DWIGHT Yoakam

A Thousand Miles from Nowhere

Don McLeese

AMERICAN MUSIC SERIES

Peter Blackstock and David Menconi, *Editors*

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For Danny Roy Young and Sir Douglas Sahm
Let's play tw

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Introductio

A Thousand Miles from Nowhe

LONG BEFORE I COMMITTED myself to this project, which would become a labor of love—a opportunity to immerse myself in the music and rediscover the multidimensional richness of it— considered Dwight Yoakam an artist of singular accomplishment. Though there are mainstrea country artists who have sold far more than the twenty-five million recordings that Yoakam claims, other has reached those commercial successes by following anything close to Dwight's elevated care path; he has taken artistic chances, attracted a diverse audience, and garnered critical plaudits from th rock world.

On the other hand, while there may be alternative-country, roots-rocking, and kindred-spirit artis who remain revered beyond the mainstream, none can match Yoakam's combination o uncompromising vision of musical integrity and level of popular success. Whatever promises abo forging a common spirit for rock and country have been made by cult favorites such as Gram Parso or Lucinda Williams—or Jason and the Scorchers, or Joe Ely, or dozens more who have found wellspring of creative revitalization in roadhouse tradition—Dwight Yoakam has fulfilled. In spade He has somehow become the most formula-defying popular artist in the most formula-depende genre of popular music.

So, there are two questions that a book such as this should ask and perhaps even answer. Why hasn anybody else been able to do what Dwight has done—use a traditional-roots-alternative base as springboard to multiplatinum mainstream popularity? And why hasn't Yoakam been celebrated mor for the singularity of his achievement?

Various terms have been coined to describe the musical chasm that Yoakam straddles: country roc cowpunk, roots rock, alt-country, insurgent country, No Depression, et al. The conundrum encountere by artists who fall into that divide has always been "too rock for country, too country for rock." Y rather than compromising or diluting his musical impulses at the extremes, Yoakam has pushed th envelope.

When he jumped from the L.A. roots-punk circuit into the national spotlight, he was too *country* f contemporary country, and he rocked with an unbridled intensity beyond most contemporary rock. It fitting that he first attracted notice among the roots-punk firebrands, sharing fans at Los Angeles clu with the likes of the Blasters (whose Dave Alvin was one of his first important champions), X, a Los Lobos.

Those who saw him in those formative years insist that they knew even then that not only would be a big star, he would be a *mainstream country* star. Whether at the shitkicking Palomino or the pun rocking Club Lingerie, even if the crowd was no more than a dozen or two, Dwight displayed th chops, charisma, and vision that would command large stages of halls filled with country fans in just year or two. Heck, it was practically the same set.

His musical progression in the years since has reinforced his singular spirit. Where he initial sounded like the most retro of artists—a hillbilly, honky-tonkin' anachronism with one foot in th 1950s—he soon established himself as a visionary unbound by era, an artist who could title an albu *Tomorrow's Sounds Today* and mean it.

He accomplished all this during a period in which contemporary country has become a euphemis for "soft rock," a musical territory where Yoakam's harder edges will never fit. While today's countr owes more to the Eagles and Fleetwood Mac than it does to Hank, Merle, and Loretta, its fan ba continues to self-identify as country. Go to a country concert and you'll find it dominated by thos who listen to country radio, buy country CDs (or download country cuts), maybe even join fan clu

for country artists. They rarely find much of interest on the other side of the contemporary pop-roc divide (and even less in the hip-hop and gangsta rap that have come to dominate pop).

Yet when Yoakam's music was played, primarily, if not exclusively, on the country airwaves, hi concerts would attract plenty of fans that never listened to contemporary country radio and rarely we to other country concerts. His artistry was not merely covered but featured and championed in roc publications such as *Rolling Stone*, which typically paid scant attention to mainstream country.

Many of the artists who might be considered Yoakam's contemporaries—such as Steve Earle, Jo Ely, Rosanne Cash, Lucinda Williams, and Lyle Lovett—some of whom were initially marketed a mainstream country hitmakers, now often reach listeners over the airwaves of National Public Radi Yoakam no more fits there than a honky-tonk bull in a broadcasting china shop.

As I began my initial research for this book, I was blindsided by a couple of revelations. The first that there has never been any previous biography of Yoakam or book-length study of his music, no even a glorified fan-gossip quickie. This book was intended from the start to be more like an extende piece of music and culture criticism than a comprehensive chronicling of Yoakam's life. It offers lo of analysis of and context for Yoakam's artistic progression, and little to nothing of what Sharo Stone said about him, what veejay Duff thought about him, or what his high school teache remembered about him. Yet I was pretty amazed to find the field of Yoakam biography wide open, t discover that even at the peak of Dwight's celebrity and commerciality, no one had tried to capitaliz on his popularity with a book.

By contrast, the life of the late Gram Parsons, whose legacy looms large decades after his dea despite a career that was commercially negligible—certainly in comparison with Yoakam's—ha spawned a half dozen biographies (as well as prominent appearances in other books, where he discussed as seminal inspiration for the shift the Byrds made toward country-rock, a buddy to Kei Richards of the Rolling Stones, and a mentor for Emmylou Harris). Do a book search for Dwight an all you'll find are songbooks, sheet music, and a collection of lyrics printed as poetry (and titled *Long Way Home*, which is an album title I would have considered borrowing for this book if Yoakar hadn't already reappropriated it).

Another surprise awaited when I searched the archives of *No Depression*, the magazine where I lo served as a senior editor and which covered the alt-country movement more comprehensively (an dare I say, more incisively) than any other publication. Expecting to find at least one extensive care piece on Yoakam, if not a spate of cover stories, I was dumbfounded to discover that there wa nothing beyond short album reviews.

The archive gives no indication whatsoever that Yoakam is one of the most commerciall successful and artistically compelling musicians to emerge from the movement that also spawned *N Depression*, which was supposed to be the genre's bible. In the pages of *ND*, Dwight had been treate more like an afterthought than a standard-bearer.

