



THE CURATING COMPOSER

CREATING CULTURES OF NEW MUSIC

A MINI PUBLICATION BY STUDIO WILL DUTTA
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Published by Studio Will Dutta on 7 May 2024

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Daytimers at Boiler Room, photo by Sunny formats, 2020 © Sunny formats

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The learning — in brief

In the last sixty years alone, many cultures of new music have come and gone. We live in the afterglow of these and at the epicentres of the unfamiliar where new aesthetics create new styles that soon become techniques in the creative bank of composers and music creators. Dub, minimalism, 2-step, PC Music: these are just a random selection of styles that can trace their identity to a few key individuals or collectives and the scenes that grew around them. So how can the music industry be more supportive of these often-precarious communities of interest? To answer this question, we need to first understand how cultures of new music are created.

We undertook interviews with Provhat Rahman and Ryoko Akama, founders of artist collectives *Daytimers/Dialled In* and *ame* respectively, and Safiya Bashir and Roohi Sarwar, early adopting audiences of each, and discovered four areas of overlap with the two very different new music scenes under discussion. These are:

- (1) The scenes begin with an identifiable need driven by the curating composer with other creators and recreators buying into their vision. Initially, the audience is not an active consideration
- (2) Neither founding artist feels they are necessarily the right person to be running the scene but that a sense of necessity drives them
- (3) The two audience members understand the scene is principally artist-led and yet they still feel valued. They understand the founders' motivations and feel aligned with the need and vision that has been identified
- (4) Clear communication, performance space and low financial burden are key success factors for inviting and keeping an audience engaged.

We also identified sector development that needs attending to if more cultures of new music are to flourish. These are:

- (1) Increase media representation by creating more development pathways for aspiring music writers, content creators and promoters
- (2) Inspire, back and upskill the next generation of scene makers to do it themselves. This means investing in self-producing skills development.



The learning — at work

Communities of interest come together up and down the country and form the backbone of a vibrant music ecology in the UK. It is something this country rightly celebrates. But following the double blows of the UK's decision to quit the EU and a global pandemic, not to mention the astonishing scale of digital creativity competing for our attention and a broken economic model—both facilitated by new technologies—it suddenly looks very fragile. Because of this, I want to look at some of the individuals and collectives who drive these scenes, so we can begin to understand how to support them better.

In 2021, my Studio published the first in a series of research papers exploring the curating composer, as a new role with a distinct set of practices. An implication of the paper was that the curating composer had another function—that is in creating cultures of new music.

Over the last 15 years or so, I have often observed how music scenes come about through the work of a handful of individuals or collectives of individuals, who are often music creators themselves. I want to understand what motivate these individuals to invest so much time (and often their own financial resources) into building communities around their music and that of others. I also want to explore ways of making these scenes more sustainable. For example, what happens to the scene when the founders move on? What happens to the scene when it reaches a certain level of critical or commercial success? What more can be done by the music industry—and by this I mean major labels and publishers and publicly funded talent development organisations—to better support these catalysts of creativity? This paper goes straight to the heart of the DIY ecology, which plays a vital role in the wider cultural ecosystem here in the UK.

To discover the potential of the curating composer as a culture creator or scene maker, Fiona Allison, Creative Project Leader at Sound and Music, and I interviewed two creators of two very different scenes. Ryoko Akama is a composer and co-founder of *ame (art music experiment)*, a Community Interest Company (CIC), which runs Dai Hall in Huddersfield. She has been growing an experimental scene in North East England since 2005. Provhat Rahman is the founder of *Daytimers*, a creative collective that began remotely during the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, and *Dialled In*, a one-day festival launched in 2021. The collective and festival have had a meteoric rise and are at the heart of a flourishing South Asian creative scene. We also spoke with Roohi Sarwar, a regular at *ame* events, and Safiya Bashir, a supporter and audience member of *Daytimers* and *Dialled In*, because we wanted to know what it is like to be in the audience.



Top. Screening of *What Is Man And What Is Guitar?: Keith Rowe* at *ame*, photo by Shirani Brookes, 2022 © Shirani Brookes

Bottom. *Audrey Chen* and *Phil Minton* at *ame*, photo by Shirani Brookes, 2022 © Shirani Brookes



DJ edv3ctor at *ame*, photo by Stephen Harvey, 2021 © Stephen Harvey

We have structured these contributions in the form of an edited conversation, or ‘idobata kaigi’, which is Japanese for chit-chat, at Ryoko’s suggestion. This is set out in the next section. For those who want to get straight to the point, what follows is the key learning at work.

There are limitations to the research in this paper, however. For example, there are other actors in scene creation who are not represented here—the record shops, pirate radio stations and DJs, for example. This is deliberate for at this point I want to see how far I can push the curating composer role, as I seek to impact artist development and training pathways.

Critical success factors

(1) Identifying the need

Provhat Rahman’s vision was to create an outlet to champion South Asian artists and develop a safe space that was notably different from the overriding culture:

‘We’ve been made to feel, for a very long time, very unwelcome, and that the [dance music] scene as a whole is very individualistic, it’s very capitalistic.’

During the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020, Provhat spent time researching South Asian producers and initiated a series of meetings via Zoom to discuss his idea. He soon realised there was a group aligned with his vision:

‘It just kind of clicked and everyone was on the same wave.’

Ryoko Akama noticed there were few opportunities for experimental artists to play outside of cities, and particularly London. After moving to Huddersfield from London she started getting requests from international artists who had come to play at the more established venues in the UK for other performance opportunities. She felt driven to start promoting events in her local community:

‘It became a bit of word-of-mouth thing, and people were talking about “Oh, contact Ryoko, and maybe you could have a concert in in Huddersfield.”’

These reflections show how needs were identified and that the individual founders gathered or encountered other like-minded artists around them thereby building the foundations for the scene to develop.

Imposter syndrome

An addendum to this is that both artists felt they were not the right person to be leading a scene, but that a sense of necessity drove them. Provhat recalls:

‘It was just something that I really wanted to have as a thing, as opposed to something that I knew I could do.’

Similarly, Ryoko says,

‘I don’t even feel that I am a curator.’

