzy of incredible musical creativity. From Tijuana and San Diego in the north, through Tierra del Fuego in Chile and Argentina in the south, the Americas are ablaze with homegrown reggae Latino, reggae en Español and reggae en Portugues.

Gondwana, Chile's reggae super group held the #1 slot on national and regional pop charts several times and played in sold-out venues of 60,000 and national TV hook-ups. Puerto Ricans don't just make reggaeton: reggae roots doesn't come much sweeter than those from Puerto Rican roots groups *Filosofía*, *Umoja* and *Cultura Profética*. In Costa Rica, tens of thousands of fans come together for irie shows in soccer stadiums, with artists from Argentina, Jamaica, Chile and strong Costa Rican artists – *Mekatelyu*, *Bamaselo*, *Native Culture* – breakin' up da place.

In Mexico, Antidoping plays to huge crowds across the country and boasts of four CDs, including a riotous live performance from Chiapas (the heart of Mexico's Zapatista Revolt) put out in 2002. Dr. Dread worked with *Los Cafres* from Argentina in 1994 and *Gondwana* in 2002. These groups are some of hundreds across Argentina and neighboring countries who produce an avalanche of CDs every year and



Ed Boboshanti of Zion the Promise Land in Venezuela

play nearly every night of the year, in small venues or huge festivals.

Reggae in Spanish and Portuguese taking hold in Latin America? It really only makes sense. Take a look at Trenchtown – vibrancy and creativity exploding side-by-side with down-pression and hopelessness. Unemployment. Corruption. Injustice. Racism. Colonialism. But Trenchtown, Jamaica, is the birthplace of reggae. Take a look at Santiago de Chile, Mexico City, Caracas de Venezuela, Rio de Janeiro or any big city anywhere in Latin America and you are sure to find the same – vast cities built of cardboard – harboring despair, hunger, suffering, struggle, rebellion, protest and solidarity. Just as in Trenchtown, the message of Rasta – that message of dignity and hope – finds fertile ground and flourishes here. Add the rap-

idly increasing social and financial collapse many countries across the region face as U.S.-imposed neo-liberal economic policies wreak havoc from Argentina to Nicaragua and you have a recipe for a revolution of consciousness, and you can hear the music of the revolution rising across the region. "Get Up. Stand Up. Stand up for Your Rights!" Bob Marley's message has morphed and reproduced itself a thousand times in Spanish, Portuguese and English across the Americas in the last 20 years and the pace quickens every day.

Luis Enrique Loll, member of the Venezuelan cultural roots group *Negus Nagast* says: "The message of Rasta is pretty much the same in any part of the world...in the poor and working classes or among the high class. Remember that the rich are rich by having a rich, deep spirit...that's what it means to be rich. Having money doesn't make you rich...rich lies in having a high level of spirituality. Money doesn't bring you happiness; it helps, but it doesn't bring happiness unless you have a high level of spirituality. It's like the human body; in the head you have all the information and the body responds. But if you stand on your head, what happens? You can't think, all the blood rushes to your head, you feel bad, etc., etc. It's the same thing with spirituality. Your head is your spirituality and your body is the material plane. Spirituality always needs to be superior to the material. THIS is the message of Rasta..."

William Benitez (Selector Kalonji)

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One Love. Reggae en Latino expresses the sentiments of struggle, rebellion, solidarity and protest against the system..."

In one sense the question is this: What is it that has migrated from Jamaica to the barrios of the Americas? Is it reggae music or is it Rasta? Is it the infectious beat that moves souls around the globe, with lyrics of higher consciousness? Or is it H.I.M. Haille Selassie, ital and righteous living in One Love, One Destiny?

The answer is that *both* have migrated, the music *and* the consciousness of One Love.

