

BFS Audio Report

BOUND FOR SOUND - since 1989

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The Arthur Loesch Tube Preamplifier by Tempo Electric

by MGD [Martin G. DeWulf]



Simply mentioning the name “Arthur Loesch” amongst audiophiles gets their immediate attention. I’m ashamed then to admit that when H.R. Weiner e-mailed me regarding the new preamplifier he was interested in hearing, I didn’t know what, or who, he was talking about. Arthur, who? Still, I went to the web page and took a look at the handiwork of the Tempo Electric team now building the preamp. www.tempoelectric.com

I did know Joe Levy, however. Joe’s been a BFS reader for a long time, and as I look back at my reader correspondence, I see Joe’s name popping up often. Joe Levy is the founder and owner of Tempo Electric in Troy, New York where his office and production facility is located. Just how Joe

became associated with Arthur Loesch is an interesting story. Joe met Arthur in 1990 at the inaugural meeting of the Catskill and Adirondack Audio Society in Albany, New York. You will see that in spite of his many accomplishments over the years as a physicist in a number of fields,¹ Arthur has remained an audiophile, meeting with local clubs and sharing ideas amongst the area aficionados. Still, he has never been a “real” manufacturer, choosing instead to design and build only for a small circle of friends. Beyond that, he lets someone else do the heavy lifting, in this case Joe Levy.

Getting back to 1990. The members of the Audio Society of which Arthur and Joe were both



members had the habit of meeting in members' homes where equipment would be brought over and compared to that of the householder. After going to

Arthur's home for an audition with some of the other guys, Joe noticed something quite different about the sound of Arthur's system – and he liked it. The entire system was an eye opener, but it was the preamp that truly caught Joe's interest and imagination.² Joe became so enthusiastic about the Loesch system, he began to recreate it in his home, replicating it in every detail. Herb Reichert wrote about Joe's system in Issue 3 of *Sound Practices* magazine.

Prior to this time, Arthur has been working with John Weisner, and had combined their talents to create and build preamps under the Loesch & Weisner name. Distribution was extremely limited and the products were basically still made by hand, one at a time. In 1999, after a gestation period of almost a decade Joe Levy started Tempo Electric with the express purpose of manufacturing and distributing Dr. Loesch's designs to a larger market, using the highest quality parts available – period. Setting the basic formula (design) in stone was extremely important so as to alleviate the unit to unit variances sometimes found in earlier products.

I find one aspect of the current production model extremely interesting. Manufacturers generally find a type of tube, resistor, capacitor that they like and they use the same thing throughout the design. For example, manufacturer X likes 6DJ8 tubes from a certain European source and that's all he uses. Insert the same type or kind of wire, connections, whatever, all the way through a design

and you end up with a product that has a noticeable house sound reflecting, in some measure, the accumulated sonic characteristics of that favorite part used. I have done it myself. Using one brand of interconnect or power cord in a sophisticated system can result in a signature sound that emphasizes the good and bad aspects of the wires' sound. As a result, for many years I have used at least two or three different brands of interconnects and cables in the Big Rig so as to maximize the positive aspects of the various brands, while not allowing the negatives to accumulate. The Loesch/Tempo approach has been to assemble a wide variety of super high quality parts for the preamp in order to balance out whatever sonic signature any one of the parts might individually have. That is a great idea...

The unit sent to Dr. Weiner, and then to me retailed for \$11,058. The basic "Loesch Full Function Audio Stage" has a base price of \$7,100. The difference between the two models is one of parts quality and the addition of a second power supply (\$2,500) making the unit dual mono from start to finish. The upgrade path includes Western Electric WE417A front end tubes, VCap Teflon output caps on the line stage, WBT NextGen-Ag Silver RCA sockets, soft temper internal silver wire, two custom made power cords made by Joe himself, all with Kimber and Amphenol connectors. Add to that a healthy mixture of NOS tubes, and esoteric resistors from Audio Note, Caddock and "Naked" Vishays; along with caps from VCap and REL and the ingredients are there for something unique and special. It literally took Joe years to test the piles of resistors, caps, etc., one by one, to find the perfect recipe of parts for his preamp.



Set-up.