By acknowledging this, it is important the next generation of culture creators are inspired not only by role models who reflect their own experiences, but that they are given agency and a belief they can do this for themselves. This means the music industry providing more opportunities for self-producing and curatorial skills development

(2) Understanding the value-proposition

In our research we found a common thread: the initial catalyst for the scene comes from and engages composers, music creators and recreators first. Provhat acknowledges that audiences are a secondary consideration. He says:

‘At the beginning, the audience and the artists that were being targeted were one and the same thing.’

The same is true for Ryoko, who was driven by a need coming from artists to play, rather than a need from an audience to experience experimental work more broadly. This was reflected in the audience interviews. Roohi Sarwar, a regular at *ame*, says:

‘I don’t think *ame*’s really that dependent on the audience. I think they wouldn’t mind if the audience didn’t even like it.’

However, the audience does not feel undervalued—quite the opposite:

‘As an audience member, I also feel very important and an essential part of the cog of the wheel being there.’

This might seem contradictory, but the audience understands the motivation for the scene, even if they don’t feel essential to it themselves. It is this tension that draws them in. How the audience understands the motivation needs to be unpacked further. It is related to how clearly the vision is communicated and whether attendees buy into it.

Provhat talks about how important it was to be visual in communicating their intentions. The Boiler Room broadcast in August 2021 for the collective was an important milestone in this respect:

‘I think it clicked for a lot of people because a lot of people saw it and they were like “ah wait, this is a thing that’s happening that’s really new. And I’ve never seen this many brown people in a dance music space, let alone on a Boiler Room.” ’

Safiya Bashir, a *Daytimers/Dialled In* audience member, reflects that although she could tell it was artist first:

‘...they have created a really amazing community for themselves in a space for everyone else... just the fact that they’ve created this safe, regular space for a group of people who are all into the same thing is so amazing. And that’s something to really be celebrated.’

She also notes a sense of feeling aligned with the need and vision:

‘...we felt like we manifested it a bit because we really wanted this, we really needed it’.

(3) Reducing the risk for an audience to come and try

The third critical success factor for both scenes is to create events with a low financial burden. This allows audiences to come and try at relatively low risk. Ryoko explains this was essential for building a community around *ame*:

‘You can take a risk, this is only five pounds, come in and just come and listen, if you don’t like it, don’t come back, you know!’

Roohi felt this was an important part of why she felt encouraged to attend:

‘If it is on the doorstep and it is affordable, why not go, and I think that’s originally how I got into it.’



There is a common understanding among Provhat, Ryoko, Safiya and Roohi that an audience is receptive to new things but that they can tell when something is purely driven by the financials (i.e., profit-led). A scene that is more socially aware is perceived intuitively by an audience and it is another important factor in successfully building a sense of community. Provhat explains:

‘It was interesting to see the reaction from the people that were coming, when they know that no one who is running it is in it to make money and that it is just a community focused thing, people are then willing to spend.’

Although the audience may not be pivotal in the creation of the scene, they are essential to its sustainability. Provhat reflects on how far the collective has grown in the space of a year, from when they started in 2020, and how important audience feedback is to them:

‘...we’re at this stage where it’s so audience oriented. It is for the artists that haven’t had the opportunity to occupy these kinds of spaces before but the audience is pivotal to who we are and the entire movement.’

(4) Sharing space binds communities

ame and *Daytimers/Dialled In* began in very different contexts. Ryoko was able to open a physical venue in Huddersfield with the support of public funding whereas Provhat needed to start online because it was more affordable and during a period of national restrictions. The virtual space became the springboard to a physical space. However, both express a desire to be in physical spaces as a priority. Provhat says:

‘So many seminal movements are defined by [the] spaces that they operate in, and having an anchor that solidifies the movement, a physical, geographical anchor that actually certifies it I think is really important.’

Recommendations

We conclude this piece of research with two recommendations for the music industry to do more to support aspiring curating composers.

(1) Increase media representation by creating more development pathways for aspiring music writers, content creators and promoters

Provhat highlights the issue of media representation and the lack of diversity and imagination that is given to reporting on DIY scenes and underrepresented communities. He says:

‘...it comes across that if marginalised communities want to break into spaces where they’re not really given opportunities regularly, it has to be done through one overarching umbrella body.’

He goes on to describe how the media presents *Daytimers/Dialled In* as if they are the only source of South Asian creative activity, which, in turn, sets them up as the gatekeepers. He says this does a disservice to the ethos they are trying to promote:

‘So, it’s kind of breaking out of that space the media has inadvertently made us out to be like gatekeepers . . . there’s a lot of assumptions that are being made by all the attention that we’ve got, which I think makes it more difficult for people to think that there is an ethos of DIY culture around this community.’

(2) Inspire, back and upskill the next generation of scene makers to do it themselves. This means investing in self-producing and curatorial skills development.

Both artists touch on the importance of inspiring the next generation of scene makers and culture creators. Provhat says it is not enough to create the space for himself and others but that he inspires those that follow to know they can exist and that they should do it themselves:

‘It’s important that people know that there should continually be projects that are started.’

In a stark reminder to the music industry, Ryoko says that a lack of visible female Asian curators was a big driving factor in her continuing to do what she does, even though it can be stressful. She says:

‘...I just feel like I must do it. You know, I can’t just leave this, I just must do it because there’s no one else doing it.’





Top. *Nik Nak* at *ame*, photo by Stephen Harvey, 2021 © Stephen Harvey

Bottom. *Lyn Hodnett* and *Gillian Whitely* at *ame*, photo by Nick White, 2021 © Nick White

The interviews — in full

Part 1.

The following text is an edit of two 90-minute conversations between **Ryoko Akama, Provhat Rahman, Will Dutta and Fiona Allison**, that took place online on 13 and 27 January 2022.

Will Dutta (WD): Can we talk together about the word ‘scene’ and explore its relevance or not for how you think about your work?

Ryoko Akama (RA): At first I thought, I find it inspiring how you chose both of us. When I think about Provhat, who creates an experimental scene, one that could even be defined as a mainstream scene, it’s on a big scale for underground music, where I suppose you probably deal with thousands of people. And then when you say smaller scale, we’re talking about a couple of hundred people. And that’s what I’m talking about, if we have 30 people, it’s like great, you know, we have this crazy young person creating strange noise object music and we thought no one was going to come but then there were 35, great, thank you very much! You know, this is where we’re targeting acts. So yeah, that was just like my first pop-up thought when I saw this question that the word scene can have a completely different meaning when it comes to different creative practices.