Take a listen, even if you don't speak Spanish. It's reggae roots for sure, at least most of it. Whether it's Antidoping or Ganja from Mexico, Sensimilla Dub or Tribu Do Jah from Brazil, Alike or Radio Roots from Argentina, Negus Nagast from Venezuela – or any of hundreds of other groups – you will know that great Latin American musicians have taken the roots from JA and made it their own. Listen – you'll hear salsa beats weaving through reggae groups Cultura Profetica and Gomba Jahbari from Puerto Rico. Listen – you'll hear Gondwana's use of indigenous instruments. Brazilian reggae is like no other, fused with driving Brazilian percussion. Soul Vibration from Bluefields, Nicaragua uses bold instrumentation in "Reggae del Coco" and Mekatelyu from Costa Rica takes a dive into cumbia reggae. Alike and Nueva Alianza from Argentina move fluidly from Nyabinghi to conscious dancehall rhythms.

Artists are breaking out across the region, from Kimia Na Mokili in Uruguay to Anastasio y Los Del Monte in El Salvador, from Resistencia Suburbana and Lumumba in Argentina to Raices y Cultura in Panamá and Elijah Emanuel in California. Don't forget that Latin America is at one level a lot of "local" national markets – some quite small – and groups often

find great success through the hard work of lots of local shows and home-grown publicity and recording.

Quinta Porra Muella of the rock reggae group Quinta Porra of Medellín, Colombia calls the reggae scene there "...extensive and growing. There are lots of bands, many of which are extensions of other musical movements or currents, such as rock en

Español and ska, and even punk."

He continues, "Of course we have festivals and events. We have Rock al Parque, the largest free, open-air show in Latin America. We have reggae and ska festivals, there is a good scene in bars and we have concerts with international artists like Los Pericos (Argentina), Skatalites, The Wailers and local artists like Los Coffee Makers, Providencia,

Alerta, among many more. There is a great strong vibe at these shows – peaceful, harmonious."

Valentino Thompson of Negus Negast is enthusiastic about reggae there. "The reggae movement in Venezuela grows immensely day by day and it is something that we, as musicians, should take as a matter of great pride. The proof lies in more and bigger reggae concerts, with international artists coming to connect with our musicians. This is to say nothing of the backing we have received from promoters backing reggae artists."

Costa Rica is tiny but reggae is a huge force on the local music scene. Drawing on a rich musical heritage on the Atlantic Coast around Limon populated by decedents of Jamaicans, Costa Rican reggae roots groups have proliferated. Bamaselo sings in both English and Spanish in their new CD, blasting the political corruption in both languages. Trinity Roots Band entreats the security forces to "leave the Rasta in peace."

Radio is the key in more than one country. NattyRadio.com streams reggae roots in English and Spanish, 24 hours a day. Selector Kalonji from Venezuela, Selector Livy from Costa Rica and a host of DJs in Mexico City spin a hot mix of roots. In Santa Cruz, California KZSC.org offers up reggae en Español – *Tres Americas* – every Saturday morning across the Central Coast (and its huge Spanish-speaking population) at 10,000 watts and on the internet. In Costa Rica, *Vibes* airs reggae across the entire country, and on the internet, every Sunday afternoon on 91.1 La Radio. In Colombia, reggae takes over the airwaves on Radio Nacional for several hours every Sunday in Cartagena. In Argentina, RockPop 95.9 airs live reggae roots on *La de Dios (That Which Is of God)*, every Saturday from 2 a.m. through the night.



Singer, Pulga, of the Venezuelan group Negus Negast

William Benitez (Selector Kalonji)



Venezuelan Reggae group Negus Negast

William Benitez (Selector Kalonji)

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But what about Rasta? How much of the message of Rasta, of Haile Selassie, has penetrated the consciousness of the various countries across the continent?

Muñe, from the Argentine group Butumbaba talks about his corner of South America: "The Rasta movement in Argentina, for the moment, isn't very popular. For sure, there is lots of posing, those that speak of Jah, but don't show it in their style of living. There are a few true Rastas here and there. Now speaking of the reggae movement, that is something different. Lots, and I mean LOTS of reggae!! We are living in great times – we hope that it is not just a passing style. There are hundreds of bands in the country and the movement keeps growing."