I don't mean to bite the hand that fed me (cheese and crackers, but still) or to criticize the editori acumen of my friends Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock, the magazine's co-founders. (And I shoul acknowledge here that Peter was responsible for bringing this book to the University of Texas Pres Thanks again, Peter.) They were committed to drawing attention to artists deserving a whole lot mo of it, and maybe they felt that Dwight didn't need the help—that he was already too popular to classi as alt-country (whatever that is). And there were always issues of timing, access, and other contende competing for cover stories. But I'd counter that such a huge hole in *No Depression*'s archives—it as if *Rolling Stone* had all but ignored the Rolling Stones—suggests that it's quite possible for a artist who has received platinum albums and critical raves to remain underappreciated.

Which raises another question: Why? I'd be tempted to say that the big gulf between Yoakam achievement and the acknowledgment of it is inexplicable, but the writing of this book suggests,

anything, that there are too many explanations, a confluence of issues that are complex, contradictor confounding, and often tinged with irony. There are considerations of authenticity, purity, persona, th essence of country music, and the calculations of the music business (a business that some alt-puris treat as if it shouldn't exist) that are easier to raise than to resolve.

So let's preview some issues that we'll more fully explore in the following chapters:

His popularity. There is a prejudice that if that many people like him, especially that many count music fans, he can't be that good. While the whole roots-trad-alt-country corral is filled with mongr music, there's no purist quite like an alt-country purist. (Except maybe blues purists—self-appointe Caucasian arbiters of what qualifies as authentic black expression.) And when an artist or a band fin greater popularity and wider renown by stretching their creative wings—be it Dwight Yoakam o Wilco—they face a backlash from those who once championed them, many of those fans (Yoakam's case) strongly believing that anything that's on mainstream country radio must be dreck. O at least compromised.

From the very start, Dwight Yoakam has approached the music business as a business—one that h has done his best to outsmart, one in which he has pursued commercial success—and he has nev claimed otherwise. Purists see failure to achieve such success as a merit badge of musical integri and a sign of their own superiority of taste. The fact that Yoakam has moved more units than so man artists of the alt-country movement *combined* confirms to some that he sold his soul to Dev Commerce.

Yet Dwight came of age when some of the best-selling music was also the best: the Beatles, th Byrds, the Stones, Creedence. Even Elvis. And his formative country influences were hitmakers a Limiting his ambition to cult fandom was never part of the game plan.

His authenticity. When Yoakam began drawing raves in the Los Angeles alternative press, it wa almost as if he were a coal-dust baby, born to country music, as innocent to big-city ways as a latte day Beverly Hillbilly. And there's no question that Yoakam played the part and reaped the rewards, a the press emphasized his birth in Pike County, Kentucky, while downplaying the facts that his fami had moved to Columbus, Ohio, before he turned two and that he'd briefly attended *The* Ohio Sta University (as Buckeye natives call it) with interests in philosophy and history before heading west find a career in show business. They also often failed to mention that he'd been just as involved theater as he had in music in high school, and he earned a role in a Long Beach stage productio before hitting the Southern California bar circuit.

Despite his occasionally exaggerated drawl and a name that seemed to combine "yokel" wi "hokum," Yoakam is nobody's rube. He wasn't a backwoods '50s hillbilly but a media-savvy child o the television generation. It's instructive that when I asked Dwight about early musical inspiration he quickly mentioned the Monkees, the ultimate pop fabrication. Yet watching the Monkees on T was a far more "authentic" musical experience for a ten-year-old Ohio child in the mid-1960s tha listening to Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell.

Purists might denigrate Dwight as a poseur, which is rock-crit French for "phony," but he's fa more authentic as a sum of his influences and inspirations, a reflection of his place and time, than retro anachronism could ever be. And the growth he showed with albums that would employ string horns, and background vocals reflected an artistic expansion that restricting himself to music anachronism would have denied. The results, on albums that are Yoakam's most creatively ambitiou are timeless in their surrealism, like a honky-tonk dreamscape as directed by David Lynch.

So, why are the 1940s and 1950s inherently more "authentic" than the 1980s and 1990s? And didn that cowboy hat make old Hank Williams himself something of a poseur?

His performing persona. He had one. From the start. Even if only a few listeners were in the ba barely paying attention, Dwight looked sharp, and his band played sharp, unlike so many other ac

that took the stage as if they'd just rolled out of bed and had barely bothered to tune. Despite some the ~~places he played or the crowds who supported him, there was never anything vaguely "cowpunk~~ about Yoakam except the live-wire intensity of the performance.

As Yoakam become more popular, it became increasingly apparent that female fans liked him a lo This meant male critics felt compelled to make some reference, usually disparaging, to his skintig jeans and twitching butt, which he turned toward the audience too often for the comfort of som Though sexuality has long been a driving force in popular music, males tend to find qualities wi such appeal to females to be spurious, suspect, all sizzle and no steak. (As if the meatiest stea couldn't also sizzle.)

I learned this lesson instinctively before I knew anything about popular music. My babysitter in th mid-1950s loved Elvis Presley, so I instinctively felt compelled to dislike him. Not because I had thing for my teenage babysitter, a decade older than me, but I perceived that attraction as some kind threat. Whatever girls liked, especially that much, was yucky.

Dwight has always stressed the necessity of putting on a show. A flashy one. One that would driv the girls wild. Just like he'd seen Elvis Presley do. On television.

His Pete problem. No successful musical artist has ever done it on his own. There is always manager, producer, bandmates—maybe all of the above—who deserve a share of the credit. Yet wit Dwight, his crucial collaborations with guitarist-producer-bandleader Pete Anderson present particular challenge in the credit-where-credit-is-due department.

Was Pete equally responsible for Yoakam's success? Or more responsible, a sonic Svengali pullin the strings? Dwight had the songs, the voice, the look; Pete had the chops and the sound that wou showcase the artist at his best in both the studio and onstage, elevating the role of lead guitar as th singer's essential musical foil. Before Pete, Dwight's career lacked momentum, and his music lacke both edge and focus. The creative tension in their partnership sparked some sort of magic that neith has (thus far) been able to replicate on his own.

Nine years older than Yoakam, Anderson definitely served as a musical mentor. But they suffered bitter split following 2003's *Population: Me*, when the guitarist sued the singer for lost revenues aft Dwight decided to recoup some financial losses by touring without a Pete-led band. Neither h discussed the other much in print since then, until now.

Even so, when I started this book, Yoakam's camp would have preferred that I didn't talk t Anderson, fearing that whatever account he might provide would stir controversy, drawing the wron kind of attention in order to spur sales. I assured them that I had no intention of writing a boo exploiting any tension between Dwight and Pete. And I haven't. But Dwight himself made it plain our interviews just how integral Pete had been to his musical development, and it would have bee journalistically irresponsible to try to tell this story without attempting to incorporate Anderson perspective.

