

MUSIC AS A WINDOW TO THE PAST



Est. Time: 120+ minutes

Subjects: ELA, History/Social Studies, Music


Age Range: All Ages

★ *TEACHROCK* ★



How does popular music reflect and sometimes drive culture?

In this lesson you will:

- Understand the connection between music and culture
 - Learn about ways in which popular music can reflect political and social movements in U.S. History
 - Discover specific songs that have become considered touchpoints for cultural change, from the 1950s to the 2000s
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Songs are portals. Like a door, they allow us to enter new worlds, have new experiences, and consider new perspectives. Like a window, they give us a glimpse into the social, political, and cultural landscapes of a particular place and time.



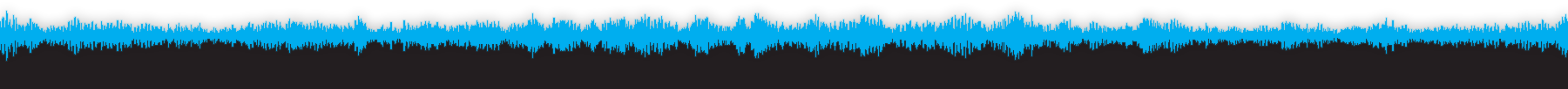


1950s

The 1950s was an era of strong employment, a good standard of living, family-focused values, and the “suburban dream” of a house filled with the latest labor-saving appliances.

At the same time, the ongoing Cold War created anxiety throughout the country, prompting a “Red Scare” that silenced many voices critical of the government. Additionally, the country remained deeply segregated.

The 1950s was the birth of teen culture, as technologies such as television and car radio spread new forms of music and dance crazes across the nation, thrilling young people and, at times, confusing and angering older generations.



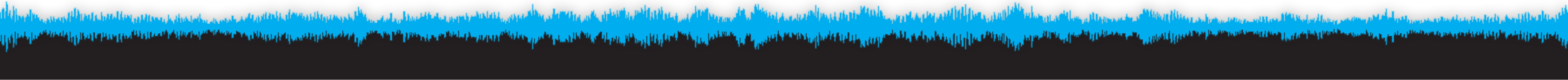



Click the links below to hear a selection of songs from the 1950s:

- **“Hound Dog” by Big Mama Thornton (1953)**
 - **“Would I be Crying” by The Flamingos (1956)**
 - **“Johnny B. Goode” by Chuck Berry (1958)**
 - **“La Bamba” by Ritchie Valens (1958)**
 - **“Rumble” by Link Wray (1958)**
- 




Consider or ask a friend:

- Did you hear any similarities between these five songs? Would you say there is a lot of variety between the songs?
 - How would you define the feeling or mood of each of these songs? Were they similar or different?
 - Visually, what are some of the things that caught your attention in the videos?
 - Based on the lyrics you heard, what kind of issues were musicians addressing in the 1950s?
- 



Print out or make your own version of **this handout**. Write down some general thoughts on how the music of the 1950s sounded, and how the musicians performed. Look at the suggestions at the top of each column to help you generate ideas.



Spotlight: “Rock Around the Clock”

“Rock Around the Clock,” released by Bill Haley and His Comets in 1954, was the first Rock and Roll song to place #1 on the Billboard Pop charts.


“Rock Around the Clock” was so popular Columbia Pictures created two films based on the song.

Read the lyrics to the song, and consider the questions on the next slide.





Consider or talk with a friend:

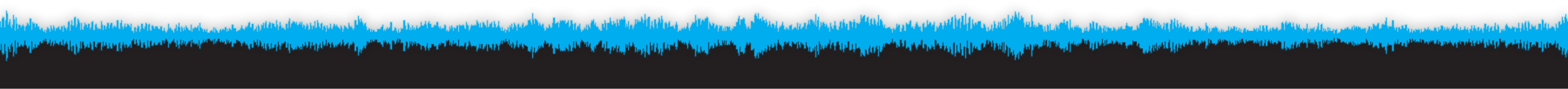
- What is this song about?
 - How would you describe the feeling or tone of this song?
 - How might this song reflect the 1950s, a time when teen culture was a new phenomena?
- 



1960s

The 1960s are considered one of the most tumultuous and divisive decades in world history, marked by the explosive growth of the Civil Rights, Women's, and Anti-War Movements, as well as the emerging "generation gap" - a philosophical divide between the younger generation and their parents and grandparents.

In response to these developments, musicians began singing much more about social issues, creating many anthems to accompany the emerging social movements of the decade.