Provhat Rahman (PR): It’s interesting what you said about numbers because that came out of nowhere. Initially, if we saw one or two others, even just one other South Asian person, at any of the events that we’d go to in this scene, then that would be like ‘Oh my God, that’s crazy’. I never ever see someone else who looks like me in these spaces. And it has now grown into something where we can fill out a room. *Dialled In*, for example, was like 1,000 or 1,200 people, and I’d say a good 70/80% of them were South Asian. So, it’s a complete 180 of what our experiences were from even just a year and a half ago. We were really scrounging to find people who were like-minded and looked like us basically.

But I think the word ‘scene’ is interesting as well because I feel like it exists for us as two separate entities. There’s the scene that we exist within and then there’s also the scene that we’re trying to create. And the reason that I see them as two separate things is because the so-called scene that we’re in feels more like an industry. And that obviously comes with all sorts of traditions that we don’t want to translate across to ours. So, it’s hard to equate them as the same thing. Because there’s things like male power dynamics, typical toxic DJ etiquettes and the illusions of grandeur, the list goes on, that you might get in the dance music scene. These are all things that are not great

aspects of the dance music scene that we've experienced, and have made an effort, or at least tried to make an effort, to make sure it isn't implemented in any kind of way in what we're trying to create. So, I think for me, it sort of it exists on two different spectrums.

We've been made to feel, for a very long time, very unwelcome, and that the scene as a whole is very individualistic, it's very capitalistic. A lot of it is focused on commodifying your hobby. Whereas we've tried to do a completely different take on what it means to go to a dance music event, or go to another art music event, where it's very community focused and it's very, very much about the music. And you know, there are so many scenes that we've looked to before, that we've taken inspiration from, you know, anything from like Anokha, the Asian underground, to FWD>>, Plastic People etc., where it was just about the community and the music first and foremost. And it was a completely welcoming environment as well.

WD: What were the motivations and catalysts for getting started? What were the significant or transformational moments?

RA: I used to live in London surrounded by artists and musicians all the time. That was how I was spending my early 20s, after college back in late 90s, early 2000, and it was really easy to go from one concert to another. And this was a time when there were squat parties and everyone's making music and everyone's self-releasing cassettes and CDs and people made money out of it. I was no one, you know, but if you play a concert, you could sell a hundred cassettes, because everyone was keen to buy stuff in the beginning. I'm talking about pre-internet time.

And then, for many reasons, I ended up being in North England, in Huddersfield. I did my PhD research and during that time, every musician, I'm talking about international musicians, would come to play major cities in the UK and they would ask me, 'can I play somewhere else?' and I'm like, 'I don't know.' But gradually I started to create small concerts for them. And they would always have good experiences and I would take them for a walk in the Peak District and everyone enjoys so much that it kind of became a bit of word-of-mouth thing, and people were talking about 'Oh, contact Ryoko, and maybe you could have a concert in in Huddersfield.' And then in 2017, after my PhD, I decided that I could probably get funding to make a concert for people to come and get paid properly.

So, I went for an Arts Council England Project Grant and Sound and Music's Composer-Curator programme and I got them both. And that's how everything started. So, to start with, it was just purely because I wanted my friends to come play. And then that became more like, can I invite someone I really want to see, not to London, not to Birmingham, not to Manchester, but to Huddersfield. It became a bit more like a tiny bit of my pride growing by being in a rural area—why can I not do this here? It became a bit of local community work.

PR: Initially, it was myself and Sherwyn Appadu, who was a good friend when I was at university... obviously still is! And he was the only person I knew, out of everyone that you might now see in *Daytimers*. At the beginning, I was like, 'I want to set this thing up, because it's lockdown and I want to do something or have some kind of outlet and I've always wanted to champion South Asian artists', it was just supposed to be producers initially. And I was like, 'nothing too intense'. And obviously that's not the case at all! It's very intense.

Everyone else who is visibly part of that internal team, like Gracie T, Yung Singh, Chandé, and others like Samia, people that you've seen on our platform, they're just people that have either found us through Instagram, either through the handful of South Asian artists that I already knew about, or sometimes in the Instagram comments, people would tag certain people when someone would ask for tracks or someone would ask for recommendations. I scoured loads of comments on SoundCloud and Instagram and I started connecting dots and being like, 'hey, uh, you do this and you do this, let's set up a Zoom call with everyone?' And we ran two or three of those and they were really nice.

I'll always remember them because of the energy. Obviously, we'd been in lockdown and there had been a million Zoom calls already, and even though no one really knew anyone, there was this energy of everyone understanding what I wanted to do and what we were all trying to push immediately. It just kind of clicked and everyone was on the same wave.

When we first started out everything was for charity. The compilations were for charity and we raised a lot of money. We raised about £13k, alongside the compilation, which raised a grand or so within the first two weeks, so for the first thing we put out I was amazed. So, even though we were in lockdown it was still very tangible how much the community wants to support itself.

When we had our Colour Factory event, which was again a fundraiser, and our first inperson event, it was still during Covid where people had to sit down and stuff. Again, we could see that people wanted to support.

And then the first thing that we actually tried to bill, something that wasn't for charity, was the first birthday, which was all the way back in August 2021. I think the tickets didn't go above a tenner. At that point you could see how much people wanted to support. It was interesting to see the reaction from the people that were coming, when they knew that no one running it was in it to make money and that it is just a community focused thing.

WD: When I think of the word 'community' in the context of a scene, I see an essential relationship between music creator, recreator (e.g., DJ, instrumentalists) and participant (audience). Are there other key players with a stake in your scenes? How is power distributed? In what ways might your roles as composers influence the musical direction of your scenes?

PR: The key players in the scene, people like Riya, have come in and really pushed our safer space policy. **This has made me realise that what we're trying to do isn't just to get bookings and play events, it is to foster an actual space that people come to and feel safe and welcome.**

So, we could be offered XYZ, like when we did Fabric, but there's still a very limited amount of control that comes with doing Fabric and that ultimately leads to incidents happening because you can't control that space to make it safer. And ultimately it did lead to incidents happening, which were not okay and that dampened it. But obviously it was an amazing night and it was sort of historic for us to do. But it was also just a reminder that we were not there to play Fabric and that's not our goal, it's not like 'we're done now.'