Alika is a female reggae star sometimes compared to Dezarie, who speaks to the question of faith and righteous living. "The Rasta movement in Argentina, where I have lived for the last six years, is quite small. We are few here, generally young people with a lot of strength and desire to learn. In the reggae scene there are lots of bands but they aren't Rasta. Sure you will see members with locks and sporting the colors of Ethiopia, but those of us who stand up for Haile Selassie I Dios Todopoderoso, we are quite few."

Elijah Emanuel, Panamanian artist performing there and in the U.S. observes that, "Roots reggae and the philosophy/livity of Rastafari in my country of Panama, is a very underground movement. It is not popular at all in the mainstream and there are many negative stereotypes that most people have in regards to Rasta, which is born out of ignorance and a lack of real interest on the subject. Be that as it may, there are also many in my country who identify with the movement and the music."

Costa Rica is known around the world as the country that abolished its army and promotes peace. Nevertheless, a small group of Costa Rican Rastas living a strict Ital lifestyle in a communal Boboshanti community just

outside the capital of San José were subject to intense media scrutiny during 2004 with television and newspaper crews making regular visits investigating their habits. Finally, the anti-narcotics squad of the public security force descended on their commune in a scene out of cops, handcuffing the occupants and ripping the house apart. Officials had to admit that they found absolutely nothing; charges were never brought and human rights groups decried the brute force of the police brought down on peaceful innocents.

Cuba has a small, strong Rasta community but Cimarron from Cimarron Reggae reports that, "the community in Cuba is one of the most oppressed due to continual police persecution and jailing of brothers and sisters. In addition, the Cuban community faces the impossibility of professionally recording or distributing their music and transmission over the airwaves is impossible unless it is reggaeton." Roots groups Insurrectos, Militar Dread and Magia Negra manage to survive on the island, and Ras Coco has a CD



Alika and Vale perform live for radio show La de Dios in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

La de Dios (Rock & Pop 95.9FM, Buenos Aires)

produced in Mexico and appeared in Mexico City in May of this year.

Ras Manu of Nuevas Raices in Argentina is even more direct: "For myself I want to separate the concept of Rasta from that of reggae or ganja – they are very different – but they can all be included in one single answer: Haile Selassie I is King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of Tribe of Judah. This is Truth and it knows no borders, no race, and therefore any person in the world can feel the love of Jah, and can interpret reggae."

"Latin Americans" are far from a homogenous group. Quino McWhinney, lead singer of the California-based reggae roots group Big Mountain lives the incongruity of being a Spanish-speaking Chicano Rasta musician residing in San Diego, CA.

To him, the spiritual aspect of Rasta is the key: "When I came back to San Diego after a major record deal, I knew I needed to get in touch with my own roots, my Chicano roots. I knew could apply my lessons from reggae to the Mexican-American

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community. We as a community see so many of our young people going 'the wrong way' in their lives. I always admired the techniques of Jamaicans in strengthening integrity, integrity of the youth and of the women, with reggae music. It is so important to teach the youth to look into history and know your culture. My own work with Native Americans, and especially with the Mexican musicians Los Alacranes, taught me how everything and everyone is linked. I'm good with saying 'I am a Chicano Rasta.' These are the spiritual ingredients that have brought me to this place. I am just being sincere in sharing things that have helped me grow as a human being."

The seed of Rasta has put down deep roots in Venezuela also. In July 2004, more than 60 persons came together as representatives of the various Rastafarian communities in that country: Negus Crew, La Kumbe Bafana and the Valencia Groundation. Billy Mystic (of the Mystic Revealers) led the conference: "You have all read in the *Bible* that Zion is the mountain where Jah lives, but for me it is a deep feeling, a moment in which one feels satisfied and happy. It is an experience in which you need nothing more – it's just you and Jah. The question is in how to increase spaces like this, create the forces that help you feel like this." Valencia Groundation has created weekly Sunday spaces, "Thanks and Praise Groundations," in the middle of the concrete jungle of the city of Valencia, where Venezuelans of all colors come together for a brief irie afternoon.