Click the links below to hear a selection of songs from the 1960s:

- **[“Oxford Town” by Bob Dylan \(1963\)](#)**
 - **[“My Generation” by the Who \(1965\)](#)**
 - **[“Purple Haze” by Jimi Hendrix \(1967\)](#)**
 - **[“Respect” by Aretha Franklin \(1967\)](#)**
 - **[“Soul Sacrifice” by Santana \(1969\)](#)**
- 



Consider or ask a friend:

- Did you hear any similarities between these five songs? Would you say there is a lot of variety between the songs?
- How would you define the feeling or mood of each of these songs? Were they similar or different?
- How would you say the songs of the 1960s differ from the songs of the 1950s? What new sounds do you hear?
- Visually, what are some of the things that caught your attention in the videos?

Write down some of your general observations about music from the 1960s on **the handout** you used before.



Spotlight: “A Change is Gonna Come”

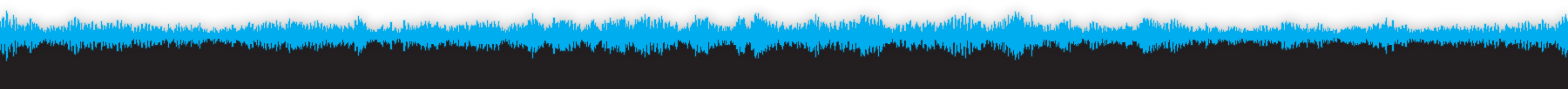
Sam Cooke’s 1964 song “A Change is Gonna Come” is often considered an anthem for change. Rosa Parks reported that she listened to this song to console herself after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Listen and **read the lyrics** to “A Change is Gonna Come,” then answer the questions on the following slide.





Consider or discuss with a friend:


- What is the change that Sam Cooke is hoping for?
 - Why do you think that this song became so popular during the 1960s?
 - How might this song be representative of the turbulent times of social and cultural change in the 1960s?
 - Do you think that this song is still relevant today? In what way?
- 



1970s

The 1970s were also a tumultuous time. An economic recession early in the decade led to high unemployment, and the Watergate political scandal that resulted in President Nixon's resignation from office left many questioning the leadership of the federal government.

The social movements initiated by Blacks, Native Americans, Women, and the LGBTQ+ community in the 1960s continued into the 1970s. Many Americans joined the protest against the ongoing war in Vietnam, and there was a growing awareness of environmental issues.





Click the links below to hear a selection of songs from the 1970s:

- **“Big Yellow Taxi” by Joni Mitchell (1970)**
- **“Rebel Rebel” by David Bowie (1974)**
- **“Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof off the Sucker)” by Parliament-Funkadelic (1976)**
- **“Sheena is a Punk Rocker” by the Ramones (1977)**
- **“You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” by Sylvester (1978)**

Write down some of your general observations about music from the 1970s on **the handout** you used before.





Consider or ask a friend:

- Did you hear any similarities between these five songs? Would you say there is a lot of variety between the songs?
- How would you define the feeling or mood of each of these songs? Were they similar or different?
- How would you say the songs of the 1970s differ from the songs of the 1960s? What new sounds do you hear?
- Based on the lyrics you heard, what kind of issues were musicians addressing in the 1970s?
- How did the fashion of musicians differ from the 1960s?

Write down some of your general observations about music from the 1970s on **the handout** you used before.



Spotlight: “What’s Going On?”

“What’s Going On?” was released in 1971 by Marvin Gaye as an emotional appeal for a better world.


According to NPR, “This song helped change the national conversation. . .Gaye knew that the real triumph in this song was in the way he transformed troubling social problems into an imploring emotional appeal.”

Listen to the song and **read the lyrics**, then consider the questions on the following slide.





Consider or talk with a friend:

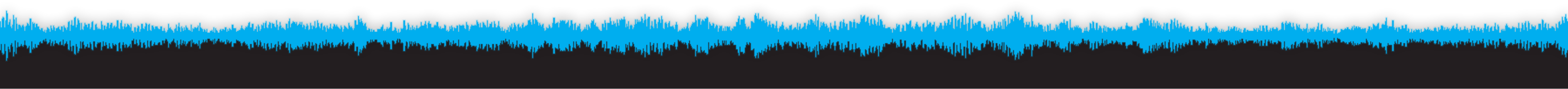
- What cultural problems does “What’s Going On” describe?
 - How does Marvin Gaye bring listeners’ attention to these cultural issues?
 - Why do you think Gaye sang so quietly about such troubling times?
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1980s

The 1980s were a time of unchecked excess, ruthless ambition and explosive technological innovation. This was the decade that brought video games and personal computers. Satellites we launched into orbit, which triggered an explosion in global communications.