Ultimately, Dwight and Pete, interviewed independently, had little that was negative to say abou each other, and both expressed considerable pride in the music they'd made together. The collaborated for a couple of decades, almost half a lifetime in Yoakam's case. Plenty of marriage don't remain as vital for nearly that long. But, as one of Dwight's songs puts it, "Things change."

So, just as a biography of Elvis Presley must encompass Colonel Tom and a book about Joh Lennon needs to include Paul McCartney (talk about your bitter splits!), this is a book about Dwig Yoakam—how his music originated, how it has progressed, what it has accomplished. And it's about legacy that doesn't stop here, for the artist has too many ideas and too much ambition to rest on h laurels for long. Like a lot of those who follow Yoakam—critics and fans alike—I eagerly await th next chapter.

How Far Is Heaven

IT ISN'T UNTIL AN HOUR into what was promised to be an interview but instead became monologue—wide-ranging, stream of consciousness, fascinating and frustrating in equal measure- that Dwight Yoakam leaves the conference room of his business office and returns with an acoust guitar. One that badly needs tuning. And at this point our interchange morphs into something like or of those *Behind the Music* specials.

The setting: the headquarters of Etc., Etc., the nerve center of Dwight's career, located on the fourt floor of the Sunset Boulevard building of the Directors Guild of America. The rectangular table wi the marble top flanked by office chairs could pass as the meeting place of any board of directors. Y the gold and platinum records and the movie posters covering the walls attest to the nature of th particular business—and suggest that, for Dwight Yoakam, business has been good.

The panoramic views of Sunset Boulevard below and the Hollywood Hills above reflect the sense privilege that success bestows. The vista from a different angle extends all the way downtown, wh you can see through the smog. By the window is a telescope through which perhaps Yoakam can vie Venus or Mars on a clear night. Nearby are a globe and the *National Geographic Atlas of the World*.

No, from here you can't see Pike County, Kentucky, the mining region that the Yoakam famil continued to call home even after moving north to Columbus, Ohio, when Dwight was two. But t real question is whether Dwight could somehow have foreseen all this back then. Could he hav envisioned his career in West Hollywood, even some approximation of this office, when he decided make music his life while still living in Columbus?

Attesting to an artistic vision that extends beyond country traditionalism, or even music, a numb of coffee-table-sized art books are stacked in the conference room: Dalí, da Vinci, Warhol. An beneath one of the two speakers, a skull. *Alas, poor Yorick!* Amid the immortality of art and th infinity of the universe, here's a reminder of the end that awaits us all.

The "Etc., Etc." on the outside door of these offices provides an oblique reminder of Yoakam early recording days, when he released an indie EP in 1985 titled *Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc., Etc.* I quickly became a national country chart topper after Warner Bros./Reprise signed the roadhous renegade and had him expand the disc into an album with the same title and added a colorized versi of the original black-and-white cover. His first full-length release with national distribution turne Yoakam into an overnight sensation, and it had only taken him a decade or so.

The funny thing about the EP and the title is that it wasn't until the expansion into the LP th Yoakam was inspired to write a song called "Guitars, Cadillacs," with "and hillbilly music" replacin the etceteras. (In other words, the EP's title preceded the LP's title song.) His record company initial balked, fearing that the Kentucky-born artist's evocation of what the label considered trailer trash w like waving a rebel flag at the possibility of crossover mainstream success.

But Yoakam stood his ground and "hillbilly music" remained his categorical description of choi (and "crossover" an epithet). Yet the "Etc., Etc." was more than a placeholder in the EP's title. suggests the inner workings of a mind that sees connections everywhere, generating possibiliti without boundaries, where "and so on, and so on" is the sort of transition that can leap chronology a linear logic as well as subject matter.

Start talking with Yoakam about seminal inspirations and you're as likely to hear him wa

rhapsodic about the Monkees and the continental shift of television from New York to Los Angele thus ~~blazing the trail for his eventual pilgrimage, as you are about the Stonewall Jackson and~~ Johnn Horton influences that made their way from his parents' albums from the Columbia Record Club in his own music.

Hours later, ask him about the breakthrough stage of his musical development in Los Angeles, whe he was embraced by the roots-punk crowd before establishing a fan base in contemporary countr Then sit back and roll tape:

"Oh, yeah, that was our crowd. We'd moved out of the brilliance of the '60s, and by then we wer into the *Tusk* world of Fleetwood Mac, and nobody knew where it was going. It was over und sideways down.

"We were too country for rock and roll and too rock for Nashville. Pete [Anderson, Yoakam' longtime producer, guitarist, and bandleader] and I had gotten fired from a lot of places, because w wouldn't play that *Urban Cowboy* cover stuff. I used to be on the phone seven hours a day. I booke us. And I had records in my El Camino—the EP—and I'd be driving 'em all over town.

"I was the generation that had given us punk. If I'd gone to New York in '75, '76, it would hav been CBGB. What we had was the emotion. When we'd do "Please, Please Baby," the affinity they fe for us at the Whisky a Go Go was like, *holy shit*. They had a lot of rockabilly out here. When I first g here I saw Robert Gordon at the Whisky a Go Go, and he had Link Wray with him. 1978. And Bil Zoom's rockabilly band opened for him. And the Blasters were really rockabilly in a sense. We ha the greatest affinity with the Blasters and Los Lobos. Again, guys who were more professional in the execution than Rank and File or Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

"But then Del Fuegos was an interesting band. The Plugz became Del Fuegos when the cowpun thing started happening. Southern California has always been more of a free-association environmen The Byrds happening alongside Arthur Lee and Love. Go from Paladin and Westerns on television.

"So, we were certainly distinct, but the access point was the emotional reckless abandon. We wer as rabid as anyone, it's just that we stayed in tune. And it was shocking to see bodies slamming. It wa crazy. We were *slammin'*, but we were in tune! Watch the Beatles on bootleg video, and, man, the were good! Listen to them sing 'Nowhere Man' live, and it was raw, but man, they were the Beatle for a reason! [Dwight starts singing 'Nowhere Man.'] 'Paperback Writer,' wow. What they're doing they're doing. Those four had depth.

