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Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music: “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Throughout his almost 50-year music career, Raffi has fought for kids. He's done it with beautiful, fun, and funny music, and he's done it as an activist. He's on the really short list of children's performers who connect directly with the youngest people with an open heart, untainted by the slightest condescension. After years of working on his foundation, the Raffi Foundation for Child Honoring, he returned to the road and record stores with his 2014 album, *Love Bug*. That's when I talked to him.

Music: “Love Bug” from the album *Love Bug* by Raffi.

Everybody's got a love bug deep inside

Everybody's got a love bug for their own

Everybody's a love bug, a love bug deep inside

A love bug, where the hugs come from

(*Music fades out.*)

Jesse Thorn: And Raffi is still recording and still touring and still advocating for young, vulnerable voices. He just released a brand-new album, his 24th, called *Penny Penguin*. Here's the title track.

Music: “Penny Penguin” from the album *Penny Penguin* by Raffi.

Penny Penguin in your penguin suit

Walk and waddle, oh so cute

Penny Penguin, oh, Penny Penguin

Penny Penguin, with you penguin pals

Hop and waddle on the snow and ice to the water

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: What I knew about where you came from was essentially that you came from the depths of my childhood. And—

(They laugh.)

Raffi: I came from my mother.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I was really interested to read about your cultural background. Your parents are Armenian, and you were born and lived until you were about 10 in Egypt before you moved to Canada.

Raffi: Yeah, in Cairo.

Jesse Thorn: What do you remember most about growing up in Cairo?

Raffi: Well, I remember the sand. I remember the pyramids. My father was a portrait photographer of renown, even in Cairo. He had a portrait studio half a block long. And the family used to go to church on Sunday mornings. I remember the Armenian choir singing those soulful songs. And you know, most Sundays, he—you know, he'd take us—my father would take us in the 1948 Studebaker, two-tone Green. We'd pile into it and drive out of Cairo to Giza and the Pyramids. And that was amazing, just to be able to do that. Also I think, you know, I was a little kid in Cairo, and I was mesmerized by the environment I was in. I was learning to speak Armenian and Turkish from my grandparents, and also learning Arabic.

So, it was very—just a lot going on (*chuckles*) and a very vibrant, experience for a little kid.

Jesse Thorn: Why did your family move to Canada?

Raffi: I think my father realized that his sons and daughter—you know, the kids would have a much brighter future in a country like Canada. And so, I really take my hat off to his very brave decision to leave a very prosperous business and relocate in a new land.

Jesse Thorn: What did your parents think about North American teenage culture when they brought their teenagers to North America?

Raffi: Well, you know, my parents—I mean, I was having the immigrant experience every little kid has, you know, in a new land. My parents were trying to keep me Armenian. I was listening to pop music. And pop music was winning.

(They laugh.)

You know, and yet I understand why they tried to keep me Armenian.

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It's just sometimes they were a bit heavy handed about it. I sang in the Armenian church choir, and that was cool. But you know, what was exciting for me was getting my first guitar from Richmond's Trading Post, a pawn shop in Toronto. Paid \$24 for it, started to teach myself how to play and got, you know, guitar chord books and really got swept away by the music of the '60s.

Jesse Thorn: Did you think that you could become a musician?

Raffi: I tried to become someone like a James Taylor. That's what, you know, I was after. And my folk music career—I don't know, interesting and sweet as it was, was always a struggle, and I wasn't comfortable on stage for various reasons. I didn't have my best gigs when I should have had them. And so, it just wasn't happening for me as a folk singer, and I was ready to give it up and become a carpenter. (*Chuckles.*) And then one day, as luck would have it, my then kindergarten teacher wife and I decided to make an album for children. And that album was *Singable Songs for the Very Young* back in 1976. And it became an instantly popular album, and it changed my life.

Jesse Thorn: You mentioned that you had a hard time performing on stage sometimes as an adult folk musician. How is it different to perform for school age kids?

Raffi: Well, that's the funny thing. I found it easy. (*Laughs.*) I found—I was interested in these young kids, and I was curious about how they were different than adults. And then I learned about that. And the more I learned about kids, the more I respected the kinds of people they were. You can't, of course, generalize. I'm not trying to say kids are all the same. You know, they're individuals. But you can notice, in early childhood, traits of what it is to be a young child. You're spontaneous, curious, sometimes loud, honest to a fault, (*laughs*) and you have a lot of pure love inside you. And I think all of the above just kind of enchanted me. And you know, by 1978 I was devoting myself to making music for children and being known as a children's entertainer. Because I came to understand how important music can be in the life of a young child.