The 80s were also a decade of extreme inflation and high unemployment, especially in urban areas, as well as the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the U.S., one of the biggest health crises of the century.





Click the links below to hear a selection of songs from the 1980s:

- **“Rise Above” by Black Flag (1981)**
 - **“99 Luftballons” (“99 Red Balloons”) by Nena (1983)**
 - “Billie Jean” by Michael Jackson (1983)
 - “Purple Rain” by Prince (1984)
 - **“Fight the Power” by Public Enemy (1989)**
- 



Consider or ask a friend:

- Did you hear any similarities between these three songs? Would you say there is a lot of variety between the songs?
- How would you define the feeling or mood of each of these songs? Were they similar or different?
- How would you say the songs of the 1980s differ from the songs of previous decades? What new sounds do you hear?
- Based on the lyrics you heard, what kind of issues were musicians addressing in the 1980s?

Write down some of your general observations about music from the 1980s on **the handout** you used before.





Spotlight: “The Message”

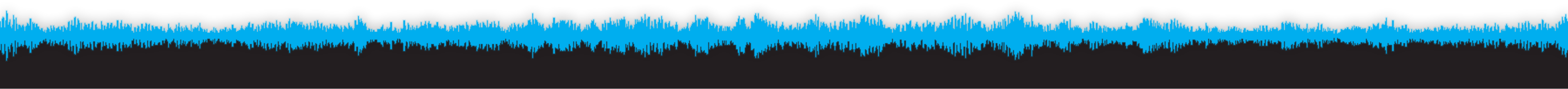
"The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five was released in 1982. Pioneering the use of social commentary in Hip Hop, the song became an international hit single. The song's lyrics provide a powerful description of the bleak conditions experienced by marginalized communities due to institutional racism.

Watch the video and read excerpted lyrics **here**.





Consider or ask a friend:


- What socioeconomic issues are being touched upon in the lyrics to this song?
 - How might this song have brought wider attention to the effects of institutional racism?
 - This song is often described as one of the most important Hip Hop songs of all time, and was the first Hip Hop song to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Why do you think that this song is considered to be so influential?
- 



1990s

In 1990, the Berlin Wall began to be dismantled, and the next year the Soviet Union dissolved. Both events were fundamental in ending the decades-long Cold War. With many national economies now freed from Soviet control, and new transportation and communication technologies, including the Internet, developing, an era of Globalization began.

The ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) symbolized an increasingly globalized marketplace, bringing new, and often cheaper, goods to U.S. consumers. But NAFTA also threatened to disenfranchise some U.S. workers - especially those in sectors vulnerable to trade competition.





Click the links below to hear a selection of songs from the 1990s:

- **“Alive” by Pearl Jam (1991)**
 - **“Can it All be So Simple” by Wu-Tang Clan (1993)**
 - “Mo’ Money, Mo’ Problems” by Notorious B.I.G (1997)
 - “Paranoid Android” by Radiohead (1997)
 - “Say My Name” by Destiny’s Child (1999)
- 



Consider or ask a friend:

- Did you hear any similarities between these two songs? Would you say there is a lot of variety between the songs?
- How would you define the feeling or mood of each of these songs? Were they similar or different?
- How would you say the songs of the 1990s differ from the songs of previous decades? What new sounds do you hear?
- Based on the lyrics you heard, what kind of issues were musicians addressing in the 1990s?

Write down some of your general observations about music from the 1990s on **the handout** you used before.





Spotlight: “Smells Like Teen Spirit”


“Smells Like Teen Spirit” was written in the style of another band, The Pixies, and got its name from some graffiti musician and Riot Grrrl co-founder Kathleen Hanna had written, which said “Kurt smells like Teen Spirit”. (Teen Spirit was a popular deodorant for teenage girls in the 1990s).

Watch the **“Smells Like Teen Spirit” video** and **read the lyrics**, then consider the questions on the following slide.





Consider or talk with a friend:

- Which do you think resonated with audiences most, the video or the lyrics of this song?
 - How do you think that this song made teenagers in the 1990s feel?
 - What do you think that the members of Nirvana might have felt about this song's huge popularity?
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Today, music continues to reflect society.