Race is one of the biggest plagues the Americas suffer. Robert Nesta spoke it all when he challenged us to embrace One Love. Now in the 21st century, each Latin American country is confronting its own racial past and future: a multitude of



Daniel Pérez

Costa Rican roots group, Bamaselo, takes a break from performance.

ancient indigenous communities; the legacy of millions of African slaves brought in chains; Chinese and East Indians fleeing poverty; successive waves of immigrants from across Europe.

Luis Enrique Loll clarifies the question considerably: "It's simple really. We all come from Africa. If you are White,

Black, 'Indian' or whatever, scientifically and spiritually we come from Africa. Studies have shown it to be true. In our own case as a Caribbean nation – with the wonderful mix of races that we are – we are a living example that we are all One – a living example that there



La de Dios (Rock & Pop 95.9FM, Buenos Aires)

Ras Manu of Argentinian group Nuevas Raices

is one God and that God does not see if you are White or Black in order to bless you with His power. This is the maximum evidence!" He talks excitedly about Venezuela: "Here's the most direct – I open the door to my house and my neighbor is 'Black' of Trinidadian parents, his wife is 'White' of Italian parents and the children are Venezuelans – one with blue eyes and one with dark eyes. Cross the street and you meet the Chinese restaurant owner who is married to an East Indian! Spectacular! Do you understand? In this country there is no racism. What there is, is class-ism. What we do see on Venezuelan television here are people of all colors working together, something you don't see often in the U.S. or Europe. Moreover, the majority of us don't know our own heritage. In my own family, my brothers and I are very different physically – curly hair, thick straight hair – and that's how we are. I have grandparents from Canary Islands, indigenous and Italian, African....so what am I? We are ALL ONE...one color, One Love."

Elijah Emanuel speaks about his own experience: "Panamá is a very unique country in that most of the population is of mixed parentage, the mixes being Spanish, indigenous and African. I have all three of these cultures running through my bloodline. My great-grandfather was a full-blooded Black African that married an indigenous Cholina whose mother was of European heritage. What does this mix of races mean for my country and for its inhabitants? It's an issue of identity. I can identify with my African roots, which gives me a spiritual and genetic access into the consciousness of Rasta. Many people in my country, whether consciously or unconsciously, share a similar connection. But, unfortunately, many Latin American countries, Panamá included, all suffer from a heavy historical dose of indoctrination, economic exploitation, class-ism and a biased Eurocentric view of the world which is fostered in the

public fool-systems. Rasta represents a spiritual and historical accuracy that is lacking in the mind-set of many Latinos. But this can change. The moment Latinos become more aware of their African connection, a shift can take place. Roots reggae en Español becomes the first trumpet call of truth..."

Magdiel Madonado of the Puerto Rican group Filosofia comments that in the case of Puerto Rico, as with many countries around the Americas, "A huge majority of the population has 'Africa' running in their veins." Bearing down hard on the message of Rasta, Magdiel continues, "Racism isn't something restricted to Caucasians' prejudice against Blacks. Everybody has access to the message of Rasta."

Some "strict" Rastas question the legitimacy of a cry for "justice" or "freedom for Africa" coming from the lips of a seemingly Caucasian-Latino singer in Buenos Aires. Some Jamaicans look askance at Mexican or Chilean or Costa Rican dreads.

Once again, Alike speaks to the heart of the issue. "Well, first of all, I don't like the word "Latino" because the word refers to Rome, and I and I have nothing to do with Rome. Thence, I consider Africans as my ancestors, and Africa as the Mother of Nations, and that those who were brought to America in slavery were those who brought Africa to these shores. You can see it clearly in the culture of the countries of South America, in the music, in the people (just look at the faces), and even in the language. Rastafari is for the whole world, all nations, and they now have to understand that His Imperial Majesty is King of Kings and Lord of Lords Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Dios Todopoderoso. and that each and every one of us have the right to give thanks and praise. He calls us,

and we respond to the call. Those who have no right to enslave the people of the world are those demons that currently run the governments of the world, those who will be destroyed by the purifying fire of the Most High God Jah Rastafari!"

Reggae roots music and consciousness in Latin America, then, is growing and spreading in nearly every country in the region, with a



Alike is ready to release her third CD of Argentine conscious roots.