"And when you listen to the Roxy Theatre [recording], that bonus disc with the deluxe edition 'Guitars, Cadillacs,' *that is the moment!* We knew! We didn't know what we knew, but we knew . . And maybe we knew that before I realized we knew it."

Not to get all Watergate about this, but what did Dwight know? And when did he know it? Before began working on this book, one journalist described him as "one of the smartest people in th business," while another warned that he is "too smart for his own good." How come? "He can ta himself in and out of things like five times in one conversation," came the reply. "He's an enigm man. And God can that guy talk!" That journalist told me about having his own broken jaw wired sh when he first interviewed Yoakam, and how it hadn't made any difference. He wouldn't have gotten word in edgewise anyway.

One of the many contradictions that makes Yoakam such a provocative artist is that his loquaciou reality is so at odds with the brooding image of the noir cowboy who keeps his visage hidden benea his cowboy hat and his thoughts to himself, preserving that lip curl for his singing. He's a flamboyan even electrifying, performer, but one never gets the sense that he's revealing much of himself beneat those flashy outfits, with jeans so tight they seem painted on his swiveling hips.

Away from the stage, Dwight has no such flash or airs. And he has no qualms about revealin himself as a balding guy with a few wrinkles and a bit of a paunch—more the character actor that l

has become (memorably and menacingly in *Sling Blade*, *Panic Room*, and other roles) than a leadin man. ~~Hiding nothing, he holds nothing back. Of all the artists I've interviewed, only the late~~ Dou Sahm (Sir Douglas Quintet, the Texas Tornados) ranks with Yoakam as a world-class talker. Th difference is that Doug was more of a memoirist, a one-man oral history project whose sudden shif had their own logic (sometimes only a logic discernible by Doug, but still). Dwight's mind is mo analytical, even philosophical, as he frequently seems to be heading down five different speculati highways at ninety miles per hour, divergent directions on different bridges, all at once.

When preparing for our interview (I'd last talked with him decades before, for a newspaper story) had dozens of questions covering his formative years in Kentucky and Ohio, his early attempt launch a career in Nashville, his subsequent struggles and triumph on the West Coast, the progressio of his music, and the development of his film sidelight . . .

After an hour, when Dwight leaves to get his guitar, we are on question two. He wasn't out of grad school, let alone high school. But he had written his first song, at the age of eight, and he wanted play it for me. And this performance provided the key to everything, unlocking the contradiction between sincerity and sham, authenticity and contrivance that lie at the heart of not only Yoakam music, but of country music in general.

Because when the fifty-four-year-old Yoakam starts singing the first song he had written, he isn pretending to be eight years old. But his voice has as much sincere innocence in its conviction as child's. For the minute or so that it takes him to sing that first verse, he is living that song, just as h had when he wrote it.

The song sounds like it should be titled "How Far Is Heaven?," and it's about a little boy who wa Dwight's age when he wrote it. The boy's dad was a soldier, killed in Vietnam, and now his father wa in heaven, or so the boy has been told. And since the boy, more than anything, wants to see his dadd he asks the question that obsesses him.

While tuning for maybe ten or fifteen minutes—the guitar itself has become an obsession, and distraction, as we try to sustain a train of thought in the interview that now threatens to jump the rai —he jokes about his instrumental range: "I haven't gotten that much more sophisticated, for better worse, but I knew enough to tell that was Johnny Cash," he says of the melodic model for his song.

Finally the strings are close enough to tuned for him to tolerate, and he starts singing with the puri and passion that might have marked his performance if we were in a concert hall holding a fe thousand. Or if he were in that boyhood bedroom, alone.

"There's a few things that I don't understand," he sings, his voice plaintive and on the verge heartbreak. "How far is heaven? When can I go? I miss my dad. Oh, I loved him so."

His voice has the ring of truth, for these are the questions an eight-year-old would ask, maybe eve one who hadn't been raised in a fundamentalist church that preached that every word in the Bible literally true and that heaven is a place far more real than West Hollywood could ever be. A kid tha age could only be consoled by the possibility that his dad wasn't gone for good, that the two of the could still reconnect. If only someone would show him the way.

I later read in an early newspaper profile that Dwight had given the song a more prosaic titl befitting a kid his age when he wrote it: "My Daddy Got Killed Over in Vietnam." By whatever titl the song is an invention, a creative fabrication. While the emotional investment of Dwight performance of the material made it ring true, his own dad wasn't dead, hadn't even served Vietnam, though he had been a soldier. Dwight had learned about the war the same way he' discovered practically everything else that would have such a significant impact on his music persona—from television. And TV was real, a heightened reality.

"I was watching the news all the time, and this is what was on," explains Yoakam, who continue with a critique of his first songwriting effort. "It's not that complex, but how many eight-year-old

would write that? Is heaven a place? From a kid’s eye view, it is.”

“It’s an awfully sad song,” replies his lone listener.

“It *is* sad,” he agrees. “I walked downstairs and my parents said, ‘What are you playing up there?’ Ar I played it for them, and they went, ‘What the hell!’ They were freaked out. ‘There’s something wron with the kid,’ ” he laughs heartily. “Yes, I was given to invention. But only loosely. ’Cause my da had been a soldier for awhile.

“I hadn’t been seriously writing, but now I knew I could do that. That was a song! At eight yea old. My parents looked at me a little weird. *Bizarre*. Not sure what you do with that or what th means. And they had me play it for some friends. And *they* thought it was weird.”

The experience left Dwight sure of two things. That he was gifted enough to write songs of his ow songs that would give him control of his artistic destiny. And that he was weird. Maybe those are th same thing, or at least they were to a kid who continued to feel a little bit different all the way throug high school in Columbus, Ohio, into his brief stint at his hometown’s Ohio State University, then t Nashville, where he didn’t fit at all. And finally, maybe inevitably (or so it seems in retrospect), h headed west, to a dream factory where a lot of creative misfits come to reinvent themselves, or invent themselves in the first place.

Over the course of the rest of our interview, Dwight continues to strum the guitar, letting h thoughts trail into riffs, documenting the chronology of his career through a series of acoust performances—sometimes an intro and a line or two, sometimes even a whole verse and chorus. B the more that he lets his music speak for him, the less he amplifies upon it. After extending a excursion through the memories of his first eight, largely pre-musical, years into more than an hou he compresses a summary of his last two decades into little more than thirty minutes, complete wi impromptu soundtrack. He can talk expansively, as if he has all the time in the world, but he’s also restless man with a short attention span.

