

# MQ

## Mandolin Quarterly

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### Interview with Carlo Aonzo

Photo by  
Julie Chase

*Review of Carlo's latest CD*  
**Traversata - Italian Music In America**  
*with David Grisman and Beppe Gambetta*



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## Interview with Carlo Aonzo

by Terry Pender

Carlo Aonzo was born into a family of musicians in Savona Italy. He studied with his father, Giuseppe Aonzo, and then with Ugo Orlandi as he earned a degree from the Cesare Pollini Conservatory in Padua. He has performed with orchestras and chamber ensembles across Europe, and he's won several awards for his playing, including the 6<sup>th</sup> annual Vittorio Pitzianti National Mandolin Competition in Venice and the special Vivaldi Prize for the best interpretation of Vivaldi's Mandolin Concerto in C Major. In 1997, he also won the 26<sup>th</sup> annual Walnut Valley Mandolin Contest in Winfield, Kansas. Recently, he's been playing and performing with guitarist Beppe Gambetta, and he collaborated on a CD of traditional Italian mandolin and harp guitar music entitled *Serenata*. He has a new recording with Beppe and David Grisman called *Traversata – Italian Music In America* that focuses on the music played by the Italian immigrants who came to the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Carlo in the home of Chaim and Colleen Caron in Manhattan before attending his workshop on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Carlo is a marvelous performer who simply exudes magic when he plays. I had never seen him perform in person before, and I was astonished with his masterful technique, his passionate, emotional playing and his warm, friendly manner. I can't wait until he returns to New York for the release of his latest CDs on David Grisman's Acoustic Disc label.

TP: So what brought you to America this time, Carlo?

CA: I've just come from Steve Kaufman's Mandolin Camp. This is the second year in a row that I've taught there. There were many great mandolin players there like Butch Baldassari and Don Stiernberg. Don and I would like to do some type of tribute to Jethro Burns.

TP: That would be wonderful

CA: I played Jethro's "Reuben Sandwich" on my videotaped concert that Mel Bay produced.

TP: That is a great video – you play so well and with so much passion. We're featuring the theme and first four variations of Antonio Ruggieri's "10 Variations on the Theme La Fustemberg" from your *Classical Mandolin Virtuoso* video as the centerfold music for this issue. The complete score with all ten variations is available from Plucked String in Neil Gladd's book *Three Centuries of Solo Mandolin Music* (Plucked String Editions PSE 029).

Carlo, what books do you use when you teach?

CA: For the workshops, I write out my own instructional materials so that I can hand out individual copies to the students. The type of exercises and tunes that you published in the September issue of *Mandolin Quarterly* is typical of what I use.

I also use Carlo Munier's *Scuola Del Mandolino, Metodo Practico Completo*, parts one and two. It is the most important of the "golden era" methods. He had a very good school of music when he was alive. This is where I start – with Munier.

TP: When you were growing up, what was your first exposure to the mandolin?

CA: My background in the mandolin is very strong because my father is a very good mandolin player and a great teacher. So I heard mandolin music being played at my home from very early on. My father's first instrument was the mandolin, so I also chose the mandolin for my instrument.

My sister and some friends and I had to form a school of music to get my father to teach us so that it was not an imposition. He didn't want to force us to play the mandolin. By forming a school of music, we proved to him that we really wanted to learn from him. So we began taking lessons at home and it was our responsibility to organize them, not my father's. We had weekly lessons at home until it became unmanageable because so many people were coming by in the afternoons to play and study. So we eventually started a mandolin orchestra with my father and another teacher. That was in 1978. I started playing in the orchestra at an early age – when I was 11.

TP: What town is your family from?

CA: Savona, Italy, which is close to Genoa. When my father began teaching me the mandolin, he taught me classical music. That is the main way that the mandolin is taught in Italy. There are no folk music mandolin teachers. There is a folk music revival in Italy, but the mandolin is not a focus of that movement. Mandolin used to be an important part of folk music, but not so much that everyone knows about it. The mandolin has always been an aristocratic instrument in Italy. Even here in the United States, the Gibson mandolin was invented to play classical mandolin music in mandolin orchestras. Only later did the Gibson mandolin become associated with bluegrass and American folk music.

