

The 1990s “Kutaisi Wave”: Music and Youth Movement in a Postindustrial Periphery

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In the summer of 2001, long before I became an ethnomusicologist, I first traveled to Tbilisi, capital of the Republic of Georgia, to intern in the now-defunct State Ministry of Property Management. One of my assignments was to accompany a German energy engineer to Kutaisi, a former industrial center in the western region of Imereti and Georgia’s second-largest city, to assess the condition of three local hydroelectric plants. More than the obvious signs of neglect and resultant decay in Kutaisi, I was struck by the plurality of layers of history visible on the city skyline. There were ancient cave dwellings carved in the cliffs of the surrounding Greater Caucasus foothills and, dating from the period in which Georgia was first unified politically, dramatic architectural monuments like the ruins of Bagrat’i Cathedral (constructed 1003 CE) and the exquisitely preserved monastery-academy complex at Gelati (1120-30 CE). Beneath these were the swollen dams, giant, corroded pipes, and mildewed skeletons of former industrial command centers once powered by the waters of the mighty Rioni River. The workers at one plant, I was told, had to jump into the river to check the chemical levels since they had no instruments to do the work for them. Still, they were considered lucky to have a job. In the shady park adjacent to the city’s central square, dreary-looking men sat or milled about throughout the afternoon, halfheartedly hawking their wares and services to passersby. My hosts told me that the local unemployment rate had soared to seventy percent. Hyperbole or not, that figure spoke to residents’ lived experience of acute economic decline and attendant social crisis in the first decade of post-Soviet Georgian independence.

Aside from functioning as a hub for the production of hydroelectric energy in the Soviet era, Kutaisi also developed into a prosperous manufacturing center. There were truck and tractor factories, rubber factories, and lighter industrial works for producing glassware and paint. There was even a confectionery. In Tbilisi today, however, Kutaisi is commonly perceived as backward and caricatured as a “big village.” The practice of jumping into the river to test levels instead of using modern tools, for example, is the sort of anecdotal material that commentators engaging in the dominant discourse draw on to construct an image of the city as primitive and unsophisticated. As I would observe over the course of many ensuing visits to Georgia and interactions with Georgian migrants in the United States, attitudes and

discourses provincializing Kutaisi proliferate among outsiders to the city. In the post-Soviet period in particular, Tbilisi-based elites have applied the pejorative stereotype *mat'rabazi*—braggart or fraud—to Kutaisi natives to imply that they bear false pretenses of sophistication, worldliness, and even Westernness.

In this paper I treat popular music as a lens for exploring the intersections of place and postsocialist youth identity in Kutaisi in the early-mid 1990s, bearing in mind throughout the noticeable cultural rivalry between Kutaisi and Georgia's political capital. Kutaisi-based musicians maintain that Georgia's rock and alternative music industry began in their hometown in the final years of socialism and spread from there to Tbilisi. After the civil war that spoiled the initial euphoria of independence in 1991, a dynamic Kutaisi-based popular movement mobilized locally produced rock, punk rock, and related genres to publicly articulate disaffection with the conditions of postsocialism. While the dominant discourse on Kutaisi dismisses this movement as inconsequential or even a national disgrace, those who were involved consider it the first and only post-Soviet manifestation in a long genealogy of forms of liberal, cosmopolitan consciousness to emerge from Kutaisi.¹ The latter also maintain that it marked an instance of anti-establishment grassroots social organizing, which is relatively rare in modern Georgian memory. While some participant-observers assert that the popular music produced in Kutaisi in this period was characterized by "uncompromising protest" (Gabunia 2005), I argue that the movement's greater social significance lay in its clustering of a whole repertoire of music-centered activities to create a platform for youth-centered solidarity in the face of ubiquitous social and economic uncertainty. Many of the songs also served as vehicles for civic activism and/or resistance to authority. What were the aesthetics of difference salient to young Kutaisi musicians and their audiences in this period? How did these articulate with a local sense of place in the context of a contested national cultural geography? My study emphasizes the importance of locality within the bounds of the nation-state as a site of identity struggle in the postsocialist space.

Today, all that is left as aural documentation of the dynamic 1990s Kutaisi movement is preserved on low-fidelity, limited-run recordings or even rarer amateur videos. The methodology of my study, therefore, focuses on critical engagement with extant journalistic accounts, interviews with scene participants, and analysis of available audio-visual materials. I begin with a broad sketch of Kutaisi's contribution to some of the formative moments in Georgia's cultural and political history in order to demonstrate that the city's relative invisibility and apparent inconsequentiality in the twenty-first century is more an anomaly than the rule across history. My discussion of

the rock and punk rock movement's emergence during perestroika and the transitional years out of socialism leads to a description of the specific sonic features of the music. A case study of one of the most influential ensembles to emerge from Kutaisi in this period illustrates my claims about the movement's aesthetics and socially committed character. I conclude by describing the performance practices associated with the Kutaisi wave: the "rock demonstrations" through which a young community of music fans created venues for their art by repurposing specific public spaces as sites of impartial assembly and sociability, redeeming them from their Soviet-era lives as platforms for symptomatically over-determined symbolic action.

O Wind Blown in from Ts'q'alt'ubo . . . if the Kutaisi May asks
who you are, say you're a breath, but don't say whose

The text of this poem, published in 1922 by Kutaisi modernist Galakt'ion T'abidze, speaks to Kutaisi's identity as a city that, at key moments in history, has served as Georgia's primary window to the West. (Ts'q'alt'ubo is a town west of Kutaisi, and T'abidze seems to be depicting Kutaisi as a place where the crosscurrents of East and West sometimes meet uneasily.) As a parallel to Tbilisi in the east, historically, Kutaisi was the political and cultural center of western Georgia and, arguably until the Russian annexation at the turn of the nineteenth century, the most European-oriented of all the Georgian cities. Local accounts of its history usually begin in antiquity, with Kutaisi and its environs as the seat of a prosperous ancient civilization, which served as the setting for the Greek myth of Jason, the Argonauts, and the Golden Fleece (Kacharava and Kvirkvelia 2008).² Its easy accessibility from all the western Georgian regions and its location along the Rioni River made the city an important regional center in the Middle Ages, especially when eastern Georgia was constantly under threat of Arab and Persian invasion. From early in the eleventh century CE through 1122, Kutaisi was capital of the Georgian feudal state and the focal point of its political and cultural "golden age." After several centuries under the yoke of Persian, Mongol, and then Ottoman rule, the early nineteenth century saw a relative peace restored as Georgia came under the Russian protectorate; shortly thereafter, Kutaisi reemerged as an important intellectual and cultural center. Later in the same century, the city nurtured politically radical intellectuals like Nik'o Nik'oladze, an activist in Georgia's Menshevik national liberation movement who had befriended Karl Marx in Zurich while becoming the first Georgian in history to earn the PhD from a European university. At the turn of the twentieth century, Kutaisi emerged as "a bastion of Georgian gentry nationalism" (Ram 2007:1549) oriented toward a Western Europe—and Paris in particular—perceived as