We are looking to foster those spaces that people can come to again and again, and don't ever go away and say, 'I did not feel that good at that *Daytimers*' event.' And same thing with *Dialled In*, it's just like people felt it was the first time they felt accepted, especially for queer South Asians, like millennial/Gen Z age, they felt really accepted and welcomed in a space like that. You can't really ask for much more than that. And it's something that you then have a responsibility to continually replicate because that's too precious a thing to take away from someone once you create it.

RA: I'm artistic director but we are an artist collective of five at the moment. We've just hired a social media developer. I felt many times that I didn't want to do this anymore. It's just so much work, you know, admin work and so much work when it comes to creating an event. I know it's really great fun. In retrospect, we always had a good time, but during or doing a performance, organising an event or promoting something, it's kind of a hell. And I'm like, 'ah, how do I do this?', you know, or after each big concert, I'm like, 'why do I have to do this?' But there are not many female Asian organisers, so I just feel like I have to do it. **You know, I can't just leave this, I just have to do it because there's no one else doing it.**

WD: Provhat, could you say a few words about the turning point when South Asian audiences went from being in the minority to the majority? That sounds like a transformational moment.

PR: Firstly, the first stream we did for the Indian farmers on Twitch. People said that the best thing about it was the chat room, because the chat room was so supportive and constantly going off: people supporting, everyone donating, saying hilarious stuff. Even people like DJ Ahadadream, who's been DJing for a while now, said they'd never felt support like that before, which is crazy because it was a text box. So, the fact that so many people felt it was tangible, just that Twitch chat, saw how much support was pouring out of it, especially during Yung Singh's set. Yeah, that's when it first felt really real.

But I don't think it came to fruition fully until the Boiler Room show. And it's funny that we were talking about selling tickets. This was a massive stress when we were organizing *Dialled In*. Up until that Boiler Room, basically it wasn't really selling at all. Which I was confused by, because so many people watched the stream and we raised a lot of money. I thought, 'all those people will probably just transfer over and it will be fine.' And then we weren't selling tickets at all. And we were at the point where we thought, 'Ah! we might have to cut a stage, we've booked all these people and we might have to tell a third of them "sorry, we can't do this anymore" because otherwise we'll owe them a lot of money.' And then we had Boiler Room, *Yung Singh presents: Daytimers*, and I think people needed the visual cue of what we were trying to do. They didn't have that, they had people DJing on the screen and the DJs were brown and that was cool. But they didn't have the raucous energy of our culture, and the blends of sounds that we were trying to make and the tracks that we've been producing over the past year. So many things came to fruition. It was the first Boiler Room back in 18 months. It was one of the first events to start playing again, it was the first time we played as a collective, which is nuts because it was Boiler Room. It was a lot of things coming together and that's

when I think it clicked for people because a lot of people saw it and were like ‘ah wait this is a thing that’s happening that’s really new. And I’ve never seen this many brown people in a dance music space, let alone on a Boiler Room.’ And that’s when the tickets started selling, literally the morning after the ticket sales were rocketing. I think people needed those moments, and that’s when the 180 happened and everyone started coming out of the woodwork and being like ‘we’re here, I get it.’ We were trying to make a space for ourselves and I really want to be a part of this. And thankfully a lot of people have.

Fiona Allison (FA): That’s interesting, because it’s something Will and I have spoken quite a bit about: what motivates those initial shifts when the audience changes, from a close-knit community into this bigger thing. And you said something interesting: that people need the visual cue to move to ‘this is new, I want to be involved in it.’ And there’s something important about that step for someone outside wanting to be involved in the scene.

Ryoko, could you speak a bit about the audiences you have had at your events. Do you have a core audience that come to all the events or is it different depending on who you put on?

RA: A bit of both. We have familiar faces in the concerts but when an exhibition runs, they bring their own audience, and they mix together. And it’s nice that we have a mixed audience.

WD: I’m interested in the theoretical idea of liveness and how it means to prioritise temporal co-presence over spatial co-presence. How important is it for the community to be together in-person as opposed to just spending time together online?

RA: As far as my own practice goes, it’s at the threshold between performance and installation. So naturally, I tend to like things that talk to music, visual arts, texts. So, it’s always important to see things in a physical sense. That’s why I like working in a gallery space where there is no stage or spotlight. The performance can be anywhere and the audience interact with a space. When I work with my performance, it’s more important to see the space than my fee. So, before asking anything, I always say, ‘where do I play?’ and this becomes part of my performance strategy. And this reflects into my organisational strategy as well. I am interested in the performers who think of the space as a part of their performance, so when I curate, that always comes first.

PR: So many seminal movements are defined by the spaces they operate in, and having an anchor that solidifies the movement, a physical, geographical anchor that actually certifies it I think is really important. And it’s the next step that I think we need to make. But again, it also comes back to the thing of that space, not just being a Blue Note or Plastic People, not like a club environment at all. The thing of making it a safe space is always the priority, but still keeping the ethos of having a space that is our own, that our community can come to regularly and rely on is the thing that’s most important. So yeah, I think that’s probably the next step for us.

WD: What was the turning point from seeing the need to acting? What did it take for you to feel empowered, to feel that ‘I can change/do this?’

PR: I didn’t really feel from the start that I was 100% the right person to be doing this. It was just something that I really wanted to have as a thing, as opposed to something that I knew I could do. And interestingly, at the very beginning, there was a bigger personal aspect to what it is now. I felt at the time I was a musician. I had just left university, I left being able to create in that collaborative space, I felt quite away from that creative and collaborative environment, and I wanted to jump straight back into it and do it in a slightly different way than what I had experienced before. I really wanted to for the sake of me being able to create music and work with other people. I wanted to make something that I could do that through but that also had that cultural weight behind it.

But, as it’s grown, I’ve felt less of a need to further my own personal profile as an artist. I’ve felt the pull instead towards doing things that I wish I’d had when I was younger: for the younger generation to have and for the wider community to have, as South Asian creatives.

So, that personal thing of not really feeling like the right person but also really wanting to do it was more prevalent, and also that shift from it being half of the personal thing and half to do something with cultural weight that hadn’t done before, into being pretty much entirely just about the cultural weight behind the project was I guess what spurred me on to continue past the initial stage.