TP: Was your father a professional mandolin player? Did he support the family by playing and teaching music?

CA: No, my father was not a professional musician. It was just that my father was a very good mandolin player – a very forceful player. But he played for his own pleasure. My grandfather played a little bit of guitar, and my grandmother was a great lover of music, especially melodramas and opera. So my grandmother encouraged my father to learn music. And he took lessons from very good teachers.

TP: Were there more classical mandolin players in



your father's generation?

CA: Well, the golden era of the mandolin started from the time of Munier and Calace – the second half of the 1800's – and lasted until World War II in 1934. So he grew up during the end of that period. But I feel that my father and I are direct links to the tradition begun by Munier and Calace. In Genoa, there was a

very big mandolin movement because Nino Catania, who was perhaps the best mandolin player of the twentieth century, lived and played there. And before Nino Catania, there was a very big movement started by Antonio Bazzini, the head of the Milan Conservatoire. So there were several major players, teachers, conductors and researchers that lived near

where I lived and grew up.

TP: Tell me more about Nino Catania.

CA: Nino Catania was the mandolin player who played with Pasquale Taraffo. My partner, Beppe Gambetta, and I have re-issued an old recording on the Il Fronimo label called *Una leggenda della vecchia Genova – chitarrista – Pasquale Taraffo – “O Rêua”* (1887-1937) FR 991. The recordings were originally released on 78's in the 1920s and '30s. Pasquale Taraffo was a guitar star of his era. He played the harp guitar and performed both in Italy and in New York. Andres Segovia was the star of the classical, academic style and Taraffo was the star on the other side. Not really a folk player, he was a fingerstyle player who performed in a concert setting but performed mostly folk songs, opera arias and lighter classical music from Italy. He also wrote many compositions, including “Marcia Americana,” a folk song he wrote here in New York.

TP: Let's go back to when you first started the orchestra. What pieces were you studying and what did the orchestra play? Many of us in America who are studying and teaching the Italian style are very curious about the repertoire. What is a good beginner's repertoire?

CA: To teach the mandolin, my father used tutorials by Giuseppe Branzoli – a very good method that was also edited and published here in the United States. The Branzoli method is the main method used today in Italy for beginners. He has largely been forgotten in the United States. The Calace books are excellent tutorials as well. More modern methods used are those by Silvio Ranieri. These are the main methods currently used in Italy.

I started with the Branzoli tutorial. The repertoire for the mandolin orchestra was taken from the old archives, which are still available. This includes transcriptions of well known pieces from the opera and a lot of original compositions for mandolin orchestra by mostly Italian composers. We also have our local productions by people like Bracco, who wrote perhaps the most famous piece for mandolin orchestra called “I mandolini a congresso.” So we played a lot of very interesting compositions and pieces by Munier, Calace and many others.

In his teaching, my father taught me works originally written for the mandolin. So from the beginning I learned the importance of playing original compositions for the mandolin – not transcriptions of music arranged for the mandolin. Many of our soloists in the past played a lot of violin solos, so we also took care to see what they played and why. But I feel we have to try to take care of our own identity as mandolinists.

TP: Are you acquainted with Ugo Orlandi? He is probably the best-known Italian mandolin player in America.

CA: Ugo Orlandi was my teacher at the

conservatory. He is also a friend.

TP: So after organizing your own school, studying with your father and starting the mandolin orchestra, you attended a conservatory to study mandolin? At what age did you begin studying at the conservatory?

CA: Well, during this time they started a mandolin school at the conservatory, so I started to go there when they started offering this degree.

TP: And when was that?

CA: I got my degree from the conservatory in 1993.

TP: And how many years did you study there?

CA: The mandolin degree is 7 years.

TP: So it's similar to an undergraduate and then a graduate program here in the United States.

CA: Yes, and I studied original music for the mandolin there – not transcriptions. We studied everything from Baroque music to contemporary works.

TP: Did you first meet Ugo Orlandi at the conservatory?

CA: No, I had met him earlier in 1982 in a mandolin course.