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culturally progressive.³ The city that many referred to as a “small provincial backwater to Tbilisi” gave birth to the nation’s first cafés, soft drinks, and electric street illumination in the name of European-style urban public sociability (Manning 2010:10). In this same period, Kutaisi emerged as a center of avant-garde literary and artistic experimentation. It was the birthplace of some of the most innovative artists and intellectuals in Georgia’s modern history, including Zakaria Paliashvili, the nation’s first opera composer; the poets Galakt’ion T’abidze and his cousin T’itsian T’abidze, along with P’aolo Iashvili and Grigol Robakidze of the “Blue Horns” literary avant-garde; modernist painter Davit K’ak’abadze; actress Verik’o Anjap’aridze; and puppeteer/cinematographer Revaz Gabriadze.

Yet during the winter of 1918, Kutaisi was effectively abandoned by its own intelligentsia in a matter of days. According to contemporary novelist and literary historian Ak’a Morchiladze (a Tbilisi native),

For some reason, everyone who had in some way contributed to forging Kutaisi’s identity decided at once to go to Tbilisi—poets, painters, actors, teachers and engineers. I think because Georgia was independent [the Menshevik government proclaimed Georgia an independent republic in May 1918] and Tbilisi was perceived to be its appropriate center. This event has gone unnoticed in our history. Despite its strangeness. But it really happened. It was a big mistake that will probably never be corrected.

The teachers at Kutaisi’s legendary *gymnasia* become professors of [the newly established] Tbilisi University. Renowned Kutaisi doctors settled into new positions in Tbilisi’s hospitals. Kutaisi poets took up residence at the Tbilisi café “Kimerion”...⁴

As a result, one city shrunk while the other continued to grow. (Morchiladze 2009)

After the Bolshevik annexation of Georgia in 1921, the communists turned Kutaisi into a major industrial center—in Georgia, second only to Tbilisi. In addition to the factories described above, a tourist industry revolving around the medieval monuments at Gelati and Bagrat’i served as a key source of income for the city, and nearby resorts attracted tourists from across the Soviet Union.

State support for industry and infrastructure collapsed with Georgia’s declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in April 1991. Kutaisi’s factories were shut down, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost, and hyperinflation set in, devastating the local economy. The communists had

“hurled the Rioni from Kutaisi” in the name of industry and hydropower, harnessing the city’s primary ecological resource for all it was worth and leaving rocks in its wake (Morchiladze 2009). Tourism all but ceased as violent conflict broke out in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Destitute, desperate residents of Kutaisi moved east to Tbilisi in hopes that they would find more opportunities to build a sustainable life in the capital. It could be that the derisive attitude towards Kutaisians dates from this period, as residents of Georgia’s capital resented the competition for jobs, housing, and basic necessities, which were in increasingly short supply.

Living conditions in Kutaisi continued to decline. Political corruption, organized crime, unemployment, and illegal drug use were on the rise, and widespread pessimism accompanied a new crisis of social values. The persistence of violent conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia exacerbated fears about basic security and an increasing distrust of authority. Significantly, Kutaisi in the 1990s would become home to a particularly large number of non-governmental organizations, with missions ranging from support for internally displaced populations to monitoring government activity for corruption (USAID 2008:110–1). While the concentration of NGOs in the area may be interpreted as a sign of political weakness and the proliferation of social ills, it may also suggest that Georgia’s second-largest city has a particularly strong culture of civic engagement. Taken further, one might contend that postsocialist Georgian citizens’ earliest efforts to forge a public sphere independent of the mechanisms of the state took place in Kutaisi, rather than in the nation’s capital as might be expected.

In the tumultuous years that followed Georgia’s declaration of independence from the USSR, Kutaisi managed to preserve a fragile peace, while Tbilisi crumpled amid disorder. In Tbilisi, paramilitary resistance against the newly elected nationalist government of Soviet dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia began late in 1991 and culminated in a violent military coup lasting from late December 1991 through early January 1992. The rebel forces seized government buildings, violently subdued pro-government demonstrations, and devastated the capital’s historic main thoroughfare, Rustaveli Avenue. More than one hundred people were killed in the fighting, while the incumbents eventually fled with vain hopes of establishing a government-in-exile. In March 1992 former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze returned from Moscow to Tbilisi and assumed control of the state, but violent clashes between Gamsakhurdia supporters (“Zviadists”) and supporters of the new government persisted throughout 1992. Political parties and civilian organizations formed armed sub-divisions, empowering the civilian population to bear arms without license (Mchedlidze 1999:339).⁵

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Later in 1992 the epicenter of violent conflict in Georgia shifted to Abkhazia on the northern part of Georgia's Black Sea coast, but the capital city was far from peaceful or secure. Police and internal security forces deployed to the war zones in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (in South Ossetia) while crime ran rampant in the capital (Mch'edlidze 1999:339). Theft, robbery, and banditry were commonplace, curfews were set by the local government, basic public security measures like street lighting were more the exception than the norm, and informal forces of young men patrolled the streets at night with heavy artillery (Manning 2007:176–7). In this general context of political unrest, socio-economic crisis and ubiquitous danger, basic survival became the main occupation of most Tbilisi dwellers. Anthropologist Paul Manning who spent time in Tbilisi in 1992 writes that even “the children of the intelligentsia were often close to the world of thieves . . . cafés were filled with members of the Mkhedroni [lit. “Horsemen,” a paramilitary organization led by career criminal/general Jaba Ioseliani] by day, both poets and criminals, with kalashnikov rifles propped against the tables, and by night, gunfire, chaos, robberies” (Manning 2009a). In a city where it was unsafe to go out at night, social diversions like live concerts and nightclubs were unimaginable. By the end of 1993, some 200,000 Georgians had fled Abkhazia, and tens of thousands of them took shelter in Tbilisi, creating an acute humanitarian crisis where food, medicine, secure housing, and currency were already in short supply and chaos ruled the streets (see Manning 2009b).⁶ Disruptions in the communication and transportation infrastructure between Tbilisi and the rest of the country meant that residents of the capital were largely unaware of musical and other cultural developments in cities outside of their own. Not only musicians, but writers and visual artists who made their names in Kutaisi and other Georgian cities remained largely unknown to residents of Tbilisi in this period (p.c. Gabunia December 28, 2010).