As the following chapters will show, when he analyzes his songs with specificity, as he did abov the underlying theme of his musical creativity relies more on the abstract. Truth or concoction? Puri or poseur? A throwback to an earlier era or a visionary offering of *Tomorrow’s Sounds Today*?

“You don’t have to live it to write it,” he explains about the writing of “It Won’t Hurt,” one of hi classic honky-tonk ballads about drowning your sorrows in alcohol, which Dwight had never drun But he’d played enough bars to internalize what he’d seen. “You write *from* what you know. And the you write *beyond* what you know, *from* what you know, *vis-à-vis* what you know . . . It’s the tool th allows the writer to move beyond yourself to something larger than yourself. That’s the task at han And that’s what the best writing can be—using what you know to think beyond yourself.”

Are you sure Hank done it this a-way? (I’m pretty positive Hank never said “vis-à-vis.” Though, Chuck Berry might have put it, “ ‘Vis-à-vis’ say the old folks. It goes to show you never can tell.”)

The “real” Dwight Yoakam may forever remain an enigma, as complicated as any of us, mor complicated than most. But his music is as real as it gets. It delivers a truth that takes something fro the facts of his life but uses that literal factuality as a seed, a springboard, a launching pad. So let call this a musical biography of Dwight Yoakam, a book about the life of the music, for the creativ truth of the art is almost always more significant than the factual truth of the artist who made it.

Readin', Rightin', Rt. 2

IN THE EARLY SONG that best reflects Yoakam's creative authenticity, his ability to render th details of a life that seemed so different, so exotic, so *real*, to fans and fellow musicians in Lo Angeles—yet were more a projection from his life than a reflection of it—he sings, "They learne readin', rightin', Route 23 to the jobs that lay waiting in those cities' factories. They didn't know th old highway could lead them to a world of misery."

The "they" in the song are those schooled in the coal mining country of rural Kentucky, just sou of the Ohio border, where the third of the three Rs was the road out of town. The most importa lesson kids learned in the schools of Pike County was that they needed to leave it far behind if the hoped for something better from life than a coal coffin.

Though that version of the three Rs was a familiar joke in Pike County, Dwight was never one o those kids. His perspective on Route 23 ran north to south, rather than vice versa. Kentucky wasn't th place he'd hoped to escape, it was the home to which his family returned, pretty much every weekend

The "world of misery"? That would be Columbus, Ohio, a hundred miles or so to the north on th twisting, two-lane Route 23. Not that far, but a whole different world: a big city rather than a rur county, where emancipation from the mines meant the blue-collar drudgery of the assembly-lin factory. In other words, pick your poison.

Yet by Dwight's own account, the life that he lived with his parents in Columbus, Ohio, where th family moved before he was two, was far from miserable. He was a reasonably happy kid in reasonably happy household. But the family missed Kentucky and had close ties to relatives there, s practically every Friday they'd pack up the car, hit the road, and travel south to Pikeville. Whenev they talked about "goin' home," it was understood that "home" meant Pike County.

That route would provide the lifeline for Yoakam's music, the return to Pike County giving hi artistry the sort of richness that those heading the other way hoped to find in the material world. Lon before he had settled on a career ambition as a country musician, he knew that "in some way, this pa of the country would be at the heart of whatever I would do," he says. He lived in both worlds, nev completely leaving one for the other.

Thus, "Readin', Rightin', Rt. 23" is a more complex song in terms of perspective than it mig initially appear. In his collection of lyrics, *A Long Way Home*, Dwight follows the song with th dedication: "Written for and lovingly dedicated to my mother, Ruth Ann; to my aunts, Margaret, Mar Helen, Verdie Kay, and Joy; and to my uncle, Gary Walton."

While Dwight's dad owned a gas station in Columbus, his mom did some factory work and was als employed as a keypunch operator. They were a two-income family at a time when a stay-at-hom mom was the middle-class norm, and with two other children following Dwight, the Yoakams neede those incomes to live comfortably, if not opulently.

There's a touch of humor in the title—where "Rightin' " suggests that those educated in Pik County never learned to "right" too well—but the lyric is dark, which would become so characterist for Yoakam. If the shimmering fantasy of life in the North is a promise betrayed, the retreat from it unthinkable. There's nothing to look forward to, and there's no looking back.

"Have you ever heard a mountain man cough his life away, from digging that black coal in thos dark mines?" sings Dwight, his voice emotionally flat, laconic, with a tight-lipped stoicism that wou

become a musical trademark. "If you had, you might just understand the reason they left it all behind

~~While there's an element of creative projection in much of the song, as in so much of Dwight~~ material, the third verse is pure memory, with the sweetness of familial redemption: "Have you ev seen 'em put the kids in the car after work on Friday night/Pull up in a holler about 2 a.m. and see light still shinin' bright/Those mountain folks sat up that late just to hold those little grandkids in the arms/And I'm proud to say that I've been blessed and touched by their sweet hillbilly charm."

So there you have it. The promise of a better life up north is an illusion. Any nostalgia for a bett life down south would be a lie. What's real is the character of the people forged by such toug circumstances, the warmth engendered by families who have only each other as respite from the col hard facts of life. And even if these words have been written and sung by a city kid, every last one them rings true, the hillbilly legacy he claims for himself a birthright, as the grandson of a coal min—his mother's father, Luther Tibbs—whose life would influence much of his music.

Pikeville without Columbus might not have produced the music of Dwight Yoakam; Columbu without Pikeville *never* would have. Except as the home of Ohio State—which vies with th University of Texas at Austin as the country's largest university, with both accommodating some fift thousand students—Columbus lacks much in the way of urban identity, not to mention artist imprint. Few know that in a state with more than its share of sizable cities—Dayton, Toledo, Akro Canton, and so on—that Columbus is the largest, with a population of 770,000, greater than th populations of Cleveland and Cincinnati combined (if we disregard the surrounding metro areas). Y those two are major league cities, where Columbus is Big Ten, state fair, state capital, where Wendy' was founded. It's almost smack dab in the middle of a state that is Rust Belt to the north, bluegrass the south.

