



# Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout! Records

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## **Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout! Records** Kevin Prested

Through hundreds of exclusive and original interviews, *Punk USA* documents an empire that was built overnight as Lookout sold millions of records and rode the wave of the second coming of punk rock until it all came crashing down. In 1987, Lawrence Livermore founded independent punk label Lookout Records to release records by his band The Lookouts. Forming a partnership with David Hayes, the label released some of the most influential recordings from California's East Bay punk scene, including a then-teenaged Green Day. Originally operating out of a bedroom, Lookout created "The East Bay Punk sound," with bands such as Crimpshrine, Operation Ivy, The Mr. T Experience, and many more. The label helped to pave the way for future punk upstarts and as Lookout grew, young punk entrepreneurs used the label as a blueprint to try their hand at record pressing. As punk broke nationally in the mid 90s the label went from indie outfit to having more money than it knew how to manage.

## **Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout! Records Details**

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# **From Reader Review Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout! Records for online ebook**

## **Brandt says**

When reading this book, all I could think of was a March records comp called Losing Money, Losing Friends. That would have been a better title for this book about the rise and fall of Lookout! Records. However, if it wasn't for one band--Green Day--there would be no story to tell here. This is the story of people who weren't very good at business trying to run one but also trying to keep to some ridiculous DIY ethic. The problem with this story is that Lookout was floated for years by Green Day's back catalog, and it was only when they pulled the plug did the idiocy of a decade of piss poor management and sucking up to moody rock stars catch up with them. It's an interesting look at Lookout!, but without interviews of the founder or of Green Day themselves, you really only get one side of the story for the most part. In the end, it is an interesting cautionary tale and one that makes me glad I never tried to start a record label.

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## **Thomas says**

Ah, Lookout! Records. I have a lot of good memories regarding that label. I think Operation Ivy was what brought them to my attention, and it was what kept it for a long time. I wasn't there "from the beginning", but I remember when 39/Smooth was the only Green Day record, and I remember the excitement surrounding Screeching Weasel finally signing with them. There weren't a lot of labels I followed religiously, but Lookout! was definitely one of them.

Punk USA takes us from the very beginnings of Lookout!, all the way through to its sad end. Prested tells us a little bit about all of the major bands that signed to the label, as well as telling us a bit about the scene that drove the start of Lookout!, as well as carried it along. He recognizes that the label was a result of the scene, and pays attention to the ones who were a part of that scene, and how they played a role in the label. It was a small enough scene that almost everyone was a part of Lookout! at one point or another.

Punk USA is a collection of recollections, some told from his perspective, but most of them from those who were a part of the scene and the label. Chris Applegren, an early employee of the label who eventually became a co-owner, tells the bulk of the story, but we also hear from members of the bands who were on the label, including such luminaries as Dr. Frank from The Mr. T Experience and Jesse from Operation Ivy. For someone like me, who followed the label so closely and knew a lot of the bands and names, it was a great insight into a big part of my youth (if you consider college "youth", at least).

Noticeably absent from the book are any pieces from Larry Livermore, one of the two founders of the label. There's no intention to it (Larry was apparently already working on his own book about the label, and chose not to participate in this one so as not to duplicate his own effort), but it makes the book feel incomplete. David Hayes, the other co-founder, participated, and from the other participants it's easy to get a picture of Livermore, but it doesn't seem right to have a book about Lookout! without having Larry give his own view of events. Considering that one of the key points in Lookout!'s history is when Larry leaves the label, but we never really get a complete view of why this happens.

To his credit, Prested makes sure to give as accurate a view as possible in the book. He takes a "warts and all" approach to the story, showing us how band-centered the label was, but also not avoiding the drama that

eventually led to the label's demise. The feuds between the label and Ben Weasel and Tim Yohannon are discussed, and Prested does his best to present them in the most balanced way possible, considering that neither Livermore, Weasel, or Yohannon participated in the book (though I should point out that Yohannon died in 1998, long before the book was written).