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few exceptions. Elijah Emanuel reminds us, "It's a struggle for us, the roots musicians of our day, who so happen to write, sing, arrange and produce original, organic and spiritually charged music for the masses. Why is it a struggle? Many people are not so receptive to this kind of message. Most people – but not all – want a watered-down entertainment version of reggae. Most people – but not all – do not want to be challenged. Most people – but not all – want to escape from reality and not embrace it."

Millions upon millions of souls have heard the message of Rasta for the first time in their own language and taken the message to their heart and meditated on it in their own way. Somehow, it seems likely that Robert Nesta Marley is smiling when he hears the sweet melodies of reggae Latino rising to Jah in Praise and Thanksgiving.



Diego Martinez www.labelrecord.com

Radio Roots out of Buenos Aires has taken the local scene by storm with their CD *Politiqueros*.

REGGAETON

Reggaeton is dancehall's Spanish-speaking cousin and it has been around for a while, bubbling under the surface. This is the dance craze swamping Latin America and poised to do the same here in the U.S.

Reggaeton is shaping up to be THE craze of 2005. Daddy Yankee, Don Omar, Ivy Queen, Hector El Bambino, Lunny Tunes and DJ Nelson, sold out two shows in two hours at L.A.'s Universal Amphitheater in May. Daddy Yankee packed in 60,000 fans in Bogotá, Colombia and the young artist out of Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, churned out more than 130 tracks over the last several years. Many hip-hop artists are pairing up for reggaeton cuts: Sean Paul, Nina Sky, Cypress Hill, 50 Cent and Fat Joe with Puerto Rico's Tego Calderon and Ivy Queen. While reggaeton has flourished in Puerto Rico, it really was born in Panama. Jamaicans were brought to Panama to help build the Panama Canal and they stayed, introducing reggae to the isthmus. Reggae cuts from JA were well known in neighboring Puerto Rico; then hip-hop hit both countries in the mid- and late-80s and the die was cast. El General was among the first artists in Panama and the beats quickly migrated to Puerto Rico where salsa and

meringue were added to the stew, and reggaeton took by storm the youth in the streets and dance halls. It's been there in the background in Peru, Venezuela and Mexico for several years as sort of "underground" music, but in the last several years reggaeton has literally exploded out of Panama, Puerto Rico and Cuba and hits such as Daddy Yankee's "Gasolina" can be heard on the streets and in the dancehalls from Argentina to Miami.

The basic reggaeton rhythm is likely to be similar to ragga dancehall beats and vocal styles range from hip-hop to Tego Calderon's laid-back style. But that Puerto Rican bomba or plena rhythm on a driving drum track, *that* is what makes reggaeton reggaeton. Sensuously danceable. Infectious. Daddy Yankee's last release *Barrio Fino* ventured into salsa, rap, and r&b style reggaeton, but the driving drum track keeps it reggaeton. Reggaeton is, above all else, dance music. More than that, it's dance music of the youth. Since time immemorial, the dance moves of the youth cause scandal among the elder, and so it is with reggaeton. El perrito (the doggie), self-explanatory dance moves that are reggaeton mainstays, provoke moral outrage in certain circles in the hemisphere. Expletive-laced lyrics in some tracks have done little to burnish reggaeton's reputation among skeptics. When reggaeton was more underground, the lyrics a bit more raw, Puerto Rico's politicians looked at action to ban the music from the radio. New artists have made reggaeton much more "ready for prime time," but reggaeton still carries something of a bad boy image. Daddy Yankee's lyrics range from love to blistering social commentary.

Just like reggae, reggaeton was born and nurtured in the poor neighborhoods, in this case in Puerto Rico, Panama, "La Tiraera" or "The Challenge" (or perhaps "The Diss") to other artists to engage in lyrical wars has been part of reggaeton for some time – the competition to stay on top is fierce. Karl William Morales, promoter, feels that the lyrics are a reflection of contemporary society. "It's steamy, the music. It fires you up to dance and the lyrics speak to us of day-to-day life, of real life in the streets. It's something that the senators in their chambers, they don't understand. It's something that people in government and politicians don't understand, because they simply don't speak the same language."

