

SHARON MAZER
FOREWORD BY WITI IHIMAERA

**I
HAVE
LOVED
ME
A
MAN**

THE LIFE & TIMES OF

MIKA



From the Old Mill Disco in Timaru to San Francisco’s ACT UP protests, through Jazzercise and drag, AIDS and homosexual law reform, *I Have Loved Me a Man* takes readers inside the social revolution that has moved New Zealand from the 1960s to the present day through the story of the one, the only, queer Māori performance artist: Mika.

Mika grew up in Timaru, was adopted into a white family, and learnt Māori culture from the back of a cereal box. He discovered disco in the 1970s, worked with Carmen, Dalvanus Prime, Merata Mita and others to develop outrageous stage shows that toured the world, played a policeman on television in *Shark in the Park* and came out on screen with Harvey Keitel, playing a takatāpui role in Jane Campion’s Academy Award-winning film *The Piano*.

Mika has never been in the closet: his life has been an ongoing production of both the fabulous and the revolutionary. This highly visual book interweaves archival and historical research with images hand-picked from Mika’s extensive archive to reveal the life and times of a queer brown boy from Aotearoa who took on the big white world.

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CHAPTER ONE

WEET-BIX MĀORI

But the queer – not yet gay – world was an even more intimidating area of this hall of mirrors. I knew that I was in the hall and present at this company – but the mirrors threw back only brief and distorted fragments of myself.

— James Baldwin, 'Here Be Dragons'

I used to believe that my birth mother gave me away without a second thought, but that wasn't true. I only found out forty years later. My birth sister tracked me down and told me the real story. When I was born, my mother told the hospital that she wanted to keep me, but they wouldn't let her. They took me away before she could even see me. Turns out, at the time when I was born, it was not unusual for single Pākehā women who had babies with Māori men to be forced to give their babies up for adoption. I've met two other men who were also taken at birth, handed to nice middle-class, Pākehā families in the same way. We're New Zealand's own 'Stolen Generation'.

— Mika

Singing a Māori-haka-meets-Liza-Minnelli version of 'New York, New York' in *Tribal Hollywood* at the Edinburgh Fringe, 1999.

THE ONE, THE ONLY . . . MEEEE-KA!

A few years ago, I took a road trip to the port town of Timaru, several hours to the south of my home in Christchurch. Our destination was Timaru Boys' High School, a bastion of middle-class culture for the (male) descendants of New Zealand's early settlers. We were there to see the Māori performance artist Mika, an 'old boy', perform his cabaret show. The gymnasium/auditorium was lit mostly by votive candles on low tables that were scattered, cabaret-style, around a cleared space on the floor. Overhead was a mirror ball, casting diffused glints of light at the basketball hoops and commemorative plaques and on us. At the grand piano in one corner, a man sat playing a mix of classical and contemporary tunes; in the opposite corner a large TV screen was soundlessly cycling through highlights from Mika's TV series, *Te Mika Show*.¹ The room filled quickly around us: mostly older Pākehā (white, non-Māori) men and women,² who greeted each other as if at a high school reunion – which is what it was in many ways. They purchased glasses of wine, beer or soda, nibbled on rice crackers and dip, and chattered amongst themselves in cosy companionship.

At 7.30 p.m. sharp, the pianist stopped. Recorded music swelled. From behind the curtain Mika announced himself over the PA: 'Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, performing here for you tonight, it's the one, the only . . . Meeee-kal' And then he entered to ecstatic applause. A cluster of feathers topped his hair, and he wore an enormous black patterned cloak (by Issey Miyake) that he dramatically swished to make a peepshow of covering and revealing a loincloth festooned with pāua shells and yellow straw – a creation of the Pacific Sisters performance art collective. He spent the next hour in the spotlight under the spinning mirror ball, singing medleys that slammed traditional Māori tunes and phrases into songs by Madonna, Prince and – for the encore – Roberta Flack, dancing,

joking and reminiscing with the audience about how he felt to be back where, so many years ago, he had been so well known as Neil Gudsell, at once the only visibly Māori and the only openly gay boy in the school. His adopted sister and his birth sister were sitting together in the front row, along with his old teachers and former schoolmates. After the performance, he changed into a kaftan that was adorned with cameos of the Virgin Mary; then he posed for photos, his arms around clusters of adoring fans. He was, after all, a celebrity – an old boy who had made it big on the international stage, returning in triumph to the town where it all began.

All this is to say that it was a very strange evening. All the more strange because I seemed to be the only one who thought it so as I watched this native New Zealander, this gay Māori man, spin bits and pieces of Māori language and cultural performance into songs from the international hit parade. It was a kind of 'native drag', at once ambivalent (in attitude) and ambi-valent (in motion), a queer tipping into and slipping between the tropes of postcoloniality and biculturalism, dressing up and discarding each in turn.