The thing is, the book covers a lot of ground. Lookout! started in 1987, and didn't go out of business until 2012, so there's a lot of time to detail in the book. Prested does a good job of giving us a look at each of the bands on the label, even if it's not comprehensive, but sometimes it feels like we're only getting a brief look at one small part of the label. It doesn't help that Prested doesn't provide breaks between sections, so it sometimes feels like the story is shifting abruptly from one band to another. Add in several typos and a handful of run-on sentences, and you get a book that's more about the scene than it is in being a good book.

Still, that sounds a bit harsh; for anyone who was into Lookout! back in the day, this book feels essential. It's not necessarily well written, but it's a work of passion, and it's a book that required a lot of hours to write. Prested should be commended for tackling the story and bringing it to the fans to read, but at the same time, it's only going to resonate with those fans. A well-written book, even about a subject with which the reader is unfamiliar, will engage any reader; Punk USA's focus is for a smaller audience. Even readers looking to know more about Green Day will find themselves having to wade through all the other bands to get there.

As such, it's a perfect punk book. It's for the fans, by a fan, and it doesn't care if it's polished and perfect, so long as it gets its message across. Anyone who remembers the heyday of Lookout! should read it, as should any old punk who wants to relive the days of the scene, even if they weren't into Lookout!

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### **Aric Davis says**

Although a bit expensive for an ebook, and lacking a few of the folks you really want to hear from-like Ben Weasel or Tim Barry-this book is a fantastic retelling of the story of Lookout Records, and of the late 80's-early 90's Bay Area Scene in general. As a huge fan of the label and it's releases in my formative years, this was a great ride through territory that was previously populated mostly by internet rumors. Mr. Prested sets the story straight, a good thing for both Lookout and its fans, and even when the narrative turns to a cautionary tale, the storytelling never wavers in strength.

I would recommend this book to anyone with even a minor interest in punk rock history, and with no reservations to anyone who grew up listening to bands like The Queers, Avail, or Operation Ivy. Mr. Prested has done a wonderful job telling a story that is both uplifting and very depressing, and I hope that he revisits this subject someday with better access to some of the bigger names from 1990's punk rock that missed out this time around.

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### **Nestor Rychtyckyj says**

In 192 pages Kevin Prested book manages to pack a wealth of information about music, business, life and how people deal with adversity into the history of Lookout! Records. The title says it all – a small independent record label formed in the Bay Area grows into a hugely successful business and then collapses into bankruptcy. It leaves behind a legacy of some great rock & roll as well as busted dreams and hopes for scores of musicians and fans who felt let down and betrayed. This book is mostly in the form of an oral

history with interviews with many of the principals. One of the hidden charms of the book is seeing how people remember and interpret the same events in a completely different ways. Many bands, some famous (Green Day, Operation Ivy), others well-known in the punk community (Queers, Screeching Weasel, Groovie Ghoulies, etc) and others almost unknown appear through the book looking to somehow catch a bit of the success that Green Day found. Their dreams bump into the reality of running an independent record label where cash flow and business planning are frequently in short supply.

The book is fun to read even though we know how the story will end. The mistakes made the people running Lookout multiply throughout the years until their own bands are forced to leave because the label can't be trusted to pay royalties on time. There are no heroes or villains here – the little record label grew out of control and its founders could not and did not make the right decisions that would have kept Lookout in business. But it's also a story where punk rock DIY ethics bump into big-time business trends and don't come out well. If nothing else, this book will get you digging through your records and playing those Lookout! bands again because they sure put out some great music.

P.S. I could have helped Lookout a little more as I only have 20 of their releases so I have quite a few more to track down. It would also be nice if the book had included a listing of the Lookout releases.

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## **Nate says**

If you want a clear picture of why Lookout! Records failed, read Rob Harvilla's story about its collapse.

*Punk USA* isn't equipped to tell that story. What it can do, what it spends nearly two hundred pages doing, is lovingly and loyally describe the lesser-known records and bands that populated the label during its ascension; the bands and records a tier below Green Day and Operation Ivy.