The pre-amplifier from Tempo harkens back to an earlier time. It is a full feature preamp, one not only serving as a line stage controller, but having built into it a phono stage. Ahhh, the good old days... Another difference seen with the Tempo Electric preamplifier is the chassis used for the control section and power supplies. Whereas, almost all \$10,000+ electronics made today feature half inch thick faceplates and heavy plating with precious metals, the Loesch has an ageless appearance comprised of simple aluminum chassis parts and lifetime designed electrical switches – in spite of the price and über parts quality, by all appearances the Loesch preamp by Tempo Electric is not “ego audio.” Yes, the price is considerable, but the vast majority of what you pay for has gone into quality hand built construction and an all star list of parts. With this preamp, you hear what you pay for...

My set-up was the usual. The control section went into my equipment rack seated on a solid butcher block, 2” thick. Since the unit came with its own power cords (two of them), that’s what I used (though I did experiment with LessLoss cords to some advantage). No tube rolling as the tubes I used were the ones provided. I did experiment with the use of AC line conditioners. The Monarchy isolation transformers were a bit too much,

lessening dynamic range some. The LessLoss Firewall worked very well with the Loesch preamp, helping it to do everything it already did extremely well, just a little better. The unit required no break-in as H.R. Weiner accomplished that thankless task while he had the units.

I’m always a little leery of tube gear as some units can be more than a little fragile and fully capable of catching curtains and other things flammable on fire if not attended to. No such problems with the Tempo preamp. It ran cool and was totally unperturbed operationally the entire time I used it.

Having had the opportunity to use the Loesch preamp with a variety of ancillary gear to get the best from this unit, it was important to use amps with input impedances of more than 10kOhms. Not that it couldn’t drive such a low load, but it sounded less strained and immensely more natural and easy if the amp had an input impedance of 47kOhms or more. This was extra true when using the monitor out to drive my Alesis CD burner directly from the internal phono stage. The phono definitely didn’t like driving the 10kOhm input of the Alesis Masterlink.

Sonic observations.