TP: I've spoken a few times with Ugo and he was very adamant that I should write specifically for the mandolin and that there is a history and tradition that needs to be learned by composers. He says one should really go through the works of Calace and Munier, write pieces in the earlier forms like mazurkas, solo studies, tarantellas and etudes and really learn the repertoire for harp and mandolin, piano and mandolin, etc. He also says one should master the various period styles before moving on to a more contemporary style of composition for the mandolin. So it makes sense that he would only teach original repertoire for the mandolin – not transcriptions – in the conservatory program.

CA: Yes, he taught us that it is important to have our own identity as mandolinists and that we do not need to copy other instruments. Today we have come a long way toward establishing our own identity and repertoire, but in the past we had to be more careful about this. Now the culture has changed and things are much better for the mandolin.

TP: Tell me a bit more about the conservatory program. Did you also study music history, theory, orchestration and counterpoint? What other courses did you take while obtaining your degree? Or was it more focused on instrumental repertoire and technique?

CA: At the conservatory, we studied all possible styles of music for the mandolin – from Baroque music with basso continuo and the mandolin concertos, which are very, very important, to the most contemporary works. There are many mandolin concertos – many more than there are for guitar and some other instruments. It seems that not many people know about the mandolin concertos. They only know Vivaldi and maybe Giovanni Paisiello. So at the conservatory, we strove to understand all that was important in the history of the mandolin – who played

it and wrote for it and why a composer used the mandolin for certain works – say Mozart in his opera or Vivaldi in his concertos. We studied to discover the background of our instrument. We also had to pass some exams in harmony and music history, as well as a little exam on piano.

TP: So you were at the conservatory for 7 years?

CA: No, the program was seven years long. I was probably only there for about three years.

TP: Was it the type of program where you could pass certain exams and move on more quickly toward getting your degree?

CA: Yes, exactly.

TP: When did you become interested in mandolin music of different cultures?

CA: I discovered other music because of Beppe Gambetta. He played in the square outside of my parents' shop. My parents liked the music and my father bought a recording from Beppe. Later, he brought it to me at home and I started to hear and listen to this strange music. When we got a bluegrass CD, I thought it was just mandolins at first – I had never heard of the banjo before. So I started to transcribe that stuff, thinking it was a mandolin. I drove myself crazy trying to figure out how to play this banjo music on the mandolin! Later, I discovered other types of mandolin music, like jazz, and I found the Jethro Burns books by Mel Bay and started to play some of that music. It was great to discover another type of mandolin music that wasn't classical.

Today, I like to play some bluegrass music and am happy that I can play with big stars of bluegrass and jazz mandolin like David Grisman, Don Stiernberg and Butch Baldassari.

TP: So what happened when you left the conservatory? Did you know at that point that you wanted to be a professional mandolin player – to make your living playing mandolin? And how did you pursue that goal?

CA: I'm still trying to have the mandolin as my first job, but it is not so easy because also I like to enjoy family. If you don't teach at a big institution, you have to tour a lot. So I feel that I'm a total musician, but I also like my job, which is being a firefighter.

TP: So you're a firefighter in your town?

CA: Yes, I am a captain on a boat.

TP: On a boat? So you do rescues and deal with boating accidents?

CA: I do both – we do the normal service on the road, but I also have a degree to conduct boats. The boats are for the seaport – because we have a petroleum industry. But I think that is not so interesting.

TP: Well, I think it is. I don't know of any great mandolinists who are also captains of fireboats. It's the same thing here. Many of our best mandolinists have regular day jobs, or quit touring so much and take on day jobs once they settle down and have a family. So I

think many of our readers are interested not only in the music that you play, but also in the type of life that you live and how you manage your career.

CA: Yes, thank you! To follow up on that last story, I met guitarist Beppe Gambetta and started to understand that we had in our country also a very strong background in the music between the folk and popular Italian music. It was always concert music – theatre music, but not strictly classical. So we listened to a lot of these old recordings and did a lot of research. That kind of music was not written down, but was passed along by ear. So we learned it by ear and then tried to capture and record that kind of spirit and soul in our own playing. The result is the CD *Serenata*, (AMC 1136) on Acoustic Music Records. David Grisman enjoyed this CD so much that he wanted to do one with his company, Acoustic Disc. We of course wanted him to play on the project too, so we recorded a new CD called *Traversata – Italian Music In America* (ACD-47), which should be out by the end of the year.