Quotes from those marquee groups don't appear in the story. The result is a book written from the perspective of the also-rans. It's compelling to hear about the underdogs, but hard to shake the feeling that the real story is happening one room over. We can hear the conversation, but can only make out some of the words.

The story comes from a place of obvious affection and light criticism. It makes the East Bay scene sound as exciting as it probably was. It will make the kind of person predisposed to fantasy about "how it used to be" tilt their heads and sigh deeply at a moment passed, never to be reclaimed. It won't tell the clear story of the rise and fall of a seminal record label.

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## **Dan Taylor says**

I was a huge fan and proponent of LOOKOUT records, pretty much from the start, thanks to my role as both a zine editor and college radio DJ. Kevin Prested's book is an excellent oral history of the triumphs and travails of the label, though I wish there had been more interview/scontributions from label founder Larry Livermore and Screeching Weasel founder/singer Ben Weasel (not to mention any members of Green Day). But the book succeeds in making we want to go back and revisit some of my favorite releases from the label as well as check out some bands that had slipped under my radar.

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## **matt says**

I thoroughly enjoyed reading every page but that shouldn't be misconstrued as this being objectively good, even for an oral history. I'm hesitant to repeat the points from an earlier review but it hit the mark: this book is way too short/narrow while suffering from a significant lack of access. As a result, topics are brought up as asides that are never fully addressed. There's a much better story to be told here; hopefully someone else takes it up.

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## **Jeremy says**

I'm doing a long review for PopMatters sometime in the coming weeks, but for now I'll say that the day my friend Will drove us to Lexington to buy Don't Back Down was a really good day.

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## **Dale Nixon says**

Punk USA is a mix of oral history and history as told by the author. If it were just the former (like the excellent Bay Area punk history Gimme Something Better) that would have been cool. But it's not.

Prested is an enthusiastic but poor writer with a habit of mixing metaphors - "As Love Songs For The Retarded surfaced, the band hit the ground running. For several years after, not only would the release schedule kick into action, but also the punk party lifestyle would go full tilt."

I wanted to like this book, as Prested clearly loves his subject and spent many hours interviewing folks associated with Lookout, but I couldn't finish it.

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## **Brad says**

As a huge fan of Lookout! Records and oral histories, I've been excited about this book from a few years back when a Facebook group was started while the book was in development. While any fan will enjoy reading about this nuanced subject matter in book form, a critical eye will see the ways this literary passion project falls short:

**(1) Short book length.** The author makes it clear that telling the entire story and detailing each record in the Lookout! catalogue would have been too unwieldy a project as well as not a financially viable one. But that is exactly what I wanted. I wanted Ian MacDonald's *Revolution in the Head* for the Lookout! catalogue, devoting a few paragraphs or several pages to each Lookout! release, held together by the frame story of the labels rise and fall, its influence and the surrounding context. (I wanted this in oral history form, though; when the author devotes space to voice his thoughts on specific releases, his voice never feels authoritative because his descriptions are overgeneralized.) Naturally, the limited number of pages means some of my favorite releases are never mentioned (Were the Hi-Fives only mentioned once? The Bomb Bassets? Common Rider? Dr. Frank's solo album? The music video compilation?), but it also means that the surface is

barely scratched regarding life outside the label, be it how the punk explosion benefitted/gave birth to other labels/sounds (What about other mainstream punk successes like The Offspring and Blink-182? What about the whiny stepbrother of pop punk, New Found Glory and other Drive-Thru Records bands?) or what Lookout! bands did after leaving Lookout!, especially those that later returned. At 191 pages, this is the shortest oral history I've ever encountered. It should have been three times longer.