Jesse Thorn: I want to play a little bit of probably your best-known song. And you know, I have to say a song that means a lot to me personally, “Baby Beluga”. Let's take a listen.

Music: “Baby Beluga” from the album *Baby Beluga* by Raffi.

Baby beluga in the deep blue sea

Swim so wild and you swim so free

Heaven above, the sea below

And a little white whale on the go

Baby beluga, baby beluga

Is the water warm?

Is your mama home with you, so happy?

Way down yonder, where the dolphins play

Where you...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. You probably know my guest. He's the children's performer, Raffi.

When you started touring for kids and recording for kids, how did you feel out what kind of performer you wanted to be? Like what the values of your performances were. Because I know that you're a very values-driven guy.

Raffi: Well, I think it was all about respect for the child as a whole person. That's what drove the songs I decided to record. And respect is also the value that shaped the tone of my recordings, the tone of my singing, the invitational tone in the concerts. And right from the beginning, we didn't make the concerts 90 minutes with a loong, you know, intermission in the middle. We knew—and when I say we, I'm including my then kindergarten teacher wife and I and our primary school friends, who were kind of a foursome—you know, where we'd discuss these things. We knew that little kids didn't need more than 45 minutes. That to hold their attention for that long was quite something. So, we tailored those early shows to be 45/50 minutes. And even now, they're no longer than an hour. And that seems like we've had—you know, by then we've had enough time together, type of thing. So, in various ways, you know, the concerts were tailored to be considerate of the young child.

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And I think Pete Seeger was quite an influence on me. He was such a sing along master that I also wanted my concerts to be sing along concerts. And that's the way they turned out.

Jesse Thorn: More with the great children's singer Raffi after the break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is singer and activist, Raffi.

Early on, at the end of the '70s, beginning of the '80s, were there inflection points where you had to... where you had to make choices based on, you know, the kind of person and the kind of performer that you wanted to be that might have been difficult choices or choices that made you, you know, feel like you were going to be less famous or less financially successful or whatever?

Raffi: Well, the major decision was to become a children's entertainer and to be proud of that and to be devoted to that calling. I think another aspect was knowing clearly that I was not going to do any commercial endorsements of any kind, and I haven't done one in all these years. Along the way, I understood also that if you respect your young audience, you don't directly advertise or market to them either. So, I've never done that, and I consider it unethical for anyone to market directly to young children. It's exploitative of their innocence. So, those are the major decisions.

Jesse Thorn: Tell me about—I'd like to hear more about the whys of those two rules. Tell me why you chose never to make commercial endorsements.

Raffi: Well, I didn't want to be selling fast foods to kids. (*Chuckles.*) I wanted to be making music for them. I didn't see why, you know, my popularity should be an influence in their choice of what products to buy. I didn't want that at all. And again, you know, when you consider who my inspirations were musically, you had people like—well, I mentioned Pete Seeger. He was a huge influence on me, his integrity. It was all about the music, as it should be. (*Laughing.*) So, I turned down every kind of commercial endorsement offer you can imagine—from, you know, soup companies to diapers to fast foods. And it wasn't even, you know, a hard choice. I mean, I didn't have to think about it. It was no. (*Laughs.*) When you say yes to the young child, when you say yes to respecting the young child, it's easy to say no to the marketers.

Jesse Thorn: What do you think is the difference between writing a song for a young kid and writing a song for an adult? Besides just, you know, not swearing.

Raffi: I think you're keeping in mind the child's realm of experience. You know, it's at the beginning of life.

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You don't want to overpower the young brain. You want to serve, you know, tonal colors that delight. Hopefully. You can have a wide variety of musical styles, but there's a—you know, it's incumbent on you to serve them with some grace and not hyper frenzy, hopefully. (*Chuckles.*) Because that's not what they need.

Jesse Thorn: Do you have children yourself?

Raffi: No, I don't.

Jesse Thorn: You don't have to answer this question if you don't want to, but was that a choice on your part?

Raffi: Yes, it was. I just realized one day that it wasn't necessary for me to have children of my own. (*Chuckles.*) And the woman I was married to at the time felt the same way. We didn't feel the calling to have our own kids, so we just went with that.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that affects the way that you connect with the many, many hundreds and thousands of kids that you interact with all the time?

Raffi: I'm not sure that's a factor, because I imagine that if I had my own kids, I would still love children just as much, if not more.

(They laugh.)