The Kutaisi wave⁷ takes shape: perestroika, independence, and civil war

For much of the Soviet era, the state had treated popular music as either a potential tool for the promotion of the ruling ideology or as a dangerous force which threatened to undermine it—that is, as either for or against the regime (see Bright 1985; Szemere 2001:70). In the late 1960s, the state began to sponsor and promote professional “vocal-instrumental ensembles” (VIAs)—essentially light pop-rock groups—to offer the many young people who were turned on by The Beatles and other electric-guitar-heavy Western rock bands an analogous, more prudent form of musical entertainment

(Bright 1985:124). Listening to Western-produced rock or performing or composing in a rock-inflected style independently of an approved VIA was interpreted as an act of defiance of the socialist order; as a result, amateur Soviet rock persisted almost exclusively underground until Gorbachev introduced his perestroika reforms in the mid-1980s.⁸ During perestroika, rock and other Western popular genres were stripped of their power of dissent and granted a place among the multifarious forms of expression now officially tolerated. Youth movements in support of radical regime change now drew on rock and punk rock to convey their political message in localities across the Soviet Union and socialist Eastern Europe.

In Georgia it was not until the late 1980s, in Kutaisi, that young amateur musicians began composing and performing music and lyrics in a frustrated, belligerent punk rock style that sought to (re-)connect popular culture with the dreary realities of everyday life. While the forms of musical expression that emerged in Kutaisi in this period were indeed countercultural, they appeared after the state had dramatically relaxed its constraints on cultural production and thus too late to have constituted a true underground movement. Further, Western popular music as a whole had enjoyed considerable tolerance in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic—particularly after 1972 when reformer Eduard Shevardnadze assumed leadership of the Georgian Communist Party. Consequently, genres such as rock and punk that had been treated as subversive and condemned to the underground in Leningrad and Moscow lacked the same transgressive quality in Kutaisi and Tbilisi. The first official Soviet rock music festival, called “Spring Rhythms” and featuring an adjudicated competition of bands from across the USSR, was held in Tbilisi in 1980. There is no single explanation for the Soviet Georgian leadership’s relative leniency toward the consumption of Western popular music, but the simplest one is that the Georgian party elite enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy on account of the republic’s location on the geographic periphery of the Soviet empire, and that the Georgian party leadership was more tolerant in matters of cultural consumption.⁹ Another theory identifies popular demonstrations in the spring of 1978 against the Georgian party’s initiative to amend the constitution so that Georgian was not the sole official language of the Georgian SSR as a turning point in the party’s position on the dangers of Western cultural influence. Popular resistance to the language change initiative convinced the party leadership to reject their plan, but it also made them frighteningly aware of the power of informal social organizing to call their legitimacy into question. As a result, according to this theory, the party leadership began doing everything it could to prevent further public expressions of dissent. This included relaxing its enforcement of official policies restricting Western music consumption in hopes that youth might

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find an outlet for their discontent in private listening practices rather than on the streets. Turning a blind eye as young music fans circulated dubbed cassettes of Western rock and added missing meter bands to their Soviet-built radios in order to catch popular music broadcasts from nearby Turkey was one easy way of doing so.¹⁰

According to Kutaisi native music journalist Lasha Gabunia, in the late 1980s there was suddenly an “unprecedented abundance” of popular music in Kutaisi (2005). Most of its performers were young and educated, either holding a recent university degree or in the process of completing their studies. They had no particular socioeconomic privileges, but rather came from the same proletarian background as all but a tiny percentage of their fellow Soviet Georgian citizens. In the very beginning, Temur Jokhadze (known popularly as “T’usovk’a”) and Vakht’ang Nebieridze (“St’radivari”) founded Georgia’s original popular music performance and production club, called “Meloman” (from the Latin for “music lover”), in the building of the Kutaisi Opera and Ballet Theater, thereby repurposing one of the local communist party’s most important cultural institutions (Gabunia 2005).¹¹ In such a way, they established a practice of “appropriating and reworking urban spaces to construct new urban narratives” (Bennett 2000:66) that subsequent Kutaisi wave participants would carry on for nearly a decade to follow. Several pioneering punk rock bands were formed at the club, among them Outsider, the best-known of all the bands to come out of Kutaisi in this period (discussed below). With the assistance of Meloman’s management, Outsider was invited to perform at Soviet alternative music festivals in Tallinn, Estonia, and then in Moscow (Gabunia 2005).

The bands Pulse, Bunk’eri [Dumpster], and Tribunal were formed, and the individual performers Bajoo and Goga Zhorzholadze launched their careers in this period. Shortly thereafter, the bands Best History, Archaeopter X, Shavi Ghvino [Black wine], Radical, Coma, Alk’o [likely short for Alcohol], Burusi [Fog], Reflex, and Dzebnili [Wanted, as a criminal] were formed. While these musicians’ attitudes towards the appropriation of Western popular music was ambivalent in many ways, one area about which the vast majority seemed to agree was the attractiveness of an English-sounding band name (see also Yurchak 2006:193–4 on late Soviet youth naming practices). Further, many seem to have taken their cue from Western punk aesthetics by choosing names that eschewed every kind of sentimentality and assumed instead an abject, deadpan posture.