The CD features Beppe, Dawg and me. We based it on the journey of the Italian immigrants who came here from Italy and started to mix the Italian cultural music with the new American music. So we recorded tunes by Giovanni Gioviale, Rudy Cippolla and Nino Rota – who has the same history but was perhaps a bit more aristocratic when he came here. Puccini and Masgani also came here, so we featured them. There is also music by the first great American mandolin player, Valentine Abt, and guitarists Nick Lucas and Eddie Lang.

TP: I think the music of Gioviale is great. He's a remarkable player, but fairly unknown.

CA: I am in contact with his daughter, Bianca Gioviale, and she told me some nice stories about him. He had immigrated to New York, but then at some point returned to Italy. He had many friends who wanted him to come back to America and he grew tired of his homeland, but by the time he was given permission to come back, it was too late and he died. But he was intending to return to America.

TP: I've been transcribing his music for a new book of Italian mandolin music with guitar accompaniment. My project sounds very similar to *Traversata*. I'm concentrating on the music of the Italians in America – people like Gioviale, the DePace Brothers, Giovanni Vicari, Frank Fazio, Manello e Tripoli and Cusenza Ilardi. I'm also arranging some traditional Italian folk songs and opera arias.

CA: Do you have much information about Gioviale here in this country?

TP: No, I hadn't been able to find out any biographical information about him until I spoke with you. I have the *Italian String Virtuosi* CD on Rounder Records, and I've managed to get copies of most of the 78's he recorded when he lived in this country. I didn't realize he had moved back to Italy.

CA: Global Village has also released a few more of the recordings that he did here in New York.

TP: Yes. I have those as well – *Speranza Perdute* (C603) and *L'Appuntamento* (C602). But other than those two releases and *Italian String Virtuosi* (Rounder CD 1095), there don't seem to be any commercially available recordings of his. Luckily I was able to obtain a few more tunes from private collectors from a few of the 78's that haven't been re-released. The trail runs cold after those recordings – maybe that's when he moved back to Italy. I have obtained two or three pieces of old sheet music for his tunes, which were useful as guides, but they aren't completely faithful to the recordings. I think there are only two or three of them, and I have no idea what the original source was.

Are Gioviale's compositions published or are his recordings available in Italy?

CA: No, he is completely unknown in Italy because he was not in the mainstream of the Italian classical mandolin tradition. It's a shame because his music is truly wonderful.

TP: How did you learn the pieces that you recorded on *Traversata*?

CA: I learned "Costumi Siciliani" and "Idillio Primavera" from the *Italian String Virtuosi* recording. Then, while I was researching Nino Catania, I went to his hometown, which is in Sicily, and there is still a fan club of Gioviale in that town. Its members are very old mandolin players and they sent me a few of his pieces.

TP: When did you actually start playing with Beppe? I know that *Serenata* came out in 1997.

AC: We started in 1994. A friend from Germany wanted to organize a German tour for this folk-influenced classical music – with tuxedos. There was no one else. Nobody was playing this kind of music in formal concerts. At that time it was very new.

Beppe was touring a lot in the United States and was very much searching for his own identity. I thought the music was very good, but I never thought that American people would enjoy this kind of music. When I went to Winfield in 1997 (which was maybe the best time of my life), people really loved the music.

TP: And it was that year, in 1997, that you won the mandolin competition?

CA: Yes, September 1997.

TP: What pieces did you play for the competition?

CA: I played Calace preludios – number 10 and number 2 – the greatest, and I played the "Czardas" by Monti and maybe Munier's "Capriccio Spagnuola, Opus 276." I'm not sure now. I also played one transcription. It is actually a piece that Munier put on his tutorial. It is called "Grand Tremolo," which means big tremolo, and was written for the violin. So it is a piece that is very closely tied to mandolin technique that my father taught to me many, many years ago.

TP: What was the reaction to your playing?

Obviously it was great or you wouldn't have won, but

what you played was so different from the other contestants.