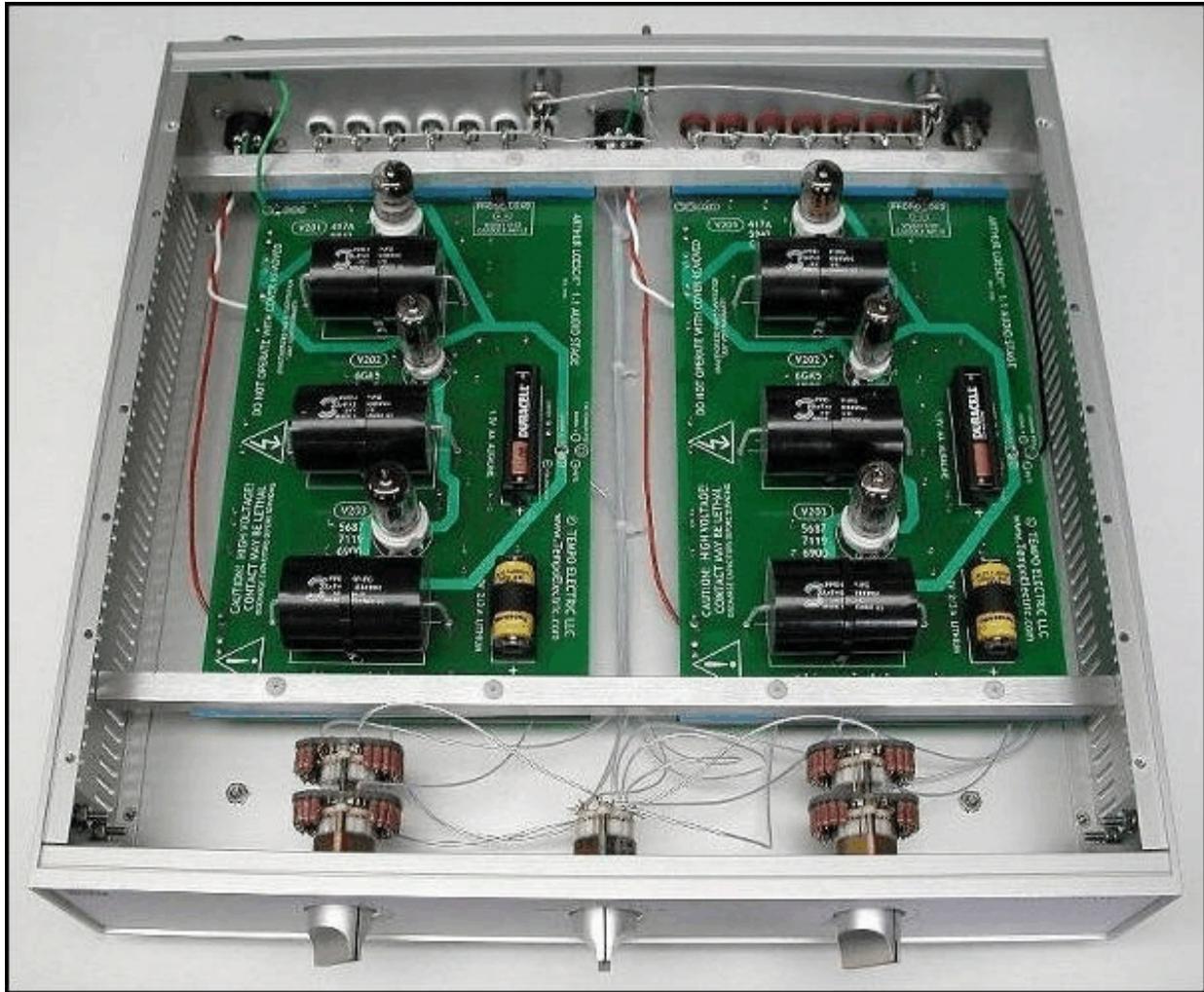
The Arthur Loesch preamplifier has a decidedly utilitarian/retro look about it. Just because it looked that way doesn't mean it sounded that way. At first I didn't know what to think of the sound, so different it was from what I was accustomed to. On a totally objective basis, the SMC VRE-1, which had not a single tube inside it, sounded tubier than the Tempo. I initially came away from the comparison wondering if the Tempo weren't a little shy in the lower mids and upper bass. Searching for answers I put away the Pass and Clayton power amps with their respective input impedances of 30 and 47kOhms. Putting in the Monarchy SE250 hybrid mono amps worked wonders in the area of my concerns. I don't think the tube input section of the Monarchy had anything to do with the perceived improvements. I do think, however, the 100kOhm input impedance was exactly what the music doctor ordered. The entire musical spectrum filled out and the preamp took on an easy spontaneity that only comes about when things are running right. I didn't have any amps with an input impedance between the 47 of the Clayton and the 100 of the Monarchy, so I don't know exactly where the dividing line is between "perfect" and "could be better". All I know is that it's above 47 and less than 100kOhms.

From my purely subjective point of view, this is how the preamp sounds. If you are an audiophile who appreciates what some call the vintage sound of tubes, this preamp will not give you that. It absolutely refused to prettify the music in any way, and that, quite frankly took some getting used to. The old adage of "add nothing, subtract nothing" came to mind on numerous occasions, especially if I had been listening to speakers, or an input source that was less than perfect. I listen to a lot of economy gear that many times doesn't get reviewed, and in the same way as the Merlin VSM mxe, the preamp from Tempo was ruthlessly revealing of everything in its way. For example, listening to Bob Dylan's "Lay Lady Lay" off of *Nashville Skyline* with the Tempo revealed that recording to be one of the most processed, hideously overdubbed recording messes ever made. On the other hand, this preamp allowed me to hear into and discover the true inner complexity and musical wonder of Neil Young's *After the Gold Rush* on Reprise. "Tell Me Why" is a perfect example of



how chorus and solo acoustic guitar should be recorded – the Arthur Loesch preamp told me just how right it was in ways most preamps do not, because they cannot. Listening to Neil Young's solo voice on "After the Gold Rush" displayed a feeble vocal presence lightly hanging between the loudspeakers watching unbelievable events take place. The Tempo preamplifier really caught the mood intact and tangible. This preamp captured musical relationships within the soundfield in magnificent ways.