After its declaration of independence from the USSR, Georgia was hurled almost immediately into civil war, and as a result very little new music was produced in Kutaisi or elsewhere in 1991–3. Many musicians fled the country. Within just a few years of the founding of Meloman, there

was no longer an authoritative political or ideological establishment against which to enact resistance—that is, no discrete dominant “culture” from which an “underground” or “subculture” might self-identify as distinct (see Hebdige 1979). Rather, the political climate at the time was characterized by a disorderly struggle for power between militant Zviadists (followers of independent Georgia’s nationalist first president) on the one hand, and the installed government of Eduard Shevardnadze and his communist-reformer colleagues on the other. Still, it was during the war that Lasha Gabunia, in his mid-twenties, developed the original rock television broadcast for Kutaisi’s newly founded local television station. He also promoted it in Tbilisi, and in 1992 Tbilisi’s Second Channel began broadcasting the program called *K’edeli* [The wall]. Tbilisi audiences first heard the music of Outsider, Goga Zhorzholadze, and Bajoo via these broadcasts. According to Gabunia, he and his co-producers worked like a family, gathering material produced by local musicians and sharing it with one another in a kind of do-it-yourself aesthetic not unlike that of a Western punk or indie band (see Andersen and Jenkins 2003; Rachman 2006; Reynolds 2005). “Preparing those broadcasts got us through the war and the terror,” he said in a recent interview (Murghulia 2011). Shortly thereafter, Gabunia started his own radio station in Kutaisi and contributed a column to the first independent newspaper in postsocialist Kutaisi, which was called *Piece* (*ibid.*)

Listening to Kutaisi after socialism

Stylistically, the music produced in Kutaisi in the late 1980s—early 1990s drew inspiration from punk rock, alternative rock, and—to a lesser extent—grunge and rap. By this point, recordings by The Clash, Sex Pistols, The Ramones, Joy Division, and other British and American punk, post-punk, and contemporary bands had been circulating underground in Georgia for more than a decade, mostly on LPs and cassettes dubbed from contraband imports. (There was no *magnitizdat* industry in the Georgian SSR, as prohibited music was copied and circulated by fans for other fans locally, never for sale or profit.) Still, the first attempts to perform punk rock in a Georgian context emerged only in the late 1980s, with the bands Outsider, Bunk’eri, and Machia & Co. (p.c. Gabunia June 24, 2011).

The instrumentation of these and most other Kutaisi bands in this period was traditional for rock, consisting of one or two electric guitars, electric bass, and a basic rock drum kit, occasionally with the addition of a synthesizer. The songs and their manner of execution were typical first-generation British punk fare: heavily distorted power chords in the guitar dominated a riff-based instrumental texture, and songs were typically comprised of

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just two or three short harmonic progressions. Most songs were in simple verse-chorus form, with moderately fast or fast tempos in 4/4 time. Vocals were delivered in a characteristically aggressive manner; growling and shouting was common. Variation in vocal pitch, dynamics, and timbre, however, was rare. The musical language was primitive and anti-virtuosic—indeed, “radically rudimentary” (Szemere 2001:170). Consistent with a punk aesthetic, the Kutaisi performers had no pretensions of musical competence or sophistication (Andersen and Jenkins 2003; Hebdige 1979; Rachman 2006). While the musicians did not go so far as to call their performances something other than (greater than) music or to reject musicality as such (in the manner of certain New York punks, for example), it seems to me that for them instrumental performance was more a means to achieving a bigger-picture social objective than an end in itself.

Song lyrics were the primary site of originality and social intervention. They were typically disenchanted and focused on themes of alienation, frustration, boredom, and sometimes expressed explicit criticism or anger. Rejecting the rapid, formulaic platitudes of Soviet *estrada* and VIAs, musicians of the Kutaisi wave sang instead about the crime, political corruption, poverty, and hunger that plagued their country and permeated their immediate urban surroundings. They delivered most of their texts in Georgian. In a song called “Maktsia” [“Werewolf”], Goga Zhorzholadze—a professional architect and punk musician—confronted government abuse of power and ineptitude directly, shouting:

Hey you, having found your way up high and thinking you behaved like a man, Having licked the man they spat on, you yourself behaved like a werewolf . . . You found money, possessions, and power—what more do you want? The people’s weeping no longer bothers you; Your own brother put his foot down against you . . . Werewolf!¹²

In a song called “Tsarieli jibe” [“Empty pocket”], the band Pulse depicted an elite government assembly machinating over the fates of a city’s powerless, impoverished citizens while one man consoles himself simply for continuing to exist:

The city sits, quietly debating who should perish and who should survive. He perished, he survived; I survived and there remained . . . [Chorus] An empty pocket, a room and a stair; I’m still alive; I comfort myself.¹³

In Pulse’s arrangement, a whistled melody woven between stanzas suggests at once a kind of (feigned) glib contentedness and an irritated exasperation with the persistence of political vice in an era of profound economic crisis. Delivered with the feel of a waltz—an emblem of European bourgeois

sophistication—the song calls attention to the hypocrisy of government leaders whose words pay lip service to Western ideals of transparency and accountability (suggested by the waltz) while their deeds prolong the nepotistic practices of the previous era.

While many of the song texts and performance practices associated with the Kutaisi wave challenged prevalent right-wing nationalist politics, discourses, and certain music-related practices, they also revealed a fear of homogenization with the global culture industries and a distrust of individuals and institutions prepared to adopt Western ways unconditionally. Some Kutaisi artists, wary of the new hegemony of Euro-American influence on popular culture, occasionally sang in German (Bursi, Goga Zhorzholadze) or Russian (Alk'o, Bunk'eri)—the prestige languages of the previous era. Gabunia contends that this was not because they found their own language inadequate, but because they sought to protest the practice of singing in English that had recently come into fashion among Tbilisi-based popular musicians (p.c. December 28, 2010). Their choice of language also served to index their stated disinterest in mass, international appeal and commercial profit.¹⁴ Having grown up during the perestroika- and glasnost'-era reforms, which had conflated Westernness with an enviable freedom of expression, many of these young musicians now sought to distinguish this essentialized, “imaginary” West from the more mundane, “real” West of bourgeois materialism and freedom to consume.¹⁵ Still, the discourses of Western cultural imperialism that they mobilized to explain their avoidance of English-language texts is difficult to accept at face value, since they were simultaneously appropriating the formal and stylistic features of globally circulating popular music genres which originated in the West. Somewhere between the rejection of English-language texts and the embracing of predominantly Anglo-American music styles appears to have been their ideal of artistic integrity and authenticity.