So, I think what I observe, what I feel is—I don't know how to even say it, but a growing love and respect for the child as a whole person. And I say that without trying to say that, you know, children are all things nice, sugar and spice, and all that kind of stuff, you know. But there's just something about the young child whose intelligence is innate and boundless and creative, that—you know, when I meet kids, that pure love that resides in them is palpable, and it's moving.

Jesse Thorn: Do you remember your emotional life as a little kid? I have these little flashes, but I'm not somebody that remembers those kinds of things well, and I always regret it.

Raffi: Yeah, I remember very well the feeling of bewilderment in my childhood. I felt that the adults, you know, who were around me loved me dearly, and yet they hit me at times, and they mocked me. And I didn't understand... I couldn't—you know, I felt really conflicted about what was happening. So, you know, that might have something to do with the fact that when I was in my teens, I felt like quite a rebel. I was the class clown in various ways. I think I was looking to humor and to music to help me find some solace in life and to forget some of that pain within me about, as I say, being loved but not having felt respected for the person that I was.

Jesse Thorn: How do you feel you are affected as an adult when you go out on a stage and interact with 100 or 500 or 1,000 and kind of have a chance to see the world their way?

Raffi: Well, the concerts are, for me, just such a hugely loving experience. They're also work. I mean, I really have to work to remember the words, to stay in the moment, to play the guitar just right, you know, and keep the groove of the song moving. But you know, I'm mostly sensing a tremendous love in the room and going with that energy. And like I say, hoping that I remember all the words to all the songs.

(They laugh.)

Because you can easily lose yourself to the fun of the moment too, you know?

Jesse Thorn: Well, Raffi, I'm surprised to hear you say that the work of a concert is not messing up the performance element of it.

Raffi: (*Cackles.*) You're surprised by that?

Jesse Thorn: I'm surprised by that, because—you know, I'm not surprised that sometimes you might have a hard time remembering the words to a song. You know, I've performed and forgotten what I was supposed to say. It's hard. But I would think that the first thing that you would say would be the big challenge of performing as Raffi is that you're performing for a bunch of, you know, three- and four- and five- and six- and seven-year-olds who are—you know, who are all going their own directions. (*Chuckles.*) Like, the big challenge would be—in the way that, if I talk to a standup comic, a big part of what their work is getting up on stage and just getting everyone pointed the same direction.

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Raffi: Here's the thing. In concert for me, what I know is that families come to enjoy the concert together. The children are not there, you know, by themselves. So, that's a grounding element to the show. And children and their parents come wanting to hear their favorite Raffi songs, and I know that. And while I can't sing every single one of their favorites, I certainly sing enough that they feel right away, right from the start, connected to the music that they love. And I think it's that beautiful connection at the beginning of the show that allows for the rest of the show to go well and for me to take some chances here and there with a song that they might not know. And the songs that they do know become the toys that we are there to play with. And it's a lovely experience.

Jesse Thorn: Right now I'm imagining you opening with “Baby Beluga” and like two thirds of the way through, you hit him with “Smoke on the Water”.

Raffi: (*Laughs.*) Jesse!

Jesse Thorn: (*Giggles.*) So, tell me, Raffi, what's the song that you can open a show with, and you got all those kids and parents on your side?

Raffi: Well, that's pretty easy. It's “The More We Get Together”. (*Laughs.*) It's the first song that I ever recorded on the very first children's album. So, it's a lovely little waltz to sing, and everybody knows the words. And you know, then we sing it a little bit louder and a little bit more confidently, and everybody gets in the groove. It's great. There are other songs that I can start a concert with. There's a song called “You Gotta Sing When the Spirit Says Sing”. There's one called “Time to Sing”. There's all kinds of songs I could start with, but currently I've been starting with the waltz.

Jesse Thorn: Well, let's hear a little bit of Raffi. This is from—what?—like 1977 or something like that?

Raffi: '76.

Jesse Thorn: '76, performing “The More We Get Together”.

Raffi: “The More We Get Together” from the album *Singable Songs for the Very Young* by Raffi.

The more we get together, together, together

The more we get together, the happier we'll be

'Cause your friends are my friends

And my friends are your friends

The more we get together, the happier we'll be.

Oh, the more we get together, together, together

The more we get together, the happier we'll be

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Even more *Bullseye* still to come. After a break, we will wrap up with Raffi. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Promo:

Music: Fun, percussive music.

Manolo Moreno: Hey, when you listen to podcasts, it really just comes down to whether or not you like the sound of everyone's voices. My voice is one of the sounds you'll hear on the podcast *Dr. Gameshow*. And this is the voice of co-host and fearless leader, Jo Firestone.

Jo Firestone: This is a podcast where we play games submitted by listeners, and we play them with callers over Zoom we've never spoken to in our lives.