RA: I don’t know if I saw the need to act. But I suppose it always seems like I dig myself into something and then I just can’t get away from it. So, I don’t think I saw the need to do anything, but as I went along, I was in a situation where I was doing something that I felt like I had to continue, like being a curator, an artistic programmer, or whatever it is called for *ame*.

As Provhat says, I don't think I'm the right person to do so. I don't even feel that I am a curator. It's such a big word in our world nowadays, it's a bit like composer, I don't feel like I'm a composer, but that what I'm doing is just something that's been categorised as a composer. It seems that I am the only female label manager and that makes me think that I just must keep going until it becomes the norm.

FA: It sounds like you're both really driven by things outside of yourselves. It sounds like you view your own artistry second to what's driving you on most of your projects.

PR: Yeah, it's interesting what Ryoko was saying because for me, regardless of how comfortable I felt, or what I was in it for, one thing that I was certain of was that there was a necessity for what I was trying to do because it just didn't exist or existed only in a very limited capacity. And maybe this is what informed my push away from the sort of individual aspects of it, but the scene that existed only really existed on an individual basis. There wasn't a lot of cross-collaboration and there wasn't much of a collective force behind the community as a whole. So, I knew that whatever I did, or whatever I was going to try and do the scene needed something. And obviously I didn't know what kind of impact I would ultimately have or be able to do with this whole thing. So yeah, it felt like it like it was needed from the very start.

WD: How do you invite and respond to audience feedback as the scene develops? To what extent do you and your team allow audience feedback to shape your plans?

PR: It's twofold: the feedback comes from the internal team as well as the audience. Because I think, at the beginning, the audience and the artists that were being targeted, were one and the same thing, we were focusing on finding the artists and making a space for them. And so, the artists were in the audience as well. And that's since changed to being multiple entities as it's grown.

But for us, the feedback is really important. We'll get feedback with the team, about how things are going, how transparent the organisation is and how transparent everything is in terms of projects and how people can get involved, but also how the whole movement comes across to the wider South Asian community and not just the creatives.

Creating spaces that are based around feedback has been something we've started doing recently, especially with *Dialled In* where we've started the *Dialled In Conversations*. They were initially supposed to be like panel discussions but we tried to make them more intimate and welcoming and as casual as possible. We had our first one at RichMix in London where myself, Ahad and Dhruva, three of the five team

members, sat down and said 'okay, here is everyone that organises it, this is who we are, what our intentions are, here is some of the feedback that we have and we welcome any and all criticism or comments that people might have' and have it as a really open discussion, just so people can say what they want and make sure that they know that we are listening as well.

We're at this stage where it's so audience oriented. It is for the artists that haven't had the opportunity to occupy these kinds of spaces before but the audience is pivotal to who we are and the entire movement that it's paramount that we're like 'please let us know what you guys think and how you think we can improve and what things we're missing, what errors we've made', because we've already a bunch of errors that are totally fair for people to bring up, things that we've missed. And yeah, it's that interplay between the audience and the organising team, it can't really be stressed enough how important it is for us, because it ultimately makes or breaks the whole movement, I think.

RA: When we started getting some public money, I was aware that we had to do some questionnaires. So, we had a printed questionnaire sheet and asked everyone to fill it in, but I didn't feel like it was working well. Because if you are in the audience, it's kind of pain in the neck that you get a piece of paper and so on, they're like 'oh, I just want to go home', and they've never been generously giving enough time to do feedback anyway. So we don't do that anymore.

But I think the feedback always comes from the community. When we do workshops or artist talks or when people spend more time with us, that's when I try to gather information about what people think.

And then social media—if something's good people tweet. It's a nice place to see and hear what's been retweeted and mentioned. I think we keep that level of getting feedback from the audiences. So yeah, I suppose it's a bit low level but that's what we think it's sufficient at this moment.

FA: Does having a physical space mean that you have more organic conversations with people? Do the public walk in and do they interact with you?

RA: Yeah! Having a space means we have different kinds of audiences. Just casual drop-ins all the time and they don't necessarily know anything about contemporary art, so that's really interesting. And I quite like that there's a real diversity of people coming in and out because we are not a proper gallery space. So, different questions and comments and sometimes really bad comments. Sometimes we have homeless people coming in and just stay there for a few hours and talk about art.

I do enjoy that. But on the downside, we are not in a place where we have 200 people coming in all the time.

So, I think there's always pros and cons, but I do like talking to people who don't really do art or music. It's always something interesting about talking to real people.

WD: Does that change you?

RA: Yes definitely. I always like that balance anyway, that there's this little sort of boundary, a wall, between people who understand contemporary art and people who are not very familiar with contemporary art. If I go to London and spend five days all I meet are artists and musicians and someone who's an activist of Greenpeace, and it's really interesting, you know, if you have a dinner party like 10 out of 10 are doing something very radical and interesting. But then coming back to my village and especially because I have two children I deal with parents and I try to say something about what I do and then they're like, 'err what, so do you have a job... do you play piano, do you sing?', that's how the conversation starts.

And I think it's necessary for me to be a part of that community. And it's also necessary for them to understand that there are very different people out there because not everyone's racist or not everyone's against the people for many reasons. So just me saying, well, there's this sort of sound music scene that maybe you don't know about, but maybe you can come and see something in this gallery. I'm doing something quite important for that community. I'm not trying to change the world or anything. I never think that I'm making something new. That's just not how I am, but just being there, just a little essence, so that people understand that there's weird people out there. Which you know, I don't really have when I'm in London. I think I've learnt a lot since I came to Huddersfield.

WD: What might a sustainable DIY culture look like? What support could the wider music industry provide to enable this?

RA: It's the question I'm looking for the answer too! When I talk to people of a similar age, we always end up talking like grandma and granddad, like 'back in the 90s and back in early 2000,' we've just become grandmothers and grandfathers. I come from the era when, if you wanted to do a gig, you just go and play. So, I'm looking for the answer still for it. Because it's just difficult.

I think the younger generations are struggling more financially. You know, who can live in London? People here in Huddersfield are struggling as well. We are talking about really cheap rent in North

England, but people are still struggling. So how do we maintain that spirit of DIY culture for the generations to come? I am kind of stepping a little bit back and will see what is going to happen especially when we have really bad politics. I always think it's not a bad thing for creative people. Because when politics is bad, something good happens in the creative sectors. So, I'm waiting for something big to happen after Brexit and pandemics and all sorts of things. So, it's more like I'm looking forward to it. But I don't have the answer.