The Kutaisi wave was at its core a live local music scene, as most of the musicians involved had neither the financial resources nor access to the technology needed to produce records.¹⁶ There were also no media outlets for circulating and promoting new music. In Kutaisi, FM radio broadcasting was launched only in the second half of the 1990s. After the launch of FM, amateur recordings of live performances broadcast on the radio became an important means of circulating locally produced rock, rap, and punk rock, but this was already too late to have significantly impacted the development of the scene in question (p.c. Khubuk'elashvili May 21, 2011). The few studio recordings made were circulated among a relatively small, geographically limited circle of fans on cassettes dubbed from compact discs or other cassettes. Fans would purchase blank cassettes and bring them to a local

recording studio for dubbing.¹⁷ It seems that many bands recorded single tracks, but complete albums were rare. A key source of information for this article, for example, was a two-volume compilation album released in 2002 featuring various Kutaisi artists from the period. The title of the release, *Kartuli t'algha I & II* [Georgian Wave I & II], is notable for positing the music produced in Kutaisi in the mid-1990s as standing in, metonymically, for Georgian popular music as a whole.

The Kutaisi wave on record: Outsider

Given the dearth of recordings made in this period, it can be difficult to piece together the sound of the music nearly two decades later. The trio known as Outsider, however, was exceptional in leaving a relatively rich material record. They recorded three albums in 1992, 1997, and 1999; this feat likely helped these musicians to eventually achieve a national following and, over time, to sustain a reputation as the most radical musical project to emerge from postsocialist Kutaisi. Outsider was among the original architects of the Kutaisi wave. As I argue in this brief case study, the musicians' formative years spent abroad in Moscow and their corresponding access to key material resources early on played an important role in facilitating their success.

Twenty-four-year-old singer/guitarist/songwriter Robi K'ukhianidze founded Outsider in Kutaisi in 1989 after dropping out of a university program in "mass event production" (*masobriv g'honisdziebata rezhisoroba*), but during the war he fled with his bandmates to Moscow where they recorded their debut album, *Inside* (1992)—the first album by a Georgian rock band to be recorded abroad (Gabunia 2001). On account of the breakdown in communication during the war and the significant time the band spent abroad, K'ukhianidze and his bandmates were better known in Moscow than in Tbilisi until 1996, when they first performed in Georgia's capital. While he has been called the father of both Kutaisi rock and Georgian alternative music, K'ukhianidze rejects both labels. He also refuses to call his music "punk" or "alternative," instead telling audiences everywhere that the music he performs is Georgian and that his greatest teacher was eastern Georgian traditional singer Hamlet' Gonashvili (Gabunia 2005; see Szemere 2001:66 for a similar genre-rejecting discourse among postsocialist Hungarian punks). To this author, however, the mention of Gonashvili seems more a rhetorical, authenticating gesture than anything else, as the pathos and warmth of Gonashvili's vocal delivery and his long, thoughtfully crafted melodies bear no trace in K'ukhianidze's deliberately uncultivated, pedestrian vocal sound. Like the musicians who claim to avoid singing in English as a matter of principle, K'ukhianidze seems to hover between a desire to draw on the

sounds and ethos of certain Western popular music styles as an expressive resource on the one hand, and an ethical commitment to upholding the idea of an “uncontaminated” Georgian culture on the other.¹⁸

Attacking the fallacies and moral vacuity of elite discourse, Outsider established a model of musically mediated defiance that would capture the attention of thousands of Kutaisi youth in the first decade after socialism. The band’s best-known song, “Kalakshi bnela” [“It’s dark in the city”], was composed after they returned to Kutaisi and is widely regarded as the anthem of the Kutaisi wave. It consists of three repeating guitar chords and vocals sung on just a few pitches in a narrow range. On the verses, K’ukhianidze sounds almost apathetic, but his delivery on the chorus, “It’s terribly dark in my city today,” is more insistent. His vivid verses paint an image of a stark postsocialist dystopia: “Every mask in this land deserves to be spat on/ Some create idols and some dance with death/ Today the light is extinguished in this city/ Instead of children madness is born.”¹⁹ K’ukhianidze’s text calls attention to the loss of civility in his hometown and the falsity and sense of dread that seemed to reign in its place. The refrain was both literal and metaphorical: there were constant power blackouts in Kutaisi (as elsewhere in Georgia, including Tbilisi) in this period, so the city was literally dark much of the time; at the same time, the darkness symbolized the city’s moral, intellectual, spiritual, and social crisis.²⁰ A 1992 “Kalakshi bnela” music video, produced for broadcast on Gabunia’s television program *The Wall*, documented the murky reality of daily life in Kutaisi at the time. Without a narrative thread or actors, the video depicted the city through a sequence of short, thematically unified clips and a photographic slideshow featuring littered alleyways and heaps of trash in public places; streets and sidewalks riddled with potholes; gutted, roofless former residences with empty window frames and four walls barely vertical; columns of slow-moving, no-frills Soviet-built *Zhiguli* sedans; street-corner stockpiles of brick and concrete as reminders of unfinished urban renewal projects; and throngs of urban pedestrians with bewildered, tired faces.²¹

Kutaisi live: “rock demonstrations” and the new youth autonomy

The “Kalakshi bnela” music video featured a live soundtrack of Outsider performing in Kutaisi in one of the many *rok’-aktsiebi* (literally “rock actions/demonstrations”) that Kutaisi-based music fans organized in the early- to mid-1990s in the name of a greater social cause. While they never had an explicit plan for political action, through these events, the musicians and their audiences forged a certain kind of solidarity, cultivated spaces for autonomous youth assembly (most participants were between the ages of 15

and 40), and promoted awareness of the social ills that surrounded them in a manner that was still novel in the post-Soviet space. In the Soviet period, it had been all but impossible for a large group of people to congregate in public without official sanction; instead, fans had listened to unauthorized music on vinyl or cassette at home, alone, or with friends. Nightclubs were unheard of in the Georgian SSR (p.c. Gabunia December 28, 2010). After the collapse, young Kutaisi musicians took advantage of their newfound right to freedom of assembly by colonizing public spaces and turning them into performance venues. Similar to the self-styled American “hardcore” punks in the early 1980s, they eschewed the performance of nihilism, apathy, drunkenness, and juvenilia associated with the original punks for a form of grassroots civic engagement which registered a serious contempt for incumbent authority without actually endorsing any clear political alternatives (see also Szemere 2001:69). Neither the hardcore punks nor the Kutaisi musicians had access to clubs, so the former temporarily inhabited churches, basements, gas stations, backyards, and shopping centers to pursue their culturally radical program (Rachman 2006), while the latter occupied the buildings of former communist cultural institutions, apartments, garages, and outdoor gathering places.