(Manolo laughs.)

So, that is basically the concept of this show. Pretty chill.

Manolo Moreno: So, take it or leave it, bucko. And here's what some of the listeners have to say.

Speaker 1: It's funny, wholesome, and it never fails to make me smile.

Speaker 2: I just started listening, and I'm already binging it. I haven't laughed as hard in ages. I wish I discovered it sooner.

Manolo Moreno: You can find *Dr. Gameshow* on MaximumFun.org.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're replaying my 2014 interview with Raffi, the singer behind “Banana Phone” and “Baby Beluga” has a new album out. It's called *Penny Penguin*. Before we get back into it, here's another track off that album. This is “The Birdies Sing”

Music: “The Birdies Sing” from the album *Penny Penguin* by Raffi.

The birdies sing the sweet songs

They sing...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: I want to talk a little bit about your activism, which is what you spent most of the last 10 or 12 years doing. You have a foundation called the Center for Child Honoring.

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And you've just published a book called *Light Web, Dark Web: Three Reasons to Reform Social Media Before It Reforms Us*. I think for a lot of people with small kids, especially small kids, they're trying to figure out what the internet and particularly social media mean for them and for their kids and for the way they raise their kids. And your book is a really lovely introduction to some of the ideas that are floating out there and, you know, some of the issues that are brought up. Let's start—before we get into the dark web, let's start with the light web. What's the good news about the internet, for us and our kids?

Raffi: Well, by the light web, I mean all the things about the internet that we enjoy. The ability to connect with each other very quickly and easily through a laptop or other computing device—whether it's email, text, audio, video clips. I mean, there's just so many ways to connect with each other, share what matters, learn about the world, the global storehouse of information, and so on. All of that is, you know, what I refer to as the light web, the things that we enjoy about the internet.

Jesse Thorn: Personally, Raffi, what do you like to do most on the internet?

Raffi: What do I like to do most?

(Jesse confirms.)

Well, I'm like anybody else, you know. I'm surfing the web sometimes for information. Sometimes I'm emailing, sometimes texting, and I also enjoy Twitter. I also like recording, digital recording. That's how I made my most recent CD, *Love Bug*. 80% of it was recorded in my living room. Yeah, so there are many attributes to the light web I enjoy.

Jesse Thorn: What's the dark web?

Raffi: The dark web is a term I use for what we find not so good about the internet—all the perils of being online, whether it's identity theft or privacy loss. You know, whether it's—you know, how unsafe it still is for young people to use the internet. The location of users is so easily deciphered by bad people, unless users, you know, disable their location features. There are a number of things I outline in my book. What I say in my book is that we want the internet to be a force for good. All of us. I mean, there's nobody, you know, in their right mind that wants it to be a force for darkness. We want it to be a place where you can shine your light brightly. “This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine,” the song goes. Well, we should do that online as well.

But how do we create a culture of respect online? What I say is: any technological revolution that sweeps the world should be at least safe for users, should build societal intelligence, and it should be sustainable. And if you really examine infotech by those three criteria, it has yet to meet the test of safety, intelligence, and sustainability. We're hearing from many, many quarters that young kids are becoming dependent on their devices and even addicted to infotech. And this is not the way you grow societal intelligence. All the psychotherapists of any value, all the child development professionals, the pediatricians in Canada and the United States have all said that in the first two years of life, you want no screens, ideally. And then after that, very sparingly do you want screen time for kids. Why? Because they need to learn about the real world, the three-dimensional world of marvels, of the elements, of water and sand and mud and rain puddles and honeybees, and all the good things—of which there are so many to marvel at. Whether it's the texture of—you know, when you're petting a baby sheep, a lamb, or all the marvels of growing a plant. You know, putting a seed in soil and watching it grow. These are all the things that you do in the real world.

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And at the same time, the young child learns best through active play in movement and interaction with real people, the caregivers and friends and family who love them. That's how a young being in the formative years learns what it's like to be a human being. Because what's forming in those early years is nothing less than how it feels to be human.

Jesse Thorn: You know, I'm in my 30s now, and I'm a heavy social media user. And you know, even as a 30-something-year-old guy who's been using the internet for 20-something of those years, I still sometimes feel like social media use is driving the me train rather than me driving the social media train. That was a terrible metaphor, but I think you get what I'm driving at here.

Raffi: I think what you're saying is, you know, the ideal is that we use the technology, and it doesn't use us.