"Quick, what do you think about when you hear the words 'Columbus, Ohio'?" begins a *New Yor Times* story from July 30, 2010, on the city's indistinct image. "That's the problem that civic leade here hope to solve." The article proceeds to mention various slogans the city has attempted to promo—"Discover Columbus" and "Surprise, It's Columbus," before the current "There's No Bett Place"—and then concludes with a native's sardonic suggestion: "Columbus, We Are So Not Ohio." also quotes the local head of tourism: "Columbus has not had a bad image. It has just had no image."

Little wonder, then, that when Dwight Yoakam established a strong image as an artist, first in Lo Angeles and soon in the wider world of country music, it was stamped by a tiny hamlet of Kentuck which he'd left as a toddler but returned to often, rather than by the largest city in Ohio, where he w raised and schooled, where he was a member of the school drama club and a drummer in the conce band.

"I had a real Rogers snare because I'd started playing in school, where you could be part instrumental music," Yoakam remembers. "For me, it had to be either guitar or drums because th was the rock and roll world. Those were the only instruments I was interested in. And school didn encourage guitar slinging. *No siree*! You could play that clarinet, but you don't see a whole lot clarinet on *The Ed Sullivan Show* or *Hullabaloo*."

Dwight remembers himself in Ohio as someone who never quite fit. "In Columbus, believe me, the looked at me like I was a little odd," he says. "I was queer, in that sense. I was an odd bird." But wh might have been considered odd was the part of Dwight that he didn't necessarily show at schoo Some of it was the fundamentalist Christianity that the family had brought with them from Kentuck their worship at the Church of Christ in Columbus where other Southern transplants congregated.

Music at the church was unadorned with instrumentation, and the purity of that music (as well some of the melodic progressions) stayed with Dwight. He also mingled at church with plenty students from Ohio State, even grad students, who shared his interest in music and could show him trick or two on guitar, which he'd started trying to play while still in grade school. When he made h

first tentative foray into Nashville after graduating from high school, connections from church provided him with what he calls a "safe landing."

Yet the musical influence of his religion started even earlier and ran deeper: "My family read the Bible constantly, and it gave me the ear for rhyming schemes," he explained. "The King James Version is musical. So I've got that from three or four years old, hearing that read aloud." (It also influenced his personal habits; even after he became the master of the drinking song and made his living in honky-tonks, he never touched a drop of alcohol, and never indulged in drugs.)

There was plenty of secular influence as well. His parents had a lot of country and western music around the house, much of it acquired from the Columbia Record Club, then ubiquitous with its offer of a dozen albums for a penny (with the commitment of buying a dozen more at list price with exorbitant shipping and handling charges, and if you didn't remember to return the card every month you'd get records you had no interest in owning).

Johnny Horton's Greatest Hits was one of the most played (it was on Columbia, and the record club tended to favor releases on its own label). It was one that my family got from the Columbia Record Club as well, and which I remember playing to death, having no idea that Horton was considered to be in a different musical category than any of the other hits in power rotation on Top 40 radio. "North to Alaska," "Sink the Bismarck," and "The Battle of New Orleans" were hugely popular story songs, just like Marty Robbins's "El Paso," another AM hit that I never knew was considered country.

I paid less attention to the earlier stuff on the album, such as "Honky-Tonk Man," a breakthrough hit for Horton in 1956 that would become Yoakam's first signature tune, attracting fans that had never heard the original. The year it climbed the charts for Horton was the year that Yoakam was born.

Plenty of other music made a strong impression on him: "One of my earliest memories is my mother and aunt sitting on the sofa and singing at the phonograph player," he says. "We didn't sing *with* it. We sang *at* it. And the song was Hank Locklin's 'Send Me the Pillow You Dream On.' And just *bellerin'* it to the heavens!"

If music could make you feel the way you wouldn't otherwise, it could also help you say what you couldn't otherwise: "I was listening to everything on the radio. But I would listen alone to Stonewall Jackson albums that my parents had," he continues. "We had this one around the house that my dad bought as this anniversary present for my mom, with this song 'Don't Be Angry' as a love note to her. It was sweet. They broke up some years ago, but I still remember this as a comment on what music is to people in their lives. He was a rough, tough guy, but [the lyric] 'Don't be angry with me darling' let him say something to my mother that he was incapable of saying on his own."

So much more attention has been paid to the place Dwight comes from (or at least the place where his music has its strongest roots) than the times that shaped his life, but his experiences as a child in the 1950s and '60s left an artistic imprint every bit as strong as the geographical one. On Top 40 radio you could hear Buck Owens as well as the Beatles, Stax/Volt records, and garage-band psychedelia. Those genres and more would find their way into Yoakam's own music—where the honky-tonk meets the garage band meets the countrypolitan polish—representing a natural outgrowth of his formative listening experiences.

Radio was a powerful influence on Yoakam and on practically every American music fan of his (and my) generation, but television made an impression that was every bit as strong, possibly even more so where his performing persona is concerned. He was born into the television era and came of age with the explosion of color. Television made the Monkees a more powerful—or at least more intimate—influence on Yoakam than the Beatles. The Beatles were just a little bit before his time, while the Monkees arrived when he was just the right age.

Let's let Dwight riff a little: "I was a Monkees kid. For a ten-year-old like myself, the Monkees were a cultural access point that the Beatles weren't. I was an oldest kid, teaching myself, and the

Beatles were a little bit beyond my grasp. Television delivers the Monkees to me in a different way;
Hard Day's Night was not on TV in 1965. And I was not old enough at eight to take myself to th
movies. I could see them on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, but that was too godlike. The Monkees, on th
other hand, came inside my living room, and there was a familiarity that allowed me to reall
understand what this new thing was.

"I had the first two Monkees albums, and I couldn't have gotten a better education, retrospectivel
in songwriting, when you think about it, than listening to Neil Diamond, Carole King, Boyce and Ha
compositions. The world told in two-and-a-half to three minutes. And Mike Nesmith brought th
Texan's aesthetic, and he was an accomplished songwriter. Country rock really owes a debt to Mik
Nesmith for writing 'Different Drum,' the first hit by Linda Ronstadt when she was with the Ston
Poneys. So listening to that at ten or eleven years old, with this half-baked set of drums, I'd literal
play along.

"Mike later became a friend of mine, introduced to me by my dear friend Dennis Hopper," h
continues. "Mike told me one time, he was out here on a motorcycle trip with his girlfriend
northern California, and he sees a guy with a bunch of kids and says, 'I think that's Mel Gibson.' An
Mel looked around and said, 'I know you. *Oh my God, you're a Monkee*.' And that was, like, thirt
years later."