The rock-demonstration mentioned above, which was filmed and later broadcast on *The Wall*, took place in Kutaisi on July 12, 1992. The Tbilisi-based bands Taxi, Genetic Code (these featuring future bandleader Irak’li Chark’viani, who would become Tbilisi’s most outspoken rock persona), and *Retsep’ri* [Prescription or Recipe] were invited to join Kutaisi locals Outsider and Bajoo in a performance at the Lado Meskhishvili Theater in Kutaisi. The event, one of the earliest of its kind, was called “Rock Against the Phonogram and AIDS,” emphasizing the importance that both live performance and civic consciousness held for its organizers.²² Though it was rendered in Georgian, the construction “Rock Against...” in the event’s title strongly evokes the 1970s British rock-punk-reggae campaign “Rock Against Racism,” as well as the British right-wing punk project “Rock Against Communism” (Reynolds 2005:123) and the slightly younger “Rock Against Sexism,” which would also establish roots in the US. The audience primarily consisted of teenagers and those in their early twenties. The setting was informal and intimate, with a low stage and plenty of performer banter between songs (though there was not even mention of AIDS in the segment captured on video). There was none of the stage-diving, pogo-dancing, moshing, destruction, violence, or other deliberately provocative “shock effects” associated with first generation and hardcore punk performances. In fact, the performers and audience alike were rather restrained, and a number of the songs performed were on the commonplace, uncontroversial theme of unrequited love. With the

notable exception of Robi K'ukhianidze, the performers were short-haired, clean-shaven, and cagey in front of the camera. They were scrawny, awkward post-pubescent men in printed t-shirts, denim jackets, cargo pants or jeans, and white sneakers. They did not wear leather and chains like the Western punks, nor did they spike their hair or paint garish makeup on their faces. While the lack of availability or unaffordability of a proper punk wardrobe may have shaped their choice of apparel, I suspect that these musicians were fully content to dress like others their age. K'ukhianidze stood out with long straight bangs that concealed his eyes when he looked down and could be tossed back dramatically with a flick of the neck. The print on his t-shirt flashed the English-language profanity “fuck off,” and appears to have been the most provocative element of the whole event. In other words, as far as can be concluded from the video documenting “Rock Against the Phonogram and AIDS,” the discourse of uncompromising aggression participants have constructed around the Kutaisi wave may be a bit of an exaggeration—a self-authenticating move, perhaps. Given the socio-political context in which they emerged, however, the musical styles, lyrics, and performance practices were radical.

After the war, Kutaisi's rock demonstrations became more systematic. In 1994–5, a group of individuals active in the Kutaisi music scene formed a club of sorts around the band Outsider, calling themselves “The Masks.” Over the course of a year, on the eighth of each month, The Masks staged a different music-centered event at a different location. The main attraction was the live music, but some events also featured art exhibits, food, or collective listening to radio broadcasts. Each event was assigned a title and an associated social program: “Demonstration-Rehearsal Dedicated to the Day of the Protection of Four-Legged Dogs” took place in a garage (“dog” was slang for police officer, underscoring the utter disrespect with which the country's internal security force was treated by higher ranking government officials); “Return my Life to Me” was enacted in the center of town, in the street; “Yesterday, today . . .” was staged at a former communist social club; “My City” took place at a fine arts school for children where the musicians performed in front of an exhibition of children's drawings; and “Musical [Boxing] Ring” was staged in a boxing arena. Other events were held among the ruins of collapsed buildings, in garages, apartments, or the offices of social organizations (Gabunia 2005). Kutaisi-based guitarist Zaza Khubuk'elashvili recalls that power shortages and blackouts in Kutaisi and indeed, all of Georgia, were a common source of grievance at these events. Some musicians adopted a light, ironic stance, singing about how they missed having lights; others directed their diatribe against corrupt state energy officials (p.c. Khubuk'elashvili May 21, 2011). Most rock-demonstrations took

a full month to prepare for and were open to the public free of charge. They were promoted in the community by word of mouth (with club activists literally going door-to-door to announce an upcoming event) and, in some cases, on flyers posted in conspicuous places around the city (p.c. Gabunia December 28, 2010).

Music, postsocialist citizenship, and a tale of two cities

Following their emancipation from Soviet hegemonic discourses of national unity and international socialist solidarity, and in light of the formidable obstacles to communication with Tbilisi during the civil war, the generation of Kutaisi residents who came of age in the 1990s had an opportunity to inscribe their own highly localized meaning onto globally circulating musical styles. Freed from the constraints of managed cultural production, they exercised control over their own creative process, in spite of the absence of institutions to support them (cf. Szemere 2001:33). While their music may have been largely inaudible to the Georgian public on account of the failure of communications infrastructure in this period and the scene's strong emphasis on live, unmediated performance, most of those who were aware of the movement passed it off as trivial, tasteless, or even a source of national embarrassment. This does not seem to be a source of regret, however; the Kutaisi musicians would likely find a kindred spirit in former American hardcore punk Greg Hetson, who stated, "Normal people did not listen to [us] and we liked it that way" (Rachman 2006). For the majority of Georgian listeners of all generations, light, politically aloof estrada in the Soviet style remains a more "legitimate" heritage than local manifestations of punk rock inspired by British and American performers perceived as social misfits. Westernness *per se* has never been problematic for Georgian mainstream audiences in the postsocialist period, so it seems that the denigration of Kutaisi popular music can be attributed more to differences of taste and to the implicit, if long-standing, cultural rivalry between Georgia's two largest cities.