CA: I could have played bluegrass too, but Beppe was not sure I should. I could have tried to get the contest prize playing your American music, but we felt we should risk losing by playing music from our culture instead of playing music that was not representative of what we do.

TP: I think it was absolutely the right thing to do. But I'll bet it was one of the first times that somebody came and really played a different style of music.

CA: Yes. We decided to play our music and see if they liked it. It was so nice that the judges were so open-minded.

TP: Did Beppe enter the guitar contest?

CA: Beppe was a judge for the guitar contest.

TP: So 1997 was your first big year with the release of *Serenata* and winning the Winfield contest?

CA: Yes. I am very happy about teaching here.

The first time I went to Winfield, I had to teach people who wanted to learn without reading music and with another instrument (not a classical round back mandolin). I was afraid that I would scare them because I wasn't teaching bluegrass repertoire. Instead, I was teaching finger exercises and technique. Now I am enjoying the bluegrass people very much. I find some type of exercise that can work for everybody – from beginner to advanced and even if you can't read. And that system comes out of my father's school.

TP: There are a lot of great mandolin players in the United States that don't read music. I guess it's somewhat cultural because bluegrass is really an oral tradition – you play by imitation and by ear and very little of the music was ever written down. Jazz is also similar in that manner – maybe it's something about America.

CA: Well, I think it's very important to do both. In order to be a good musician, you must have both approaches to learning music. There are many classical musicians who cannot play anything without reading music or memorizing music from a score. In learning bluegrass music, many players only want to play by ear. But it is important not to lose all of the history that we have with notation. I invite those who can't read to try to read a little bit and those who can read to try to trust the ear and play just by ear. Sometimes classical musicians feel that music is finished when it is written down because it is there on the page instead of feeling it is finished when it reaches the audience. I like very much the feeling of having an audience during a performance.

TP: At the conservatory, did you study ear training?

CA: Yes, but it was a little thing – an exam that everyone had to pass in the third year.

TP: When did you meet David Grisman?

AC: Well, Beppe and I went to one of David's

concerts with our friend John Carlini. He introduced me to him first. David said to Beppe, "I've got your yellow CD (*Serenata*). Your mandolin player is wonderful!" And Beppe said "It's him!" and pointed to me. When David turned to me – it was a nice moment. That was about two years ago.

Then I discovered that he had gotten my CD of Paganini music. It was interesting because I got to play a Genoese mandolin on that recording – the type of mandolin that Paganini played before he took up the violin. It has six double strings. The three lower strings are metal and the upper three courses are natural gut. I played a beautiful period instrument built by Cristiano Nonemacher from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is tuned like the guitar – a little guitar. So Grisman had this CD, which is maybe not so easy to find.

TP: And when did he approach you about making a recording together?

CA: Right then. Before he left, he told us to come to his studio whenever we wanted. So we thought about it and we called him and he said, "Let's do it." We recorded three times last year for the *Traversata* CD.

TP: So that CD has just come out and now you're recording your solo CD there as well?

CA: Yes. It has been delayed a little bit because David has moved from Marin County to Petaluma. But now the studio is back up and running and I have been back there to work on the solo CD in the new place. This CD will be solo Calace music – some preludes and some concert solo pieces.

TP: You also have a videotape called *Classical Mandolin Virtuoso* that was produced by Mel Bay. It provides a great chance for people to see as well as hear some of your solo work. You play several pieces by Calace and Munier on that tape, as well as one selection with Beppe Gambetta on guitar.

CA: Yes, that came out in 1999. It is a very straight forward tape of me playing some of my solo repertoire. Just me and the camera.

TP: I love that tape. There are no fancy lights or camera angles and you can really see what you're doing. You play so well on it. It must have been difficult to make that tape without an audience. Many of the pieces you play are extremely difficult, and you can really see your concentration, your passion and your musicianship. It has a great selection of tunes, and the performance is fabulous.

Tell me a little bit about the instrument that you play.

CA: My instrument was built by Gabriele Pandini – Franco to his friends. He is a maker in Ferrara, a city close to Bologna. I like it very much. It was modeled on the very old Italian culture with some new techniques on the shape and dimensions and the position of the chains inside.

TP: The chains? You must mean the braces inside

the body of the instrument.