My opinion of the sonics is that even when everything was in place and the proper amplifier was being used, the preamp didn't recreate the warm audio nest some modern music demands. Not that it was totally deficient in that respect - warmth and substance were reproduced when called for. It's just that the preamp was less than stellar at warmth and *intimacy*. This preamp was exemplary at recreating the width and depth of the soundstage in precise ways – its ability to reveal context was superb. Doing that, there were times however, when I knew the recording microphone was almost in the mouth of the singer, but it didn't sound that way with the Tempo. In that respect it was similar to the superb Jade tube preamp from Wyetech, but more detailed and faster sounding. Like the Jade, it took a step back from the recording. Bass with rock music didn't have the drive found with some preamps, especially solid state preamps – explosive deep bass transients were down a little (basically home theater stuff).



At the same time, this preamp served classical fare extremely well, superbly integrating cello and violin into the musical whole in ways that made the music complete and whole. Listening to Brahms “Variations on a Theme by Haydn,” Arturo Toscanini (RCA Victor Red Seal - mono) had a solid and full bass to midrange response which was never lush nor overly rich. With Tchaikovsky “Violin Concerto in D”, Boston Symphony – Munch (RCA Victrola – stereo), the Tempo accurately reproduced the sound of the recording hall from wall to wall at a moderate distance; perfectly appropriate for the recording. String bass and baritone sax were present and clean in jazz recordings. These are the areas where the Tempo preamp excels.

That small point aside, the Arthur Loesch preamplifier from Tempo Electric is a design that harkens back to the handcrafted days when quality was more than 14 carat gold plating on knobs seldom used. This preamp was not only lovingly assembled with care and concern for quality inside and out, it was made to last and satisfy musically for decades to come. The antithesis of mass produced equipment from China and other points in the Far East, the Arthur Loesch preamplifier from Tempo Electric is made in the USA to exacting standards and quality that simply can’t be mass produced – here, or in Asia. Kudos to Arthur Loesch and Joe Levy for making it all happen – a functional work of art for those who care.

1. Arthur Z. Loesch, PhD (retired) was, for 35 years, a professor of Atmospheric Dynamics at the University of Albany where much of his work involved the computer modeling of global weather patterns. He has been published numerous times in the Journal of Atmospheric Science, as well as other noted publications. In his other life, that of audio electronics, Loesch has worked with and written about Western Electric, as well as with John Weisner. His circuits have served as the inspiration for any number of other designers including, J.C. Morrison, Herb Reichert and Allen Wright.



2. An Arthur Loesch based system does not stop with the preamplifier and phono stage. Loesch designs and builds tube power amplifiers and loudspeakers as well. He believes in a system that works together even though made of various parts.

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Part 2 continues below...

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TWO KINDS OF WONDERFUL

Superb Phono Stages from Tempo and Tom Evans

H. Richard Weiner



The Time Traveler Awakens.

If I had fallen asleep in 1980, at the dawn the era of Perfect Sound Forever, and awakened this morning, I wouldn't be terribly surprised that vinyl remains the source of the best possible sound. The original convenient – oh, sorry – compact disc players were quite nasty. All the arguments that the new technology would mature struck me as specious when I listened to a Thorens 124 or a Garrard 301; here were decades-old turntables that sounded as good, if different, than the most modern models. If the basic idea is correct, different implementations will exhibit the idea's virtues in different ways: a fundamentally flawed concept can be modified until doomsday and still retain the underlying problem. In

passing, I'll note that rim drive, supplanted by direct drive and belt propulsion, is back: look at the Teres or VPI sites. Then look at Audiogon: those hoary 124s and 301s, those Lenco 75s, are back.

Now (late 2010) we have more turntables than I remember twenty-five years ago, and prices range from the quite reasonable to the breathtakingly extravagant, but they all sound good. In fact, they sound better, dollar for dollar, than comparable Frisbee flingers – oh, sorry – compact disc players. Tonearms have multiplied, too, with lots of variations on a few engineering premises. Cartridges of every conceivable (to me, at least) material are available, again across a wide range of prices.

So let's say you've assembled a turntable system, and you plug the tonearm leads into – what? Where did the preamp's phono inputs go? They were here only a couple of decades ago. This is a development I would not have anticipated in 1980. "Preamp" now refers, most often, to circuits that amplify a CD player's output (often more than a volt) to drive an amplifier (a volt or two). Did you wonder why passive preamps have become so popular? In this context, gain is not important.