Did the Kutaisi wave have any meaningful impact on Georgian popular culture as a whole? At the very least the Kutaisi wave can decenter the current dominant narrative which locates Tbilisi as the site of most every form of political ferment and originality of expression in the last hundred years. Like the Washington, DC-based American hardcore punks who "wouldn't desert for the music-industry capitals, New York and LA" (Andersen and Jenkins 2003), they maintained a small community which sent subtle ripples—rather than dramatic, revolutionary waves—of music-and-youth-centered energy across the country. According to Lasha Gabunia, today Tbilisi residents iden-

tify Georgian rock, rap, and electronica with Kutaisi, while Kutaisi musicians active in the evolution of these genres regard them as a broadly Georgian cultural development (p.c. December 28, 2010).²³ That is, while the loyalty of the latter to their own hometown is fundamental and evident in the fact that almost every ensemble has at least one song about Kutaisi, they regard themselves as Georgian artists first, and only secondarily as Kutaisians.

Further, while it is difficult to know for certain, I would speculate that the music-centered youth activism which drove the Kutaisi wave may have served as a model for the Tbilisi-based, university-student-led protests which generated much of the momentum for Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution. Indeed, some of the same musicians took part in both movements. In November 2003, Robi K'ukhianidze took center stage in downtown Tbilisi as one of many "rain musicians" to perform during the Rose Revolution demonstrations that culminated in the peaceful overthrow of President Eduard Shevardnadze. (The moniker "rain musicians" evolved out of respect for the artists' unwavering dedication to large-scale acts of civil disobedience despite unseasonably cold, damp weather.) The student-led campaign had demanded government transparency, accountability, and an end to the kinds of nepotistic practices the Shevardnadze government had failed to put an end to after the collapse of communism. While students had been agitating in various locations across the country for months, the final days of the revolution were staged, literally, in front of the parliament building and Tbilisi mayor's office as a "high-energy public event somewhere between a rock concert and a political meeting" (Skrypka in Helbig 2006:90). Now, K'ukhianidze's rock indexed an authentic capitalist modernity that opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili and his young, Western-educated peers promised to deliver to the Georgian people. This was, indeed, the most direct and visible role Outsider's founder and leader had ever played in support of concrete political issues.

Coda

In September 2009, six years after the Rose Revolution, the Saakashvili-led government announced plans to relocate the seat of Georgia's parliament from Tbilisi to Kutaisi, in a gesture apparently intended to redeem what was once a thriving city from the threat of total obscurity. Consistent with the sweeping "out with the old (anything and everything that indexes the country's communist past), in with the new (anything and everything that signals Western capitalist modernity)" change that has characterized Saakashvili's political course from the very beginning, on December 18 of the same year, he dispatched a private demolition company to make

room for the new parliament building. Despite protests from the political opposition, the workers exploded a 46-meter-high concrete and bronze Soviet-era memorial to the Georgian victims of World War II on the site where the new government building will be built. But the workers failed to abide by basic safety measures, and communities nearby were unexpectedly assailed with flying chunks of concrete. A mother and her eleven-year-old daughter were killed in the yard of their home as a result, and several others were critically wounded. Having apologized for the unanticipated human cost, the ruling party defended the move, claiming that it would partially relocate the country's "political epicenter" from Tbilisi to western Georgia, contribute to political stability and the "revitalization of political life" in Georgia's second largest city, and help "to increase economic dynamism" in the region (Civil Georgia 2009).

For the current Georgian government, dramatic acts like the removal of the Kutaisi monument are a means of staging a cathartic break with the previous regime; for the young people who lived in Kutaisi in the transitional years, the symbolic interventions of politicians are tiresome, insincere, and out-of-touch.²⁴ Both the incumbent government in 2009 and the Kutaisi wave participants in the 1990s contributed in a significant way to ongoing negotiations over Kutaisi's political and cultural identity vis-à-vis Tbilisi and the rest of Georgia. A discrediting of the old regime and an impatient agitation for change was common to both projects, and both made a point of reinventing the urban landscape in some way. Yet the government struck resolutely from the outside in, literally pummeling over the resistance in its path, while the musicians and their fans directed their dissent from a powerless insider position outwards, despite the criticism and naysaying against them. The latter, as I have demonstrated in this paper, were decidedly less hubristic, less authoritative, and less spectacular about proclaiming the kind of change they believed was most appropriate for the country—and for their city—at the turn of the twenty-first century. Perhaps, in time, they too will earn a place in the canon of cultural innovators and political rebels who have called this city home.

Notes

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1. When I related to a Georgian acquaintance (a native of Rustavi, a city outside of Tbilisi in southeastern Georgia) my intention to reconstruct the buried history of the 1990s Kutaisi rock scene, he quipped, "I didn't think they [Kutaisi locals] knew anything more than *khinkali* [traditional meat dumplings] and *khashi* [rustic tripe soup typically eaten to relieve the symptoms of a hangover]!"

2. In 2008 New York University's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World curated its inaugural exhibition, called *Wine, Worship, and Sacrifice: The Golden Graves of Ancient Vani*, on precisely this area of the ancient kingdom of Colchis.

3. Kutaisi has historically been more homogeneously Georgian than Tbilisi. In the nineteenth century, Tbilisi could hardly even be called an ethnically Georgian city: it was home to an Armenian majority and large numbers of Russians, Azeris, and Kurds. According to one account, ethnic Georgians made up only 18.9 percent of the population of Tbilisi in 1917 (Vardosanidze 2000:107).

4. The café "Kimerion" was transformed into a European-style literary salon for the migrant Kutaisi poets' collective known as the Blue Horns. The name of the café gestures to a fantastic "elsewhere"—a Chimera or Cimmeria, an imaginary beast or an imaginary place (Manning 2010:7).

5. While its central narrative is fictional, Levan Zakareishvili's 2005 film *Tbilisi-Tbilisi* paints a compelling portrait of the city in the dark decade following Georgia's declaration of independence from the USSR.

6. It is estimated that some 20,500 residents abandoned Tbilisi—most to migrate abroad—in the same year (Gachechiladze 1997). According to a 2001 report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as a result of the conflict in Abkhazia another 33,000 internally displaced Georgians sought refuge in Imereti, the western province of which Kutaisi is capital. Some eighty percent of these settled in Kutaisi proper. *The waves of migration from Kutaisi to Tbilisi came to a halt, but they picked up again after 1994 when the country's political crisis began to stabilize.*

7. The designation "wave," or *t'algha* in Georgian, is a calque of the English term used to designate a time delineated cultural movement.