A WEE BROWN FACE IN A SEE [SIC] OF WHITE FOLK

Who is Mika? Proudly, performatively Māori. Just as proudly and performatively gay. Mika grew up in Timaru, as he says in his performances, a queer brown boy adopted into a resolutely white, straight home, discouraged from seeking out his birth family who, he discovered only much later, were living just a few doors away. Mika's childhood experience of self calls to mind the hall of mirrors James Baldwin describes in 'Here Be Dragons',³ or as Mika sometimes says, 'here be taniwha' – taniwha being a Māori equivalent to the European concept of dragon, or sea monster, the awe-full apparition at world's edge.

Families are our first mirrors; we look to them to find out who we are, who we might become, mostly by aligning ourselves with what we see. Sometimes, however, it's not so simple. From the start, Mika, in looking to his family to find himself reflected, saw instead prismatic refractions – not the singularity of sameness but the bits and pieces of difference, of Other-ness.⁴ Embraced by the family who took him in, he embraced in turn his shifting sense of self as something to be discovered, experimented with and performed for others. And as he has gone along, his celebration of a different sort of self-in-the-making has inspired him to celebrate others for their differences. It's made him the celebrity we see today.

In an early family photo we see him with his older sister and parents, just about to dance himself out of his frilly baby clothes. Neil Gudsell. Mika before he was Mika. He's not at all camera-shy, flirting with the lens (and whoever is behind it) already: chubby-cheeked

Mika, aged eighteen months, his parents Dawn and Bill Gudsell and his sister Shirley in the family's state house at 24 Tweedy Street, Timaru, c. 1963.



and cheeky, looking as though he's just told himself a little joke. With the floral drapes and blinds setting the stage, this could be just about any nice, middle-class-ish family portrait, taken from anywhere in the Western world: 'a vision of ordered, comfortable domesticity' perfectly reflecting New Zealand's 'post-war suburban idyll'.⁵ It's the early 1960s, the tail end of the baby boom, the last lull before the incursion of popular culture via television and radio stirred things up. Mika's parents look old enough to remember the war, yet young enough to move to the new beats.

The family photo is also quintessentially Timaru – from Te Maru (meaning 'place of shelter') – where (as I write this) the mayor has just declared war on the rest of Southland for the cheese roll title.⁶ As a convenient stopover on the drive between Christchurch and Dunedin, Timaru can seem to the casual traveller like the land that time forgot. A beautiful ocean view, with a summer carnival on the

Mika's mother and father courting in the 1950s.