In 2020, Bono introduced an all-star cover of U2's song "Beautiful Day" to celebrate high school and college graduates who were unable to attend their graduation ceremonies due to COVID.

"There were storm clouds over Dublin when U2 recorded 'Beautiful Day'. . .But the song was not a description of where we were at, it was a prayer for where we could go. . .of where we might be. . . We now know that America is a song still being written, that America might be the greatest song the world has never heard. It's a wild thought, and even wilder that the Class of 2020 might be the very people to bring it into being."

- Bono





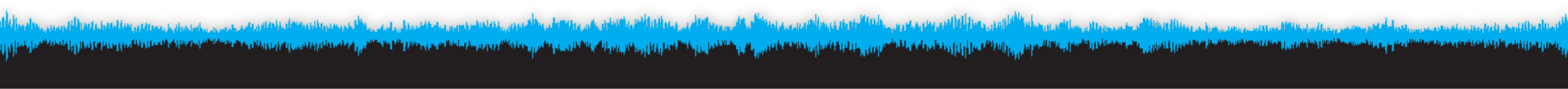
U2's "Beautiful Day" was originally released on October 9, 2000.


Read the song's lyrics, and consider the questions on the next slide.






Consider or talk with a friend:

- How is U2's song "Beautiful Day" still relevant 20 years after it was released?
 - Can you think of other songs that are considered "old" but are still important?
 - What do you think makes a song like "Beautiful Day" stand the test of time?
- 



Look back at the completed **handout**. With a friend, family member, or classmate, try to summarize the changes in music that occurred throughout the decades of American History.

Consider what sort of social and technological developments might have contributed to the ever changing look and sound of American popular music. Then list 2-3 things you learned about American music, history or culture based on the songs you listened to.



SUMMARY

- Popular songs are a window into the past, allowing a better understanding into the politics and culture of the time the song was written
- American popular music has changed throughout the decades, reflecting the cultural, political, and technological developments that have occurred in the last century



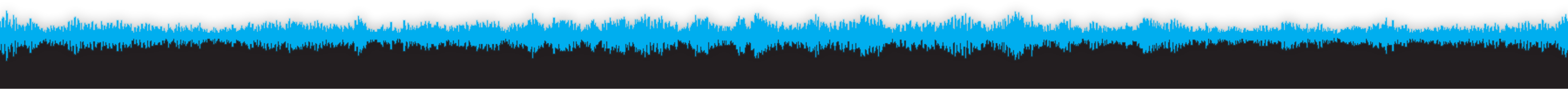
BE CREATIVE

- Using a music streaming platform, explore some of the songs listed in the lesson that didn't have links, including Prince's "Purple Rain," Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean," Radiohead's "Paranoid Android," and Destiny's Child "Say My Name." Consider how these songs fit with the rest of the songs on the playlists.
- Think about a song or songs that you particularly like. Research the lyrics and find a video of that song to watch. Then write a short reflection on the way that song and video might reflect an aspect of politics or culture in today's world.



BE CREATIVE

- Create a Musical Timeline that highlights the information from this lesson. Be sure to make your timeline colorful and interesting.
- Create a “Greatest Hits from the 1950s through the 1990s” album cover, with an included track listing.
- Create your own Greatest Hits playlist from your lifetime. Write a brief description of why you chose each song on your playlist.



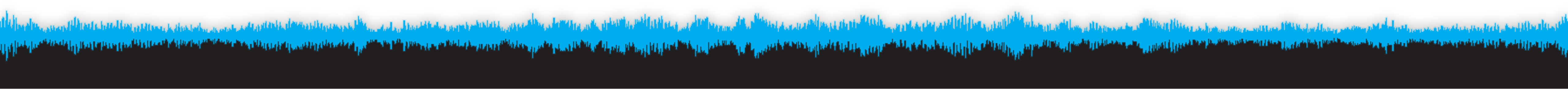
BE CURIOUS

- **Learn more about Bill Haley**
- **Learn more about Sam Cooke**
- **Learn more about Marvin Gaye**
- **Learn more about Grandmaster Flash**
- **Learn more about Nirvana**
- **Learn more about Bono**
- **Learn more about how music reflects and can change culture**



CONNECT

Share with us! Either you or an adult in your life can share your Rock and Roll Illustrated Timeline, your Greatest Hits Album Cover, or your Personal Playlist with TeachRock on **Instagram** or **Facebook**, email to **info@teachrock.org**, or Tweet it to **@TeachRock**





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