8. See Bright 1985, Cushman 1995, Pilkington 1994, Ramet 1994, Ryback 1990, and Steinholt 2005 on music-centered youth resistance in the late Soviet period in some of the other republics.

9. Another theory reaches back to the very beginning of the Soviet period, arguing that the independent Georgian Menshevik Republic had acquired such a strong cultural orientation towards Europe in 1918–21 (after its declaration of independence from the Russian empire and before its annexation by the Bolsheviks) that the Bolsheviks faced special difficulty censoring the consumption of Western culture in Georgia and in gaining the support of Georgian communist party elite for their cause. According to this theory, throughout the Soviet period the Moscow-based party leadership allowed the Georgian party elite a kind of

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limited autonomy as far as this aspect of cultural policy was concerned. The Georgian party elite were apparently less concerned with limiting citizens' consumption of Western goods than their counterparts in Moscow.

10. See Yurchak 2006:175–81 for an explanation of how the design of Soviet-produced short-wave radios both enabled and selectively limited listening to foreign radio programming.

11. Like Bajoo (whose real name I have not been able to determine), Jokhadze and Nebieridze assumed evocative stage names (*t'usovka* is a Russian slang term used by young people to denote an informal social milieu in the late Soviet period [see Pilkington 1994:172-5]; *S'tradivari* is the name of both the renowned Italian violin-making family and a certain pistol model) to create an image for public consumption, possibly drawing on models from Western popular culture.

12. *Shen hei, asulkhar zemot, da gipikria katsad maktsia, dapurtkhebuli agilok'ia, mit'om iketsi tavad maktsiad...puli ishove, k'idev koneba, dzalauplebats, met'i ra ginda? Aghar gats'ukhebs khalkhis godeba, sak'utari dzma gverdze gagidga...maktsia!*

13. *Kalaki zis, chumad archevs vin daighup'os da vin gadarches. Is daighup'a, is gadarcha; me gadavrchi da darcha...tsarieli jibe, otakhi da k'ibe; tsotskhali var isev; vinugesheb tavs.*

14. See Andersen and Jenkins 2003, Rachman 2006, and Szemere 2001:166-7 on tropes of disdain for broad popularity and commercial success among rock and punk musicians.

15. Yurchak coined the term “Imaginary West” to denote a specific cultural construct “intrinsic to and constitutive of late Soviet reality” (2006:205; see also 158–206).

16. I invoke the term “local scene” in the sense suggested by Bennett and Peterson: “a focused social activity that takes place in a delimited space and over a specific span of time in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans realize their common musical taste, collectively distinguishing themselves from others by using music and cultural signs often appropriated from other places, but recombined and developed in ways that come to represent the local scene” (2004:8).

17. This is also how they acquired older, foreign recordings, dubbing them from CDs, cassettes, vinyl, and reel-to-reel tapes (p.c. Gabunia December 28, 2010).

18. In at least one interview, instead of Gonashvili he cited iconic Russian underground-rock-musician-turned-actor Pyotr Mamonov as his “greatest teacher” (Gabunia 2001a). Mamonov converted to Orthodox Christianity in the 1990s and went on to play the lead role in Pavel Lungin's award-winning, deeply religious 2006 film *Ostrov* [The Island]. K'ukhianidze and others active in the Kutaisi wave have acknowledged their respect for religious authority—a point which marks their ethics as distinct from those of punks in general, who historically resisted every kind of authority (p.c. Tsitsishvili March 1, 2011).

19. *Purtkhis ghirsia q'vela nighabi kveq'nad; zogi kerpebs kmnis, zogits sik'vdiltan tsek'vavs. Dghes am kalakshi sinatle kreba; bavshvebis natsvlad sigizhe chndeba.*

20. In fact, a rock quartet formed in Tbilisi in 2000 took the name *Shuki movida*, or “The Lights Came On,” as this was apparently the most commonly heard phrase circulating in the capital at that time. The band lasted just a few years until its French expatriate lead vocalist, Fred Payen, returned to France.

21. The video, called “Outsider—Zamtari (Qalaqshi bnela),” is posted by ERMONIA at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hg82J-X8iw>.

22. It is unclear why event organizers chose AIDS in particular as the focus of their program. The number of HIV cases reported in Georgia in this period was relatively low for the post-Soviet region (1.4 million individuals were tested between 1985 and 1992, and only 10 were

found to be HIV-positive [UNESCO 2005:68–9]), but the United Nations has suggested that “registered levels substantially underestimate actual HIV prevalence” (*ibid.* 16). This may be due to strong cultural stigmatization of the disease. In the early 1990s, HIV was spread primarily through the use of injected drugs, and secondarily during unprotected sex between heterosexual partners (Nutsbidze 1999:369). Where reported, HIV prevalence is highest among men ages 21 to 40 in urban areas of Georgia (UNESCO 2005:70). While levels of infection were relatively low in the early 1990s, the UN, World Health Organization and local experts placed Georgia at high risk for widespread HIV/AIDS infection on account of increased use of injected drugs, increases in infection in neighboring countries (especially Ukraine), a shortage of diagnostic and treatment resources, and a lack of public education about how the virus is spread. It may be that the organizers of “Rock Against the Phonogram and AIDS” sought to counter the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS and/or to spread awareness concerning its prevention and transmission among a population with very low levels of knowledge of the subject.

23. While I have focused here on the emergence of Georgian rock and punk rock, these were not the only Western genres to gain significant attention in Kutaisi in the 1990s. In fact, one of the eldest representatives of the Kutaisi wave—Shavi Printsia (Black Prince)—is regarded as the father of Georgian rap. (The politics of race entailed in this performer’s stage name, and in the guiding ideologies of Georgian rap, could be the subject of a separate paper.) Local experiments with electronic dance music began taking shape in Kutaisi much more recently.

24. Saakashvili has torn down many other Soviet-era monuments as well, including a statue of Stalin in his hometown of Gori, which was brought down unannounced, “under cover of darkness,” to make room for a new memorial to victims of the Stalinist purges and the August 2008 war with Russia (Lomsadze 2010).

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