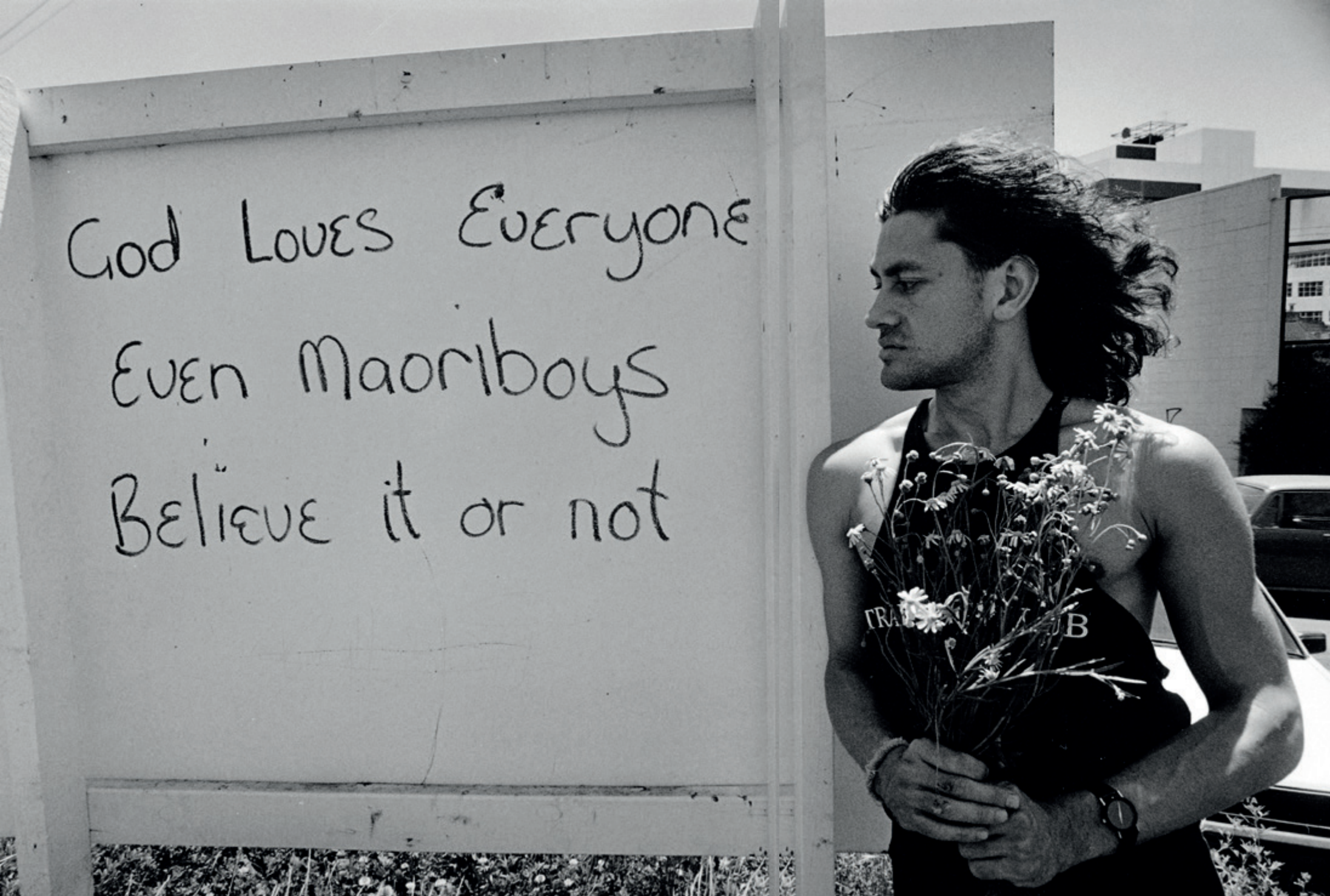


Photo by Albert Sword, 1989.

Harvey gave me his number in New York, but I never called.
— Mika



CHAPTER NINE

TOHUNGA MATAKITE

Camp itself should almost be defined as a kind of madness, a rip in the fabric of reality that we need to reclaim in order to defeat the truly inauthentic, cynical and deeply reactionary camp – or anti-camp – tendencies of the new world order.

— Bruce LaBruce, 'Notes on Camp/Anti-Camp'

Look New Zealand, I'm a traditional Māori!

— Mika

'Māori Barbarella', from a shoot for *Salon Mika*, 2014.
Korowai by Kiri Nathan. Photo by Sara Orme.

A PARTY BORN OF AROHA

September 2011. Auckland is hosting the Rugby World Cup. It's a big deal for the city and for the country. A huge influx of tourists, celebrity spectators and international media: we are, for a moment, what the world is watching.¹ In the near-darkness as spectators gather, we hear sounds of a haka mixing with the long notes of several pūkāea (long wooden trumpets), and then a woman's voice soars above the chatter, her karanga hailing everyone from far and near, summoning us to the show. Other voices, female and male, join hers, and the vast stage is soon swarming with Māori – well over fifty men, women and children – in traditional costume, performing a haka pōwhiri, singing and dancing their welcome in front of thousands of spectators. What follows is an impeccably scripted and choreographed pageant, the story of Aotearoa New Zealand, a nation that has emerged from its native and colonial past to celebrate its multicultural present. With 760 performers plus crews supporting both the live action and the filming for broadcast to audiences in New Zealand and beyond, it's magnificently theatrical, marvellously

Mika and Rena Owen in rehearsal for the Rugby World Cup *Aroha Mardi Gras*, Auckland, 2011. Photos by Sara Orme.



inclusive and absolutely massive. And while there was a similar show on at Eden Park – cast and crew of a thousand or so, starting with Māori and culminating in a valorisation of contemporary, post-colonial, post-bicultural New Zealand – to launch the World Cup just a few days before, this show's at Britomart's Takutai Square, and it's all Mika: *Mika's Aroha Mardi Gras*.²

In the film of the event, we see Rena Owen take the stage in a beautiful frock designed (as many of the key costumes were) by Kiri Nathan. Seated with a big book, from which she reads periodically, she becomes our guide, a poised counterpoint to Mika's perpetual-motion performance as MC.

A millennium ago, our ancestors arrived in Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud, now known to all as New Zealand. Our stories, our tradition and our culture were passed down orally through song, dance, chant, performance. Tonight we celebrate the multicultural heritage of our country, to bring you a taste of how this land became the current party destination of the world. . . . Welcome, welcome, thrice welcome to Mika's Mardi Gras!

The crowd cheers, and the show pours onto the stage, seemingly from all sides. She announces: 'And so people, our party continues. A party born of aroha. Love. A party to welcome you to our city, to our culture. A party where you can, and should, expect the unexpected.'