Raising a feeble 125 millivolt signal (the output of my old Ikeda/Rowland cartridge) to 2 volts is a very different proposition. The amplification factor is much greater, and so keeping the noise floor lower than the background hiss on old pressing is a problem. Reversing the equalization curves can produce other nonlinear phenomena.

I've been listening to stand-alone phono stages since manufacturers stopped putting them in preamps, and the results have been mixed. As I discovered in a survey a few years ago, you can pay thousands of dollars and get nasty, harsh, rough sound from records; or you can pay a few hundred dollars and get much of the best possible result. (The best bargain was the Margules Magenta 47 dB; the poorest deal shall remain nameless.) A couple of years ago I listened to the Xyz Artisan and thought it was terrific, especially if you happen to have a Xyz cartridge. Then I borrowed some friends' phono stages and found some well-reviewed units that weren't nearly as good; and they weren't cheap, either.

Over the past year I've had two really wonderful phono stages in my system. They have competing virtues. I can't tell you which one will be better for you, but I can guarantee that you should try both.

Common Ground

Both the Tempo Electric (tube) and the Tom Evans Audio Design Groove + SRX (solid state) took decades to evolve and are built by obsessive and highly creative fanatics. Arthur Loesch and Tom Evans don't pull circuits out of a design handbook; they are more likely to have written the handbook. They share another trait: they listen with extraordinary care and acuity. Their products may not conform to current tastes, but are the most

musically accurate systems they can execute. Every part, from the chassis to the internal wire, has been selected to produce the best possible result. They look radically different, and they sound different; but those differences arise from very careful and methodical work.

Tempo Electric: my suspension of disbelief

Out of the boxes (plural), the Loesch has a decidedly 1960 NASA/NORAD appearance. It's not lovely like some preamps, nor is it dressed up as an ultramodern component. There are small circular analogue meters on the power supplies (about thirty pounds each) and the control unit (about twenty pounds) is plain as any lab equipment I ever used. The Loesch is a single-minded, supremely refined expression of an idea, and it has only one purpose: to reproduce musical signals.

I listened to the same Arthur Loesch 1.1 control preamplifier as Marty did, and drew many of the same conclusions about the unit's sound: it produces an impeccable sound stage and is sonically neutral. This is as honest, uncolored a tube preamp as I have encountered. While it retains tubes' capacity to place flesh on the musical bones, the unit does not render overly lush sound. The designer has managed to strike the middle ground between old-fashioned tube signature and the starkly unpleasant noise of some solid state (and, alas, some tube units trying for a solid state sound). The sole reason for my report is to comment on the phono stage, and I can summarize my findings by describing my experiences with one recording: Dennis Russell Davies conducting the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (Sound 80-DLR-101) in *Appalachian Spring*. (There were a lot of other records, but this one example will tell you what made me so enthusiastic.)

Simply stated, the Loesch is better than any other phono stage known to me at reproducing the tonal qualities of live music. We've all heard systems where we had to supply some missing data: there's a guitar or a flute or a voice, and we mentally add and enhance the sound until it sounds right; or we filter out the harshness that doesn't belong, we build in the right amount of decay and ambience. In another context, this is what Coleridge meant by "the willing suspension of disbelief." Plainly, we

are not sitting in a Bayreuth orchestra hall in 1951 or the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, but we use our imaginations until we share the experience with the audience. Of course we know it's an illusion created with wires and gizmos, but our minds compensate for the limitations of the equipment.

With the Tempo, none of that was necessary. The instruments sounded as they should, with exactly the right harmonic envelope. Several times during my first listening session I was surprised at how strikingly correct the Loesch sounded. Over the ensuing months I realized that, with a properly engineered record, I had never heard a more engaging and natural sound from my system – or any other system. This includes those magical and immensely expensive systems encountered solely at audio shows.