So, by the standards of Columbus kids in the 1960s, Dwight's cultural experiences were prett
much in the mainstream. Maybe he heard a little more Stonewall Jackson at home than some of th
others, and practiced a more fundamentalist religion than most, but he listened to the same radi
watched the same TV. And these experiences became as authentically his as his family's Kentuck
legacy and their weekend drives south down Route 23.

Just look at Yoakam onstage or on video. Consider the way he wears his cowboy hat, twitches h
leg, cradles and thrusts his guitar. He didn't get any of that from Kentucky. Or Ohio. Or even from th
radio. He got it all from television, where gunslingers and guitar slingers all but merged in his min
into a single heroic image.

"I was influenced by every guitar slinger I ever saw on television," he agrees. "I was born in 195
and TV kind of exploded in the late '50s, when it was firing on all eight cylinders. From *Cheyenne*
Sugarfoot to *Have Gun, Will Travel* to *The Rifleman*. And TV had moved to the West Coast and ha
almost become an exclusive province of Hollywood. TV moves from that theatrical-like soundstage
the film-like execution of serialized television.

"So my life, oddly, because of the medium of television, was profoundly impacted and influence
to always come [to Los Angeles]. By the look, the swagger, the explosion of the cowboy TV serie
this gunslinger imagery that dovetails on any given weekend night with Ed Sullivan and any oth
guitar slinger performances. I have a picture from when I was eighteen months old with this big o
guitar and trying to cock my leg to impersonate what I saw on TV."

When he made the big leap in high school from watching music to performing it, impersonatio
rather than self-expression was the impetus. Except for his drumming in the concert band, his maj
artistic pursuit was theater. He'd played Charlie in *Flowers for Algernon* and James in *The Mirac*
Worker as a student at Northland High School in Columbus (class of '74).

He'd received musical encouragement from his theater teacher, and he'd hosted the school's variet
show, where making music was like playing dress-up. In the wake of Sha Na Na, he had a '50s-sty
rockabilly band, Dwight and the Greasers, whose debut at school established the course his life wou
take. "That was what I'd been living to do," he remembers. "At sixteen, I realized I'd been waiting th
first fifteen years of my life for this band, this moment, this stage. Three hundred and fifty non-relate
people and the place went a little berserk. *The girls did!* And I did become fascinated with wh
possibilities were there for me if I had the necessary guidance and focus."

The guidance and focus would require a move to the West Coast, but the drive was already there.

South of Cincinnati, West of Columbu

WHEN DWIGHT YOAKAM LAUNCHED his recording career and quickly won fans in both th country mainstream and the alternative fringes, his music sounded as if it had been forged in the co mining country of Kentucky. But it was really in Southern California where Yoakam developed hi signature style and found his destiny. He was a musical product of Los Angeles, defined by ho different he was from all the other musical products of Los Angeles, which itself was another wor from the assembly-line production of Nashville.

If this were a different sort of biography, one encompassing the minutiae of the life rather tha focusing on the progression of the music, we'd have to devote a chapter or more to Nashville, whe Dwight made his first stab at a musical career after a brief stint at Ohio State in his hometown Columbus convinced him that higher education was not for him. His house had never been filled wi books, though Dwight's inquisitive mind found kindred spirits among the grad students from the ne South who attended their church, and his vague plans to pursue a degree in history or philosoph suggested some direction after his graduation from Northland High School in 1974. To what goal?

"Oh, man I had no idea," admits Yoakam, whose restless spirit led him to quickly abandon h studies. So he decided to seek musical fame and fortune in Nashville. Why Nashville? Because it w close, a short day's drive from Columbus, less than four hundred miles. (A pudgy, Indiana high scho dropout named John Hiatt had decided to relocate to Nashville for pretty much the same reason. seemed a whole lot easier and less extreme for a Midwest kid than trying to tackle New York or L.A Plus, Dwight had what he called a "landing spot" in Nashville—friends from his church had fami there.

Otherwise, he had no more of a sense of destiny than most other high school grads that had giv college a try before deciding that since they no longer *had* to go to school they didn't want to. Only retrospect did the sojourn to Nashville become symbolic in the Dwight Yoakam mythos, some sayi that he had somehow been spurned there so he had to find somewhere else where his music wou receive its proper embrace.

Nashville didn't reject Yoakam. Nashville didn't even notice him. It offered him a job as an extra Opryland, the theme park surrounding the suburban relocation of the Grand Ole Opry from th venerable Ryman Auditorium. (Opryland has since become a shopping mall, and, yes, there's metaphor here.) He was an eighteen-year-old kid with no band, no connections, no songs—well, a fe formative efforts, but Yoakam wouldn't really begin to mine the musical possibilities of Kentuck and establish a hillbilly persona to fit until his subsequent move two thousand miles west would gi him greater perspective on what he'd left behind and what he could make from it.

Yoakam's music most certainly would have turned out differently if he'd found an enthusiast reception in Nashville, with its recording industry more interested in polishing brand new urba cowboys than reincarnating the raw-edged, age-old music of the honky-tonk man. And his life cou have turned out very differently had he remained at Ohio State, where he would have been one of th many who had once dabbled in music and theater but had left them behind in high school.

But neither Nashville nor Ohio State had panned out, so when a musician friend in Columbus with car urged Dwight to accompany him on a cross-country joyride to Los Angeles in 1977, Yoakar didn't need a whole lot of convincing. After his brief anonymity in Nashville, he continued to pla

music in Ohio, singing the songs of Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers, things that were closer
spirit to what would become neo-rockabilly than contemporary country.

Oddly enough, one of the hits that had convinced him that he had something special to offer w “Rock On” by David Essex, where the hitch in the voice of the Brit, almost a hiccup, was somethi akin to the choke you’d hear in the vocals of the Appalachian bluegrass Dwight had heard Kentucky. What seemed exotic to the rock fans in Columbus sounded familiar to him.

Even greater validation came from the popular dominance of the roots-oriented Creeden Clearwater Revival, a band that bridged FM album acceptance and AM single hits and had becom one of the most consistently successful commercial acts of the 1970s. Creedence gave Dwight son hope that he could do what they had done; mainstream country simply wasn’t on his radar at the tim The hard-edged country music he’d loved was no longer in vogue in Nashville or on the airwave “Lookin’ Out My Back Door” was a Creedence hit, and it was more country (“listenin’ to Bu Owens”) than country.