**(2) The narrow focus.** While the author was clear that his focus would be about the rise and fall of the label (offering loads of extra content on his website) the result was a mostly-oral history that was missing crucial components of an oral history. Part of what makes oral histories fun and interesting are hearing crazy anecdotes, different accounts of the same story, embittered tangents to counter another person's diplomatic response, etc. (While the drama can be fun, it's the multiple angles that I crave.) Instead this book feels like a just-the-facts approach, alternating between a paragraph from the author explaining some bit of history, followed by a quote (often a single quote) on the subject that might elaborate a bit. There are exceptions, but less and less as the book progresses.

**(3) The limited access.** While the interviews the author scored are wide-ranging and impressive, the gaps are noticed pretty quickly. A person wouldn't necessarily expect comments from mega-famous Billie Joe Armstrong or the media-shirking Ben Weasel, but the absence of others like Jesse Michaels, producer Kevin Army or even Avail's Tim Barry are strongly felt. John "Jughead" Pierson's podcast series (Jughead's Basement) is proof that many of the hard to reach figures are in fact reachable, though perhaps this is also proof that this book's author--while his efforts are greatly appreciated!--was not the best to tell this story. (The fact that many of the interviews were guarded further supports this opinion; interviewing a person is more than asking the question, but creating the environment where the best answers will come out.) The biggest absence among those interviewed is that of Lawrence Livermore, who might have appeared early on, but if so disappears quickly.

**(4) The resulting story.** If this document proves to be the final word on the subject--I hope not; I want a longer book and more revealing interviews--it is a shame that a more balanced story isn't told. Because of the limited access and the narrow focus (caused by the book's shorter-than-desired length), the oral history sections are dominated by Chris Appelgren. While Appelgren does not subtract himself from the blame equation, hearing only his side on many business matters is far from the multifaceted view I hope to get in oral histories. With little-to-no interviews with Lawrence Livermore, Molly Neuman and Cathy Bauer, the only side we hear is Appelgren's and the PR guy, whose answers were diplomatic to the point of being mock-worthy in a book about punk rock. Robert "Eggplant" Burnett and Jesse "Luscious" Townley seem to be the voices that were most generous with their time, offering the most visible long view of the label and the Gilman scene, being critical and realistic to counter Appelgren's best intentions and sometimes diplomatic memories. But those two voices are not enough to keep Appelgren's side of the story as coming off as *the* story.

These four points are the book's biggest flaws. Still, the book is a fun read, especially since this period of music is perhaps my favorite. The fact that I was left wanting more did not keep me from enjoying the book.

(view spoiler)

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## Philip says

Author Kevin Prested's new book *Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout Records* is essential reading for anyone that has any interest in the history of punk rock. The book, published in paperback late this past January via Microcosm Publishing,, examines as the title states, the rise and fall of one of punk's most influential record labels. It is a label that was home to greats such as Operation Ivy, Crimpshrine, and even none other than Green Day in its heyday. But as with all great things, it came to an end; an end that was obviously not the way that anyone wanted for a once great institution, but an end nonetheless. Now thanks to Prested, who is also a music journalist, audiences get a first-hand look at what led to the famed label's beginning and eventual sad fall. Readers will especially enjoy this book primarily thanks to the presentation of the story. Prested doesn't try to make his story another run-of-the-mill bio/history style presentation. Rather, it comes across more as a video documentary put into book form versus the other way around. That will be discussed shortly. Another aspect of the book that readers will appreciate is the history lesson provided by Prested. Audiences learn about not just the history of Lookout Records but of the bands that once called Lookout Records home. One more factor worth noting of Prested's book that makes it so interesting is the inclusion of the occasional picture here and there as an added illustration of Lookout's history. None of the photos are the standard publicity photos either. Rather, they are often times more candid shots of different bands and releases put out by Lookout. It's a minor detail, yes. But it still adds its own interest to Prested's book. The combination of those photos, the history presented by the story, and the overall structure of the story makes *Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout Records* a must read not just for those with a love of music history but especially for those with an interest of and love for punk and its roots.

*Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout Records* is a must read for anyone with a love for and interest in not just music history but also for the history of punk rock and its roots. The main reason that it proves itself such essential reading is its overall structure. The overall structure of Prested's presentation is not just another run-of-the-mill bio or history piece. Rather what Prested has done here is taken the road less traveled. Instead of just being a long-winded read—unlike those bios and historical pieces—Prested has used his journalistic roots and crafted a piece that is presented more like the script for a televised documentary than a literary piece. The story and the quotes from Prested's subjects (E.g. former Lookout employee Chris Applegren, Frank Portman (The Mister T Experience, The Bomb Bassets), Scott Conway (Screeching Weasel, Even in Blackouts), etc.) are clearly separated and even specifically labeled throughout each chapter. Speaking of the chapters, the book's chapters are relatively short, ranging anywhere from three pages to five and maybe a little more. In general though, the chapters are relatively short. So readers won't find themselves constantly asking when the chapters are going to end. On a directly related note, the historical reflections on Lookout's history both on the part of Prested and his subjects are themselves so entertaining that even if the chapters were longer, readers still wouldn't have to worry about the story dragging along. The story in whole is that well-written and structured. Considering this, it would be interesting to see if Prested would ever consider turning what is essentially a script into an actual visual presentation to complement his book. Needless to say it would be just as welcome among music lovers and punk fans as his book.

The overall structure of *Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout Records* is central to its success. The road taken by Prested in this book is the polar opposite of its much more well-known counterparts. In other words it isn't just another of those long-winded pieces that relies more on facts and figures than actually engaging the reader. For this reason alone Prested is more than deserving of his share of applause. It is just one reason



that Prested is deserving of credit in examining his new book, too. The history provided by the book makes Prested just as deserving of credit. The story presents not only the history of Lookout Records but also of the bands that once made Lookout one of the biggest names in the music industry before its eventual demise. Prested explains through the course of his story Lookout Records' humble beginnings, its slowly building fame, which seemed to climax at the debut of Green Day's hit 1994 record *Dookie*, and its not entirely surprising (and in turn sad) eventual fall. The thing is that as readers will note early on in the label's history, there was some foreshadowing of what was to come for Lookout. The warning signs were there. They just didn't seem to be entirely heeded. In regards to the history of the bands that called Lookout home, some readers will be surprised to learn that Green Day once called Lookout Records home as did punk icons Operation Ivy, Screeching Weasel, Pansy Division, and a number of others. Readers even get to hear from members of the noted bands as part of the label's history in regards to their own experiences during their time on Lookout Records. The combination of the labels' history and the history of the bands signed to the label together makes for quite the interesting read that true punk devotees will not want to put down. That coupled with the book's overall structure makes it even more of a work that music lovers and punk lovers specifically will enjoy.

The structure of *Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout Records* coupled with the history of the label and its bands makes this book one that is well worth the read whether one is a punk devotee or a music lover in general. They are together only two parts of the whole that make it such an interesting read. Last of note in regards to the book's enjoyment is its photos. While minor, they do play their own part in the book's enjoyment. That is because the photos, much like the overall structure of the book, are not the standard prim and proper publicity photos that one might expect. Rather, the band pictures are candid shots of some of the bands that helped Lookout get its start and vice versa. There are also random pictures of some of the vinyls and cassettes that were distributed by Lookout throughout its life. Audiences will be interested in examining some of the pictures that Prested actually discusses in his book aspects of the albums such as their artwork. Readers, for example, will be interested to learn of the DIY approach taken in regards to the artwork of many of the bands' albums. It wasn't that spit-shined look of so many of today's labels. That approach mirrors the overall approach of Lookout Records in whole in terms of signing and promoting bands. It makes even more interesting the fact that said approach coupled with so much dedication and hard work led to the rise of Lookout Records. At the same time, thinking about that in the same fashion, it is just as interesting to learn that that same approach also contributed to the label's end. Again, that goes right back to the story at the heart of the book. It shows in the grand scheme of things why in fact the pictures included in this book are just as important to its overall story as the story itself and its structure. All three elements together show clearly why *Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout Records* is a must read for music lovers in general and for those more devoted to punk rock and its roots.