Back to the Copeland. There were moments where I didn't have to use my imagination at all: flutes sounded as delicate but as prominent (with microphone placement and a little boost in the recording suite) as they do in real life; violins were just as sleek and slightly strident as bowed instruments should be; and the piano had proper attack and tone. The performance area was properly rendered (I've been there). Most importantly, I could quit kidding myself about how all of the gear at the other end of my living room was working, and settle deeply into the music.

But how did it do with rock, or jazz or Balinese cymbals? To each question, I will say that I never encountered a good recording in which the Loesch failed to produce a superbly musical result.

<http://www.tempoelectric.com/preamp.htm>

Tom Evans: the rightness of being

If the Tempo preamp was overwhelming in its multiple boxes, the Groove + SRX is almost too modest. This is a small, plastic chassis that doesn't weigh much, and what appears to be a power brick. As with the Tempo, there are no loading switches to drive your obsessive compulsive disorder into full

bloom: you tell the manufacturer what cartridge you're using, an internal setting is made. All you do is plug wires into and out of the little box.

(I am not going to waste my time or yours recapitulating Mr. Evans's resume, or his claims about the sonic virtues of the power supply. I'm not an engineer, so much of the rationale is lost on me; and you're here to find out what the unit sounded like. If you like techno-porn, there are plenty of camera, computer and car magazines to titillate your sensibilities. Sad to say, there are plenty of hifi journals pandering to the same proclivities.)

Again, my first impression was so striking that it set the tone for the rest of my time with the Groove + SRX. I started with Kurt Roegner's and the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra's performance of Schubert's "Great" C major symphony (Denon OB-7350-51-ND). From the first bar of the horn figure, I was struck by how true the tone was. In the past, I had found the sound to waver a touch, as though my turntable's belt were slipping or the speed control were fluctuating. With the Groove + SRX, the horn is exactly on pitch, and that makes an extraordinary difference in the listening experience. I didn't have to correct for deficiencies in the source or the playback system. As the performance unfolded, I heard the orchestra hall's ambience, the instruments with more clarity than I could ever recall (and I've had this record since 1980). *This is the sound of live music*, I noted.

It is a commonplace observation that solid state units reproduce bass with greater control, definition and extension than tube units. In this comparison, I'd say that the Groove + SRX sounds different, although not necessarily better, than the Tempo. The difference is more a matter of taste, and if you're familiar with the difference between sealed and ported cabinets, you have a pretty accurate sense of the difference. At the other end of the spectrum, we are often told that tubes have better extension and less grain. Here again, I found that the Tempo was quite true to life in the treble – but so was the Groove + SRX. The differences lay in the amount of color (in the good sense) and the sense of precision portrayed by the two units. A very long time ago, I asked my musicology professor a stupid question, one which I could have answered by

opening up a book. He replied simply, “Check your ears. Then check the score.” In this context, the question is not which unit is better (whatever that would mean here) but which set of virtues you prize more highly.

<http://www.tomevansaudiodesign-usa.com/id2.html>

In passing, I’ll mention that both companies make other components, and you could build your entire system to fit the musical philosophies embodied in these phono stages.

The \$5-10,000 Question

Your question must be: okay, here are two phono stages that cost roughly the same amount (depending on power supply and other enhancements, the Groove can cost anywhere between \$4,000 and about \$8,900, while various stages of the Tempo begin around \$5,000 and rise toward \$9,000) and both are terrific. Which one should I buy?

I am not going to equivocate. These two phono stages stand as my references. They are so far beyond others I have reviewed that they dwindle in the distance. Here’s the catch: the Tempo excels, as tube units do, in spectral color, the liveliness of music, while the Evans is as nearly perfect at transparency as I have encountered. These are two wonderful accounts of the same musical event – but they are not the same.

Now you must search yourself (having searched your bank account) and decide what you value most in music. It is a falsehood to claim that we have all crossed over into Jordan: tubes emphasize some aspects of music while solid state brings other parts forward. There have been endless attempts to join these separate virtues over my time in audio, and countless announcements that the mission had been accomplished, but I have yet to encounter a component that reproduces all music’s wonders equally well. What would I do? Christmas is just around the corner, and if Santa dropped either a Tempo or a Tom Evans unit into my stocking, I’d plug the little (or quite large) box into my system and say, what a good boy am I. I would stop what I was doing, reach for an LP, and quit reading phono stage reviews forever.

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