REGGAE VS. REGGAETON

Classifying music and generalizing about artists is risky business. Nevertheless, some folks end up scratching their heads and asking, "What's the difference between reggae roots en Español and reggaeton?"

Like cousins, these two genres of music have quite a bit in common. Both trace their roots to Trenchtown and Jamaican roots. Both reggae roots en Español and reggaeton have sprung from the sizzling slums of Latin America, and both speak in their own way about the dreams and frustrations of

those relegated to the bottom of the economic ladder by the down-pressure of Babylon.

Nearly all of these artists have achieved commercial success in their own countries or on the international scene, largely through their own efforts. Recognition of this music by the “big” record companies is very recent in reggaeton, and the exception rather than the rule among reggae roots en Español artists. It has been said that the big companies see reggaeton as a chance to once again live “La Vida Loca” like the good old days with Ricky Martin.

While the vast majority of the lyrics are in Spanish in reggaeton and reggae roots (along with some Portuguese), English is creeping in among artists across the spectrum and across the region. Not only that, U.S. hip-hop performers and some Jamaican roots artists, such as Tony Rebel and Sean Paul, are “crossing over” to perform in Spanish!

Artists in both genres draw liberally on the rich tapestry of rhythms from across Latin America. Ever since Panamanians started playing with Jamaican roots music in the late '70s, artists from more than a dozen countries have infused reggae roots rhythms with their own distinctive beats and instrumentation, giving the music a spirit many call “fresh and alive.” The Panamanians forged plena, which was the first reggae in Español, and the Puerto Ricans have made it reggaeton, and made it famous.

There are big differences between reggae roots and reggaeton. Reggaeton, more than anything, is a dance craze. Reggaeton is party music. Reggaeton takes pride in its roots in the barrio, in its “rudo” or bad boy image; the driving beat and performance style make reggaeton more aggressive than roots music. More than anything, reggaeton gets you up to dance!

It's literally a different vibe with reggae roots en Español. Reggae roots speaks to your soul and strives to lift you to feel irie (and to dance if you feel like it). You won't hear Jah Rastafari mentioned in a reggaeton hit, though surely some reggaeton artists are writing conscious lyrics.

That is not to say that reggae roots en Español isn't danceable. Reggae roots in Spanish or Portuguese, just as in English, calls the listener to a higher vibration, to a deeper spiritual meditation. Reggae roots artists take Bob Marley's message and translate it into Spanish and Portuguese precisely so that the reggae massive of Latin America can hear the good news of Rasta.

The biggest difference lies in the make-up of the bands. A reggaeton artist may, like Daddy Yankee, perform alone with just a drum machine/sampler backing up. Queen Ivy has one hip-hop back-up singer, a couple of dancers and the ubiquitous drum machine. Reggae roots group Gondwana from Chile, on the other hand, travels with 12 musicians, including

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percussion, horns and two keyboards.

Think of reggae roots and reggaeton as lights in the darkness. Roots would be the big, steady, long-burning candle that brings a smooth, constant glow over the long haul. It's probably too early to tell with reggaeton; it surely is burning bright. Time will tell whether reggaeton is like the match that flares quickly and then goes out, or something more durable.



William Benitez (Selector Kalonji)

The Reggae Massive at One Love Reggae Fest in Caracas, Venezuela sends greetings and an irie vibe.

HOOK UP! The internet is unequalled for information about reggae en Español.

ReggaeFestivalGuide.com has an extended version of this article in English and Spanish, along with other links to sites in English, Spanish and Portuguese.

Check out these sites also:

3americas.org/kzscreggae

latinbp.com/history.htm

reggaeseek.com

jamaicans.com/music/reggae_brazil.htm

If you are interested in purchasing the sounds, several record houses in Central and South America will be able to help. For example, **labelrecord.com**.

If you want to listen to reggaeton dance rhythms, check out the CD/DVD set titled *Chosen Few: El Documental* with a collection of 25 tracks and a documentary about reggaeton. **reggaetonline.net** ♡

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