by Hân Pham I all photos courtesy of the designers

# Zero Waste:

# All Meaning in Ecolesion



The thoughtful act of everyday design teaches us that though we may be a consumer culture, there is room for a reverence of something greater than ourselves.

here is a reason for everything. From the grandiose to the minute, everything around us has been carefully thought of by someone else.

There is a reason I write this story. It is because of a man, who speaks little and laughs much: my father. By day, he easily works 70 hours per week designing computer disc drives for the hungry technology market. He does his work and always goes home after the sun has already set, and each time a new product is launched, the world has something that works faster and better.

I wonder if, at night, he transforms into that boy he once told me he was—the barefoot boy who chased a Red Cross truck that rumbled across the dirt roads of his village and leapt on board, disappearing for weeks as he traveled the countryside, helping the sick and fallen of war. This is the story that lights him up and one which he keeps tucked away in a secret place.

Businessman by day; idealist in his dreams. There is more to my father than the products he creates, and there is more to the products we use than what we initially see.

We may not see the designers behind the things we touch, wear, play or use every day, but they think of us—the way our hands move around an object; of our days and nights; our needs, our wants. And, so, with this careful mental diary inside their mind, these unseen designers write sonnets through the things they create for us: a perfect dial, rare and advanced materials, a mechanized function to set free our time.

The thoughtful act of everyday design teaches us that though we may be a consumer culture, there is room for a reverence of something greater than ourselves.

Aric Mayer, the founder of the design firm Aidan Olive, wrote of one tradition uniting a reverence for life with that of nature, "I am also moved by the traditional Japanese relationship to wood. It used to be that if a Japanese family had a daughter, they



would go out and cut down a tree, rough mill the lumber and put it up in their eaves. However many years later, when that daughter was ready to start a family, they would call a master carpenter who would come and make furniture for her out of that same wood that was cut at her birth. This attention to material as having an important role in our own life cycles is beautiful."

The following three-part story, a diverse look at a handful of designers who are striving to make our world last a little bit longer and our lives a little better, is an ode to the passion of uniting values and work, and of taking the time to think of a world beyond ourselves.



## The Surfer and The Storyteller: Y Studios, LLC



Studios is headed by Wai-Loong Lim, an internationally recognized designer who has won awards across the globe. Their products can be found in everyday retailers like Target, and serve customers from head to foot (clients include Joe Boxer, Johnson and Johnson, Keen Footwear and Motorola). Their multitiered services hope to connect to both clients and consumer passions on a global level.

Lim's passion is surfing. Looking at him, a towering man with a mane of black hair not yet dulled by the grey of time, we see that it makes sense.

Surfing takes a certain sense of reckless adventure and patience. You develop an unwavering endurance of things that might make others shrink away: early mornings, the notoriously fierce cold of the Northern Californian Pacific Ocean, the body-carving action of paddling your way to the perfect point—to wait.

And this brings us to the other reason why being a surfer makes sense for Lim—his patience. Surfers wake up early and work hard to simply wait. The perfect wave does not come at every moment, but you keep watch and you get better so that when the opportunity comes, you take it.

This is how Lim and his firm, Y Studios, tackles design—with the laid-back zen of the surfer, who knows his terrain blindfolded, watches the weather re-

ports like a hawk, and hones his body and mind for the effort of making the free careen across the churning surface of a wave seem effortless.

They design everything from dish sets to wireless sound systems. Along with his co-founder, Lisa Yong, who heads up the research arm of Y Studios, and creative lead George Schnakenberg, Y Studios takes a firm stance on what they do.

"We don't tout ourselves as a green company," Lim said to me, just minutes after saying hello.

"Maybe we're the wrong firm for you to interview."

He is affable but adamant, offering me chai and sitting back, comfortable to pass up an opportunity to speak about himself



Workplace design for Vessel, Inc., by Y Studios

and his work if it means labeling himself something that may be merely trendy.

In contrast to the allure of volatile fads, their design philosophy is an enduring one.

"We serve our clients by designing products that fit their needs. It's not about trying to be 'green' or using recycled plastics. It's about quality for us. If we design a quality product, then it may stay with the consumer longer, and stay out of landfills."

He sums up their approach in four concepts. "We believe in beauty, simplicity, utility and meaning for everything we design."

Both he and his business partner Yong agree that eco-friendly design is more than a passing trend; it's built into both the product

itself and how consumers live their lives.

"If a product is well-designed, then it can become part of your life for a long time, and that's eco-consciousness, in a way. It's a very basic meaning, but it's an important aspect of what we do."

### The Bigger Picture

When asked about their transformational moment in realizing the direction of their life's work, they spoke about learning to think big by feeling small.

Yong, head of the firm's research arm Y Vision and the storyteller to Lim's surfer, recalls a film called *Baraka*, a documentary by Ron Fricke and Mark Magidson—a film with no plot, no actors and no script. Instead, the film shows some of the best and worst parts of nature and human life.