“I was really inspired by Creedence Clearwater Revival illustrating that country-hyphen-rock/p could be pertinent for a young audience,” explains Yoakam. “The Byrds were folk rock, but count rock is John Fogerty. ’Cause you can’t get any harder rockin’, and in some places more country, th Creedence—a real hybrid that was a commercial success.”

But Creedence came from the Bay Area, a long way from the bayou country that so much of music conjured. Whatever rootsy authenticity the band’s music evoked was a geographical fantasy, illusion—an art. And Dwight was heading for L.A., “swimming pools, movie stars,” as the theme fro *The Beverly Hillbillies* had put it. Despite the tinsel and glitz of a city where all of the cowboys we rhinestone ones—though Yoakam, of course, was no more of a cowboy than any of them—there w another beacon of inspiration that shone as brightly as Creedence.

“That first Emmylou Harris album is what drew me out here,” he says of his move to L.A. “M junior and senior year in high school, I was in love with both Linda [Ronstadt] and Emmylou. And s when my buddy said, ‘Man, you’ve got to come to L.A.,’ I said, ‘Yeah, I know, Emmylou Harris is o there. There’s a scene somewhere out there that I can tap into.’ ”

At least there had been. And maybe there would be, but it took another four years of scuffling working here on a loading dock, there as a short-order cook—and playing the bars in the Valley befo Dwight recorded his first demo tape and started to receive higher profile gigs at the venerab Palomino and the hipper Club Lingerie. And then it took *another* three years after that demo f Dwight to release *Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc., Etc.* as his debut EP, and it was a couple years after th when his 1986 major-label album of the same name was released, adding four cuts (including the ti track) to the six songs previously issued on the EP.

So Dwight may have come out of nowhere, as far as the world of music was concerned, and count music in particular, but it had been almost ten years since he had graduated from high school, and was on the cusp of thirty by the time he became an overnight sensation. In retrospect, such succe appears preordained, but at the time it seemed anything but. His career path required the patience a perseverance of an artist who had more of the latter than the former.

His friend with the car who drove him out left a month later. Before moving to Hollywood, to apartment in the Hills that friends remember as slightly larger than a closet, slightly smaller than garage, he was working in nearby Long Beach. There he made his initial foray into show business not in music but in theater, with a role in a local production of *Heaven Can Wait*.

Dave Alvin says he likely ran into Dwight when they were both employed as short-order cooks Long Beach, though it would be a couple of years before their more significant encounter at t Palomino. By then, the lead guitarist and songwriter of the Blasters was in a position to help unkno artists who impressed him, introducing them to the band’s roots-rocking fans with opening slo

Dwight would later repay the favor by recording Alvin's "Long White Cadillac," introducing th song's narrative of the last night of Hank Williams's life to country radio.

Given the seminal influence of Creedence on Yoakam's music, it's fitting that he would fin musical kinship with Alvin, who mined a seam of what would subsequently become known a "Americana" for riches similar to that in the songs of John Fogerty. On the album release of *Guitar Cadillacs*, Yoakam offered special thanks to Alvin and the Blasters, as part of a select few "wh believed when nobody else cared."

"I later discovered that we'd both been cooks in Long Beach in the late '70s, worked half a mi away from each other," remembers Alvin with a laugh. "I was a cook in a Middle Eastern restaura that was predominantly vegetarian. And Dwight was a cook at a place called Hamburger Henry's.

"I'd go there and get a burger after cooking vegetarian for eight hours. And Dwight didn't g famous *only* for doing drinking songs, but he did quite a few. So it's kind of ironic, this vegetaria cooking hamburgers, who had never had a hamburger in his life, and singing drinking songs, and he never had a drink. And singing them pretty persuasively."

The years between driving to Los Angeles in 1977 and cutting his first demo in 1981 were plain productive ones for Yoakam in terms of writing. All of the ten songs that Yoakam would cut for tha demo would subsequently be re-recorded for his first three albums, except for "Please Daddy," whic he'd written in high school, once again using his imagination. It's a song sung from the perspective o a young daughter who is trying to console her father (and likely herself) that things will be all rig after he and her mother had split up.

To listen to those revelatory demo recordings, first issued on the four-disc, 2002 retrospectiv *Reprise Please Baby: The Warner Bros. Years* , you'd never suspect that "Please Daddy" would be th only track he wouldn't re-record for release because it's as good as many of them. Others mo directly reflected his own experience, as he explains of "You're the One," a highlight ballad of th demo but not included on a Yoakam album until his third. "I'd written that in 1978 about this girl I' grown up with, a beautiful preacher's daughter who broke my heart," he remembers. "She went to th prom with me. Though, again, it goes well beyond the literal. I was a senior in high school, I w crushed, and I got over it."

Living in Southern California gave Yoakam a fresh perspective on what he'd left behind, offerin even more of a contrast than he'd experienced between Columbus and Kentucky. Raised in the forme he recognized that the latter provided the inspiration that would distinguish him from the run of th country-rock mill. Not necessarily his own experiences, or even those of his immediate family, b songs in which he could use that legacy for some imaginative reshaping. "Miner's Prayer" is tw generations and a hundred miles from Yoakam's upbringing; "South of Cincinnati," a track from th *Guitars, Cadillacs* EP and LP that shows a short story's command of detail, uses the marriage of h grandparents, together more than fifty years, to explore the alternate reality of a loving coup separated by alcohol and pride.

One of the ironies of Yoakam's musical progression in California, when he began to write almos exclusively of Kentucky and cast himself as a pilgrim from the bluegrass backwoods, is that in urba Columbus he'd distinguished himself by his ability to channel the country-rock that had bee emerging from Southern California. And that was the music he considered his strength when he mad the move west.

"When I got out here, I would do 'Carmelita,' Linda Ronstadt's version," he said of the song h would later cover in a style closer to Warren Zevon's original. "I would do the Eagles. I was alway country rock, because my voice, my family, was country. So at the moment that country rock wa starting to inundate AM radio, I could play the Eagles, I could sing it. That was me."

Yet it was his writing that would allow Yoakam to discover who he really was, or at least develop

sample content of Dwight Yoakam: A Thousand Miles from Nowhere (American Music (University of Texas))

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