I think I want to be a part of it. But I'm looking at this younger generations with a power, like what what's going to happen? And hopefully something really wacky is going to happen, especially in this country. It's difficult to take a risk though. What comes out of this huge dilemma of DIY culture, what comes out of this in 2030?

WD: Are we looking in the wrong place to think that DIY culture will look the same as it did? Should we be looking online, is that the rent-free space? While there's a real issue of digital poverty and lack of access, is that perhaps where the beating heart of DIY is? Provhat, what's your experience?

PR: I'm definitely gonna agree with that, based off the fact that both *Dialled In* and *Daytimers* were born in online spaces. It's hard to say about DIY culture in general, but for *Daytimers*, it feels like a lot of the responsibility for the whole community is placed on us. I think to some extent the achievements of a lot of the queer South Asian parties have been inadvertently erased by the press that we've got as well. Parties like Pussy Palace and Hungama and Misery and Club Cali and all these other parties that have been around for queer South Asians just in London, have been around much, much longer than we have. So, it's a case of making sure that people don't see *Daytimers* and *Dialled In* as this monolith for any kind of representation for South Asians in creative spaces. I think people still look to us because we have that coverage to be the ones to represent South Asians all over the place. Whereas in reality, we just want to get more versions of *Daytimers* and *Dialled In* to exist all over the world. That's the best way to do it, because it cements it as an actual cultural movement as opposed to a moment that is spearheaded to some extent by two bodies. So, it's breaking out of that space the media has inadvertently made us out to be like gatekeepers.

For example, if you want to book South Asian DJs you have to come through us and if there's ever a South Asian DJ and in any one space then that must be *Daytimers*. There's a lot of assumptions that are being made by all the attention we've got, which I think makes it more difficult for people to think that there is an ethos of DIY culture around this community and maybe even other communities as well, where it comes across that if marginalised communities want to break into

spaces where they're not really given opportunities regularly, it has to be done through one overarching umbrella body. And that's not how it works.

I didn't have my ear to the ground as much as I do now, in terms of the dance music community, but I still managed to carve out the space for a lot of people in it. And that's just through wanting to, and there's still so many spaces out there that still need carving out, not just for the South Asian community, but for a lot of other marginalised communities as well.

So, it's just making sure that people know that they can do it themselves. As opposed to finding someone who has managed to do it and then being like, 'well, let me try and do it through them' or, tell them that they need to be doing it this way.

As much as you should be able to critique movements like this because we're not going to get everything right, it's difficult for anyone to really get everything right when it comes to representing marginalised communities. It's important people know that there should continually be projects that are started. As much the white owned media will tell you that there isn't space.

Dhruva said this story at the *Dialled In Conversations* recently, about an artist (or *Daytimers*) he was pitching to write about, to one of the major music publications, and they were like, oh, sorry, we've already spotlighted a South Asian artist this month, like that would be too many lately. That's literally the email that he got back. So, we understand, people aren't stupid, the reason why they maybe see us as the gatekeepers or come to us immediately with criticism before they start their own things because they know that the spaces that we're trying to infiltrate will only allow one at a time, like one-in one-out policy. So, I get it, I totally get it.

But hopefully we're starting to see a shift away from that where South Asian DJs, for example, are now getting booked outside of the *Daytimers'* name. It's gone from being individuals to a collective movement and back to individuals, but in a much better way where it has the community behind it now. And the community can then push for all these individual artists, they can really make a name for themselves. And then as long as those artists are also bringing up the people who are supporting them. I think that's really important. But yeah, it's a case of people having faith in a scene that I guess it's quite hard to keep faith in. But just the fact that we're making strides, but people should know that there are more to be made and it's not just us that can make them.

FA: That's really interesting, because quite often, when we think about how to encourage scenes, we think about stuff like finances and space. But media and reporting are not something that's talked about. I think you've hit on something important there. It's about demystifying, because like both of you have just said that you didn't really think you could do it or you didn't even consider it much when you started out. You just started doing it. But once it gets to that level where someone writes an article on it, there's a sort of shininess that's put around it. There's this magic of it happening that people reading it might think, 'Oh, I could never do that.' But it's about changing the perspectives of those people seeing a scene and then empowering them to be like, 'I could do that too.'

PR: Exactly. And I think, importantly, where we're also representing a community and not just doing it for the sake of making individual careers and getting people booked. Obviously, that's part of it, but that's not the whole thing.

FA: Just on that point Ryoko, what were your measurements of success with your projects?

RA: Success. Hmm I suppose reflecting a bit on what Provhat's been saying... occasionally, some people come up to me and say, 'Oh I've seen you doing this and now I'm doing that,' that's really nice. So, **passing on, I view that as a success.** I don't know if that's what the word success means. And also, when other sort of like-minded organisations and artists, when they come up and say, shall we do something or, I can help you to support this. So that feels like friendships expanding? I think that's kind of personal success, but when it comes to, I suppose as organisation, as a professional success, maybe the increase of the audience numbers, that's always nice. That's a professional success, I suppose. And then trying to think ahead for bigger project. It's nice when I can see that clearly in retrospect.



Mick Beck at *ame*, photo by Nick White, 2021 © Nick White

Part 2.

The following text is taken from a single 90-minute conversation between Roohi Sarwar, Safiya Bashir and Fiona Allison, that took place online on 3 May 2022.

Fiona Allison (FA): What was the turning point from seeing promotional materials to feeling like you wanted to go? If it was word of mouth, how were you convinced to go?

Safiya Bashir (SB): I think with *Daytimers* I had been following them for a while and I think they kicked off in lockdown. I was following them online and aware of a lot of work they did and really got into that scene through my own interests and projects that I have. So yeah, for me, it was like a no brainer. I'm not actually based in the UK most of the time. I'm from the UK but I am currently living in the Netherlands and because they started off in lockdown they had a lot of great online events, I saw a lot of them and heard about them and then they started doing some in person ones and I really would have loved to be in there but never could. So, then when *Dialled In* came around it was just something I immediately wanted to be a part of.