CA: Yes, chains or braces. This kind of mandolin is called a Neapolitan mandolin. The Vinaccai family began building this kind of mandolin around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We have some instruments that have survived from that era. The main difference between the Neapolitan mandolin and others that came before it is the bridge and how it holds the strings. On our mandolin, the strings are held at the end of the instrument with a free bridge. On the oldest mandolin (that maybe came from the lute), the bridge was glued on the top and the strings were pulled through the bridge and stopped there. On our mandolin, the sound is made because the strings are pushing down the bridge. The others use a different kind of power. The free bridges were influenced by Persia, by the saz. The old kind of mandolin like the Vivaldi mandolin is more from the lute. In fact, the Vivaldi mandolin is also a soprano lute. Stradivarius also made mandolins like the Vivaldi mandolin that are from the lute family. The Genoese mandolin is also from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. You have one here at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

TP: What other brands of mandolins are popular with the Italian players today?

CA: There are not many companies in Italy today that are building mandolins of concert quality. Just Calace, Pandini and maybe Gabrielli in Milano, but mostly Pandini and Calace. I prefer the Pandini. I like very much the tone of my instrument. It is between the Calace and the Gibson. The Calace has more tone on the highest notes and I like more tone on the medium treble notes and the bass. In fact, Grisman liked it very much and has gotten one like this one. Whenever I play for famous people they always tell me that they have never heard an Italian mandolin like mine – Roland White, Tut Taylor, Tony Trischka and David Grisman. When they hear it for the first time, they are always very impressed by the sound of it.

TP: Tell me about who you perform with in Italy.

CA: I have built in Italy a mandolin orchestra. It is a regional orchestra. And I have also started to play with a quartet of my pupils, playing classical music. The quartet plays original compositions by people like Munier and Calace, but I also very much like to play old classical music like Hayden, Mozart and Bocherini. We get this music from our old archives and from the old people like Nino Catania.

TP: Are there other groups that you play with?

CA: I am the mandolin player in the orchestra of La Scala in Milan for the opera. I am also the artistic director of the International Festival of Varazze. I put on a mandolin festival every year in December – this will be the fifth year now. This year, it will begin on December 5<sup>th</sup> and will feature Mike Marshall and Darol Anger in a concert with a symphonic orchestra and a Christmas concert. In the past, players like Gertrude

Tröester and Katerina Lichtenberg have performed.

TP: Have you thought about publishing a book of your transcriptions of Catania and the arrangements that you used on *Serenata*?

CA: Yes, I might. There seems to be a growing interest in this type of music.

TP: Will you be conducting more workshops in the United States?

CA: Yes, I am planning to do a three-day workshop in Manhattan in the spring. And then I'll return to teach again at Steve Kaufman's Mandolin Camp from June 24<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup>. It will be a little bit of everything I do, and I'll probably give some private lessons as well.

TP: Well, you can count on seeing me there.

CA: Ciao.

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A partial discography:

Carlo Aonzo, Beppe Gambetta and David Grisman  
*Traversata - Italian Music In America*  
ACD-47  
Acoustic Disc  
P.O.Box 4143  
San Rafael, CA 94913

Carlo Aonzo  
*Classical Mandolin Virtuoso Video*  
Mel Bay Publications, Inc.  
#4 Industrial Dr.  
Pacific, Missouri 63069-0066



Beppe Gambetta with Carlo Aonzo  
*Serenata*  
AMC 1136  
Acoustic Music Records  
POB 1945  
D-49009 Osnabrück, Germany  
Phone: ++49-541-71 00 20  
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Pagannini  
*Integrale per Ammannorlino & Chitarra francese*  
Sandro Volto and Carlo Aonzo  
Arion Records  
Paris, France, 1998

Pasquale Taraffo  
*Una leggenda della vecchia Genova "O Rèua"*  
"il Fronimo"  
Edizioni Suvini Zerboni  
Galleria del Corso4, 20122 Milano  
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*Speranze Perdute* (C603) and *L'Appuntamento* (C602)  
Italian Mandolin  
Global Village  
P.O. Box 2051  
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*Italian String Virtuosi*  
Rounder CD 1095  
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