The Haere Mai Taiko Drummers keep the beat, mixing seamlessly with whatever's next: from the Te Tai Tonga Kapa Haka troupe, the Te Ariki Vaine Polynesian Dance Team, the Pearlz of Meganesianz fa'afafine dance troupe, the AUT Dance Team and the Kā 400 kids (really, 400 kids!) led by Jay Tewake to The Glamboyz, Haka Punks, Pounamu Diamonds, The Manu Dolls and the Phoenix & Tais Belly Dancers. There's a burlesque performer, Miss Leda Petit. There are drag queens who take the spotlight in showgirl pink, feathers and

Rugby World Cup
Aroha Mardi Gras,
2011. Southside diva
Chanel D'vinci (left)
performs 'Get It On' by
Mika. The song, says
Mika, 'was a fun way to
inspire condom use for
safe sex'. Jay Tewake
is in the back leading
the Haka Punks dance
crew. Trajano Leydet
stands far left. Mika's
costume by Polyfilla.

sequins. There's a fashion show, models runway-walking in designs by Kiri Nathan. There's Mika singing duets with Edward Ru, Mahina Kauai and Keisha Castle-Hughes (in her first venture as a singer). He is himself a one-man fashion parade racing through, stitching the whole thing together with a constant patter to the audience. In one of his more flamboyant costumes, he stops, finds the camera and proclaims: 'Look New Zealand, I'm a traditional Māori!' In another he swans a bit, waving his voluminous parachute silk cape over the wind machine, then smirks, 'I wear this one to New World, Mt Roskill.'³

Seen on the screen, more than five years later, the show still feels fresh, as if we can be forever there, part of the party. It is indeed, as Mika exclaims, 'A beautiful night!' He crosses the boundary separating stage and audience, between the live and the mediated performance, tells us to 'feel the love in the air', wiggles his finger (naughty, naughty) and goes on: 'Some of you are even touching. . . .



And for one night only. Let's not give a dingle dingle about what anyone else in the whole wide world . . .' He doesn't finish, but we know what he means. This is, after all, part of the Aroha Festival, also produced by Mika: a cosmopolitan promenade that visibly embraces gender and sexual diversity as part and parcel of the rich cultural tapestry of contemporary New Zealand. It's a celebration of all kinds of love – tribal and familial, between friends and between communities, platonic perhaps for some, but also undeniably erotic: 'Shake, feel, kiss me, love me . . . start a fire.'

Mika's Aroha Mardi Gras was, he says looking back, 'the biggest thing I've ever done'. To make a show that looks so spontaneously combusted requires months and months of disciplined preparation, countless conversations (and certain compromises) with

Mika and his all-stars
at the very alternative
RWC Aroha Mardi
Gras, 2011. From left,
Pounamu Diamonds,
Leda Petit, Mika,
Kelly Henare-Heke,
Edward Ru.

collaborators and sponsors, detailed design and direction aimed both at the live audience and for the cameras. For her part, Kiri Nathan says that Mika

literally slapped me in the face with his take the world by storm attitude to life and work! I spent 6mths [sic] working on his Aroha Mardi Gras Event during the RUGBY WORLD CUP. It was an insane, creative, learning period. I went from making a few signature pieces for Mika to creating all of his costuming, dressing the main cast, Keisha Castle-Hughes & Rena Owen to name a few and styling the entire show and CAST OF OVER 600 people. I did everything from physically dressing Mika to holding the wind machine for optimal costume performance. . . . Most of the pieces I created for this show were hand woven and hand sewn, it really was creativity outside the box. I loved it!⁴

Every one of the 760 people on the stage looks confident and absolutely thrilled to be there. Every step, every note, what they are wearing, the way they keep the beat is explicitly performative. 'We know who we are, because this is the way our people – native and not-so, queer and not-so, young and not-so – have always danced,

Poster for RWC Aroha
Mardi Gras, 2011.



Keisha Castle-Hughes with Mika in Los Angeles, recording the song she performed at the RWC Aroha Mardi Gras in 2011, which later became the title track for the stage show and film *Room 1334* (2015).

we're making these dances new with each other and for you, and we will still be dancing, here and elsewhere, long after this night is over.' Thus they recall the past into the present and summon the future. Everyone is applauded, not because of political correctness, but because of the way the vitality on the stage flows into and lifts the audience. Twenty years after Mika's first gay haka, at the Hero Party on Princes Wharf, only a few hundred metres away from Takutai Square, the show carries on.

AN ARTISTIC MINORITY REPORT

The distance (physical and metaphysical) between the two Rugby World Cup spectacles is instructive. Transgender academic/activist and prolific theatre critic Lexie Matheson saw the show as standing alongside the larger event, rather fraternally, as 'the artistic

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