I was speaking to someone about it recently, it's not just about the fact that it's the South Asian community, but on top of that it's South Asian people plus the extra niche of dance music and DJs and that crowd, so it is bringing those two parts of my life together into one, **it really is like 'Okay, wow, these really are my people.'** So, I think when *Dialled In* happened, I definitely wanted to be there for the first one. And it was just extra exciting having followed and spoken to a lot of the *Daytimers* crew and the people involved and the people who are DJing, it's the first festival I've been to that I was kind of a bit of a nerd about it. I think a lot of times people just rock up to festivals, maybe know a few people in the line-up and just want to go for the good time but this was one where I was like, I actually feel part of the community that they're trying to make. So, that was really great.

Roohi Sarwar (RS): I live in Huddersfield, it is quite a small community and we're lucky that we have quite a good music scene. I think a lot of people go to the university to study music and then hang around and they're quite open, creative and experimental. And I found out about *ame* through word of mouth and social media because once you know a few bands or a few music venues in Huddersfield, you tend to just to get to know everybody. It's quite a tight knit community and everyone knows everyone and I'm very keen on trying new things. I just thought it'd be something that's different and at first, I was a bit like 'Oh, what is this?', you know, 'is this music, are these sounds, what are they?' and I got more and more interested in it, even just the simplicity of it,

about how you can get small objects and create beautiful sounds and create an atmosphere.

And it doesn't necessarily have to be a finely tuned song that's on the radio for example, you can go somewhere and just immerse yourself into something that you wouldn't normally expect to be classed as a musical performance. I work in a theatre part time in the box office. I was quite familiar with the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, which has had some quite out-there events over the years and I've also been to see a lot of shows at the theatre, which are quite experimental and I've been to sound installations as part of theatre performances. So, I have experienced that kind of stuff, that kind of work before a little bit. I didn't go into it stone cold. It was in my own town and it was accessible. And sometimes you don't get stuff like that in small towns, you have to go somewhere like London or Manchester to experience things that are a little bit different. It's nice, it's on the doorstep. And if it is on the doorstep and it is affordable, why not go, and I think that's originally how I got into it.

FA: How often do you attend *ame/Daytimers/Dialled In* events?

SB: I think the first *Dialled In* I happened to be in the UK anyway, which was really handy and great, but the one that just happened I went back for it. Those are the only ones I've actually gone to but I'm always aware of what they're doing and I'm kind of following them very closely. And also aware of the fact that a lot of scenes are very London centric and *Daytimers* is trying very hard, and that's quite clear from following them, that they're really trying to diversify where they're located by having the northern branch and having events all over the country and I think they're going to come to Bristol soon, which is where I'm from. I'm unable to attend a lot of the events, like when they were at Fabric and stuff like that. I was very like, 'Oh, I wish I could have been there' and was clicking through and watching all the footage. But yeah, unfortunately just unable to be there in person. But if I was in the UK when anything was happening, I definitely would make my way over if possible.

RS: Usually about once a month if there's an event on and I can make it. Luckily, it's on my doorstep, it's in the town centre. I work in the town centre and if I'm not working from home that day, it's very easy to get to for me. So, I'm lucky. I have a friend who sometimes comes over from Leeds and he's like 'we don't have stuff like this in Leeds' and I'm like 'you must do' and he says 'no we really don't.' And he's like 'I love going to this, I just love the surprise of it and the fact that I don't know what to expect or what I'm going to get, I'm open to come to any of these events.'

And at one of the *ame* events they showed a film about women in electronic music, the first women that were in electronic music, about the whole history of it and there's so much stuff we didn't know. Off the back of that we found out that one of the artists is coming from America and going to be in Leeds and we've got tickets to go and see her, because we watched her in that film. We'd have never known about her before. I didn't know about women with transistors and the whole electronic music scene back in the day and how it was really sexist and a real struggle.

I feel like some of the events are really eye opening and educational. And they open doors to other things that I want to try. I'll see something at *ame* and I'll look it up and research it and I think I actually quite like that, let me just go into that field a little bit more and see what else is out there. I think it opens your eyes to new things.

FA: Do you feel part of a community? If so, what does being part of the community mean to you?

SB: It's an interesting one, because, obviously, I want to say yes, because the space has been created and they're inviting everyone into it, as like, a guest. But I think it's really hard with anything like this where it is at the end of the day a collective, a group of people who are all organising and all DJing and all present at the same ones, and everyone else, when you're in that space, it's really amazing, but you don't know anyone here, you know the main people, they're the big names you know you want to see and who's part of this group, but it's hard because the word community, I feel for me, it means something more personal. Like at *Dialled In*, I'm really interested in this scene any way and I've spoken to a lot of them individually and know who everyone is.

So, I would be kind of more at the forefront of that, but it still feels like, and I guess for a lot of the audience, you still feel like you're a guest attending a party, you're still going to be surrounded by strangers, and it's the same group who are organising them and they've, **I think, maybe have created a really amazing community for themselves in a space for everyone else.** It's weird because I was just thinking about this when I was at *Dialled In*, it's an amazing space, but community for me is just a funny word, but I've always thought that about how we refer to any community like, oh, the South Asian community, or the black community. I'm like 'what does that mean, though?' It doesn't mean we're all interacting and know each other.

FA: For sure, it's about South Asian creatives, but also, like you said, rather than community, you specifically said a space for South Asian audience members as well. Which is not a common space created in the dance music scene, for marginalised communities.

SB: Yeah, and just the fact that they've created this safe, regular space for a group of people who are all into the same thing is so amazing. And that's something to really be celebrated. But community I just think is a funny word.

RS: I've just looked up the word community just to see what Google says. It says a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common or the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common.

So, with the second one, sharing interests and living in the same place, I definitely feel like I'm part of the community with the *ame* events. I know that the creators probably feel like they've got a stronger sense of community because they're creating work in a similar kind of field.

But as an audience member out, I also feel very important and an essential part of the cog of the wheel being there, and it's a small town as well so you see the same people you start talking to them, we start getting to know them, we start talking to them about their future projects. And then you feel like you're part of that, and then you get to see it performed, what their dreams were, what they were talking about, and you're part of that process going along from when they're devising it to when they're performing it and, you know, that's only really possible in a place like Huddersfield because of the size of it.

Obviously in London, people are busy, you might go to one event, you might not go to another one until six months later, you might not see the same people so it's harder to be that involved in it. But where I am, I definitely would say I feel like I'm part of the community, even though I'm not a creator myself, and I'm just an audience member. And I do feel sort of important being there and contributing by being an audience member.