*Punk Rock USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout Records* is a must read for any music lover in general and for those whose loyalties are more linked to punk and its history. The structure of the book makes it easy to follow for audiences. It comes across more along the lines of a video documentary's script than a standard, long-winded historical piece. The story that is presented within the book's pages makes it even more interesting for readers. That is because the story focuses not only on the history of Lookout Records in regards to its rise and fall, but also to the history of the band's that once called Lookout Records home. Both histories are balanced quite well throughout the course of the book with the end result being an overall story that will keep readers from wanting to put the book down at any point. The band photos and photos of albums and EPs released via Lookout are just as intriguing of an addition to the overall presentation. That is because in some cases, the photos are accompanied by stories of the DIY approach taken by Lookout's employees to crafting the releases' artwork as well as the DIY approach taken to promote its bands. It shows that Prested was really thinking about that aspect of the book. He didn't want to just throw in some random photos here and there. He wanted them to play their own important part in the whole of his book. The

understanding of that approach also helps readers understand its role later in the label's life, proving yet again the importance of the included photos even as minor of an element as they may seem. The combination of all three elements together proves once and for all why Punk USA: The Rise and Fall of Lookout Records is a book that is a must read for music lovers and more specifically punk loyalists alike. It is available now in stores and online and can be ordered direct online via Microcosm Publishing's online store at <http://microcosmpublishing.com/catalogo...> More information on this and other titles available from Microcosm Publishing is available online at:

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### **Scott Gotham says**

I really did enjoy the book, but it felt like half a story. I think to really know the story of Lookout, you NEED to hear from Larry Livermore, Ben Weasel, Green Day, Jesse Michaels and a lot of other key people who were just missing. I also think the end of the label is covered in about 20 pages, which was rushed.

In the beginning the author talked about initially covering every release that Lookout did but I think I would have preferred that, with a bit of history thrown in

Again, I liked it and it was well worth reading, but it just seemed to be missing something.

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### **Josh says**

While the author clearly has a deep passion for the subject material, strange choices were made in the editing process (cutting short some details, jumping around chronologically, etc.) creating a sometimes - confusing narrative. Pairing this with notable absences in the interview list, and I'm left feeling like this book is a missed opportunity. Which, in a way, is fitting for a book about Lookout.

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### **Ravachol says**

An incredible amount of hard work and research put in to a disjointed and poorly written book, with lots of cool anecdotes from some of your favorite punks. I think Chris Appलगren makes up about 80% of those anecdotes though. He probably should have been credited as co-author.

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## Jon Roig says

Lookout Records meant a lot to me in the 90s... so, when I saw this book pop up on Amazon, I was immediately curious. Here's my takeaway: it's good that someone wrote this book, but this is not the book I really wanted to read. Overall, the author showed real scholarship, wrangling together the story, such as he did. I learned a ton about the label, prompting me to go back and dig out Crimpshrine and MTX albums I hadn't heard in years. Man, I love that stuff.

Falling somewhere between an oral history and a chronology of releases, it's almost as if the book splits the difference and doesn't quite nail either. Threads that are super powerful just get dropped, like the meteoric ascent of Green Day and Operation Ivy. Instead we plot the entire career of the Queers. which, while they're undeniably masters of their craft, it's a little less meaningful to me. Truth be told, I never stopped listening to Dr. Frank / Mr. T Experience and found their story really interesting, but if I'm only going to read a single book about the history of Lookout Records, I'd want to know how those seminal albums like Energy were recorded. What was the reception like... the scene? What happened when those albums blew up and what did that mean in those days?

I get there's only so much you can throw into a book like this and still have it be somewhat approachable, but I would have loved to hear what Kevin Army had to say, among many other people. It seems like that guy was all over those early recordings, more so than even the "stars," the book seems incomplete without his insight. Who is he, anyway?

It ends rather abruptly, would love a "Where are they now?" update...

So, that's to say, good book, glad it exists. It's a solid history of LK releases, pretty well written, fairly compelling.

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