Jesse Thorn: And you write in your book about how, you know, these are technologies that are very new and are generally not designed for children. They're designed for adults who—you know, who can respond to them with an adult set of tools. And I find that even as an adult with an adult set of tools, sometimes I am challenged to respond to them in a way that's useful for me. I mean, I think overall I do, but sometimes it's hard for me. And it seems like one of the things that you're arguing for is trying to figure out ways that there is an expectation that the basic values of... the basic values that, you know, in some ways the internet was founded on, of community and respect, be baked in rather than added later as an afterthought once the profit model's figured out.

Raffi: Yeah. (*Laughs.*) Yeah, I think the internet does require regulation to make it the technology that it can be. I know many people disagree with that, but my view is that it's—you know, the virtual world needs respectful behavior. And I don't know how we're going to get that unless we regulate some aspects of it. Because in the real world, for example, you can't hide behind anonymity and hurl insults at people. You can't do that. (*Laughs.*) You know, and yet you can do that online. And in the real world, you can't threaten people. You can't jeopardize young people's lives at will, again, hiding behind anonymity. You can do that online. That doesn't seem smart to me.

So, there are all kinds of things like this I look at in the book, again, from the perspectives of safety and intelligence. And also, the often left out topic: the ecology of infotech and its sustainability. That's an important one as well. So, that's why parents and teachers tell me that *Light Web, Dark Web*, that book I wrote last year, is an eye opener for them.

Jesse Thorn: Tell me about how you've decided to run your business. What's the difference between your record company that releases your records and always has and, you know—whatever. Uh, Interscope Records.

Raffi: Well, I can't speak about other businesses, but I can say that my company, Troubadour Music, is run along triple bottom line values. So, it's not just about the money. It's about the social and environmental impacts of doing business. So, we have a triple bottom line, you might say. I was never in this for the money anyway. I mean, I started as a folk singer to make good music and decided to record on my own label just so that I could, you know, have artistic freedom and help shape my art the way I wanted it. I've stayed true to those principles over the years. And you know, rather than record to some exterior timetable—

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—I just go with what I feel is worth doing at a given time. I go with what I feel on the inside. And that's how it's always been.

Jesse Thorn: I want to play a little bit of you performing a song called “Turn This World Around”. This is you performing it in Toronto, at Ryerson University. Nelson Mandela's there. I wonder if you can tell me first what led you to write this song.

Raffi: In the year 2000, Nelson Mandela made a speech in which he said, “It's not enough for world leaders to spout empty rhetoric.” He said, “What we need to do is to turn this world

around for the children.” And I was so taken with those words that I wrote and recorded the song “Turn This World Around”.

Jesse Thorn: Let's hear a bit of it.

Music: “Turn This World Around” performed live by Raffi.

We heard it from Mandela

Turn this world around for the children

Turn this world around

We've done it once before

And now we hear his call for the children

To turn this world around

Turn, turn, turn, turn this world around for the children

Turn this world around

Turn, turn, turn, turn this world around for the children

Turn this world around

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Did you meet him?

Raffi: I sang that song for Mandela in 2001 in Toronto. And at the end of it, he stood up and shook my hand. Unforgettable. As an entertainer, I cherish those moments when I'm able to sing for those who inspired me—just as I was so excited to sing with Pete Seeger a couple of years ago at the Clearwater Music Festival.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Raffi, I sure appreciate you taking the time to be on *Bullseye*. It was really great to talk to you.

Raffi: Well, thanks so much, Jesse. I'm just tickled to be able to make music after all these years, and I hope that *Love Bug*, the CD, is a good virus out there. *(Laughing.)* I hope it's contagious.

Jesse Thorn: Thank you for your music and the way you've touched my life and my family's life. And you know, I know I'm not the only one.

Transition: Playful banjo.

Raffi, from 2014, speaking to us via Banana phone. If you're on the East Coast or up in Canada, Raffi is probably touring near you. We'll have a link to dates on the *Bullseye* page at MaximumFun.org.

I'll tell you what, after we did this interview, I took my kids to see Raffi. They were very young at the time. We just had a great time. What a special experience it is.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, just had a visit from the shutter guy. It turns out it's kind of hard to get shutters that operate. Everybody's shutters are just these shutters that you like staple to the side of your house. It's very weird.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, Dan Wally. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation", written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and Memphis Industries, their label, for providing it.

Bullseye is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](https://www.instagram.com/BullseyeWithJesseThorn). I am on Instagram, [@JesseThornVeryFamous](https://www.instagram.com/JesseThornVeryFamous). We also share our shows on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. So, go smash that subscribe button on YouTube. Share an interview there with someone that you think might enjoy it.

I think that's about it. Just remember all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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