SB: Yeah, that was probably the piece of the puzzle that I was missing. Like one, a lot of the events being based in London and secondly, are really quite huge ones, but just by the fact that they're in London every time you turn up I think it's lots of different people there. And also, a big factor of this is that I haven't been to a lot of events and I haven't been able to keep going back and recognising the same people. So, that's why I'm probably lacking that feeling.

FA: That's interesting how much space feels important for community to develop, in a sense where community means really knowing the people. Here's another word for you that I'm just going to throw at you to see what you think of it, what do you think of the word 'scene'? And do you think you're involved in a scene or being involved in the two events and collectives that you're both a part of?

RS: I am involved as an audience member in the experimental music scene, I think. What do I think of the word? I feel like it describes a genre but one that's active at the moment and moving.

SB: Yeah, I think that's what I felt when you said the word scene, I felt like it is something that is quite current. Like you said, not quite a genre, because a genre will forever be there, but a scene as it's happening right now, it is this group of people in this space, doing something at the moment. And do I feel part of the scene? I guess so. Yeah. Because I have my own kind of projects that're similar to what the *Daytimers* do, so, having that bit of a crossover and being able to chat to them and get to know them a little bit and do my own things around that in Bristol. I think the word scene for me feels like for example, the *Daytimers* is our scene currently, but what they want to achieve is way more longevity than that. They don't want to be like the original *Daytimers* movement, which was quite small in the late 80s and then just faded out. This new South Asian underground, this new collective of *Daytimers*, has wanted to be more permanent, rather than just like a scene that happened.

FA: To what extent did you feel there was a need for this work and that *ame/Daytimers* are meeting it?

SB: I think for *Daytimers*, it was a huge need. Before I'd heard of the *Daytimers*, it was something that me and my brother, he's a DJ and I was just very into music in general, we were complaining about it a lot. We lived together in lockdown in London. And I was just really recognising the fact that, I was also learning to DJ at the time, I didn't see any kind of any role models that were South Asian. And the thing is, as soon as I started doing research, I realised that they were actually loads but it just wasn't mainstream and they were kind of more on the edges. And then as soon as we had this chat and decided to do our own project, that's when we came across the *Daytimers* and they just like, grew and grew and grew and it was just really amazing to kind of watch it from what felt like the start and **we felt like we manifested it a bit because we really wanted this, we really needed it.**

And now this amazing group of people have created this space and it's just so multi-dimensional as well, which I think is so important. It's not just DJs and club nights. We're going back to community: I think that's something that they are doing that's quite strong. And it's really inclusive and there's talks and they did Iftar over Ramadan and it really is bringing together a group of people. And they've been successful at portraying that to a much wider audience, to people like me who really wanted this and needed this, but also bringing it to the attention of people who maybe didn't want it or need it, but now they're aware of it and are really interested in it as well.

RS: I think the kind of performances that *ame* do, they're not easily accessible music. I mean, if you want to go and listen to a guy with a guitar, it's pretty easy to walk into any open mic night or go to a lot of gigs and you can hear that kind of music, or a jazz band or you know, such like. And I think the kind of work *ame* do, a lot of university students that are studying music will have had access to that kind of work, but the general public, we don't, not really, not unless you know that it exists, and you've done your research and you know where to go. It's not something that you see very often. So, in that sense, I think there is a need to get that kind of performance out there. I think they've definitely met it in Huddersfield.

They've had quite a variety of performances and they've all been extremely interesting and I've seen different people there. And I think they've done a great job and they make it accessible, even the ticket prices and everything; it's been affordable to go and listen to. Usually when you have experimental music, sometimes it can be quite expensive, and that would put people off, but when you're only paying a little bit for something that you're not sure you'll take the risk, but if you're paying £30 for something you might be like, I need to know I like that before I can commit because I could you know go to a show that I know that I'm going to like, so I think they're definitely affordable. And yeah, there is definitely a need for it.

FA: How do you respond to audience feedback requests as the scene develops? Do you want to feel included in the shaping of the scene or are you satisfied just to be part of it or to have it happen to you?

SB: I think it's great being an audience member and with *Daytimers*, I think they've created this platform where they're inviting people to join in, maybe an example of that being DJ lessons. I'm saying this, but it's also really hard, and I think that what the *Daytimers* are doing is really great and they are trying to bring people in with them, but I think with things like this, it's inevitable that it's a handful of people, you know, doing the organising, calling all the shots and it's hard to invite other people into that. So, if their thing is about South Asian DJs in dance music, then it is, of course, the same handful of DJs from that collective who are kind of doing the circuit, and I'm sure, maybe I've just like missed that, I'm sure there are working on this and they're probably talking about this all the time, but the fact that it is really important that South Asian DJs can't be this one handful of DJs. The point should be, and probably is to be, we need to find people who aren't us to play at our nights.

Another example, as well as the lessons, for *Dialled In*, they had performance slots and they did a call out for new DJs where they said, 'please send us a mix and here's a slot you can play it out'. And so, things like that are amazing and proves that they're trying to actively

work against this. But I think, maybe for people who aren't so involved, it can feel a bit excluding. But yeah, I think obviously they are aware of this and through initiatives like that are trying to make sure that isn't the case.

RS: I don't think I play a part in shaping *ame*'s work at all. I don't think it's really that dependent on the audience. I think they wouldn't mind if the audience didn't even like it. I mean, I think it is the artists' creation and it's not there to please the audience. It's just there to exist as it is. And people can observe it and take away whatever they want from it and people will take different things away from it. And that's the whole point of it. So no, I don't think I shape it, I just think I allow them to perform to someone.

For more information about the work of Provhat Rahman and Ryoko Akama, visit:

<https://www.dialled-in.com/>
<https://daytimers.bandcamp.com/>
<https://amespace.uk/>

Dr Will Dutta is a curating composer based in East Kent (UK). He is Chief Executive of Sound and Music, Director of Studio Will Dutta, a Trustee of Electric Medway, Fellow of the Institute of Cultural and Creative Industries at the University of Kent and Guest Lecturer at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance.

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Ref: Dutta, W. and Allison, F., 2024. *The Curating Composer: Creating Cultures of New Music*. [PDF] Available at: <http://studiowilldutta.art/>



Daytimers at Boiler Room, photo by Sunny formats, 2020 © Sunny formats

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