"It is a collage of life, from Indians bathing in the Ganges, to chicken factory workers in the American Midwest. It's all held together with this mesmerizing music. It's a movie that makes you think about your place in the world," Yong recalls.

"It shows you the scale of life. It reminds you that you are not invincible," adds Lim.

This quietly humbled awareness makes them design things on a human scale, as they think of new ways to gently shift the way we approach life and the things in it.

One of their simplest products is an elegant solution for an everyday act: eating.

"The Workplace dish set we co-designed for Vessel encourages reusability and reduces the use of disposables while



eating at the office. A lot of the parts are multifunctional. For example the silicone placemat can also be used as a heat pad for removing your meal from the microwave as well as forming a sleeve to store your dish set in. The utensils are used as a latch to lock the sleeve in place. The bowl and plate can be used to cover each other when you are heating food," explains Lim.

"This isn't green in the sense it's made from green materials," Lim says, as he starts unfolding a sample set, turning out bowls and cups, unfurling the sleeve into a heat-resistant mat, "but it's green in its use. We wanted to circumvent a worker's dependence on Styrofoam, the fast food lunch. We wanted to create an inviting lunch set for someone to use at work that can be many things—a container, mug, a placemat. It wasn't about competing for Tupperware but thinking outside the Styrofoam box to create something durable, useful and beautiful."

According to Lim and his team, design is a grand experiment in rethinking the problem and offering a solution, not just in a better product but also in how we use it in our lives.

One of the studio's key projects, Sonos—the first wireless, multiroom digital music system allowing you to play all your favorite music all over your house while controlling it all from the palm of your hand—demonstrates this approach to be beautifully executed with a subtle design that places a high value on seamless integration with your life.

Good design isn't about flashiness or bragging rights. It's about something that



Y Studios "Workplace" design for Vessel

works so well, you don't even notice it.

"Music is something that you can choose to have in every room. When we designed this, we wanted it to fit in every room, so we kept the color and form very simple. We paid attention to the materials," Lim says.

"It's robust," snapping his fingers smartly against the casing, "Lift it."

He geeks out for a minute, spinning the box and pointing out the materials—metal here for better conductivity, perforated plastic from bottom to top there for better performance.

Yong says, "We wanted to create an object of desire, but retain the simplicity and subtlety. It's beautiful, but you don't have to show it."



Lim nods and states, "We design it so it lasts. It has simplicity, meaning, utility and beauty. So you can choose to buy it and display it, or buy it, forget about it, and let it work for you in the background of your life. Although every other audiovision system is obvious, this one doesn't need to be center stage even though it can be."

### The "Green" Word

Y Studios' office is located in an eclectic, vibrant section of San Francisco called Bernal Heights, where dogs and new parents mingle amidst funky coffee shops and intimate bookstores with live bluegrass bands on weekends. It is a funky neighborhood with milliondollar views that encompass everything from the Bay Bridge to the Golden Gate.

For years, the residents on this slightly rebellious little outpost of the city refused to have their streets paved, preferring to keep the quaint beauty of uneven dirt roads and



wildflowers. It is a strangely charismatic place that stands in stark contrast to the shiny newness of the steel-and-glass highrises being built just a few miles away.

There is a reverence for things old here, for things being given the opportunity to grow old enough to take on character and history.

As it makes sense that Y Studios is run by a surfer, it makes sense that the firm is located here, in this place bursting with beauty and teeming with culture.

"Here in the bay area, there is more exposure to new ideas than in Asia, and you're encouraged not just to talk about it. You do it. Here, for example, you have signs telling you to recycle. In Asia, if you told someone to recycle, they would say, 'What are you talking about?' They're less prone to naming it 'recycling'—they do it naturally. They call it reusing things," explains Yong.

Lim agrees. "Recycling is a western term; in Asia, where sometimes there's not that much access to a stream of newer things, we tend to learn to retrofit and reuse. It's about the longevity of something's use—you can keep using it traditionally or find new ways to use [them]. I remember my mother washing plastic bags and reusing them until they fell apart."

Lisa chimes in, "I remember a neighbor who used to carefully open noodle packets by snipping just the end, so he could reuse it. We might do it because we're frugal or because we have a reverence for the life cycle of things. In Singapore, we had someone called a 'garang guni,' literally a gunnysack man, who used to come and collect our used goods. He would call out 'Garang! Garang!'

and offer to take away anything: old newspapers, bottles, whatever you had."

"It's a historical and cultural awareness about reducing your impact; it's not something that's driven by the government or a green movement. In China, you have old men and women who collect empty plastic bottles because it's lucrative. They will actually follow you and wait until you finish your drink and point to your bottle when you finish, to collect and reuse or recycle it."

Yong, whose career it is to translate the emerging cultural trends and help companies develop culturally appropriate business strategies, takes a long view.

"This green movement might seem like

a new idea, but it's not. Maybe it's more a certain nostalgia—the ability to return to an item and use it over and over. To be able to see more clearly your place in the world, slow down, think and perceive your impact."

Y Studios is not a green company in the new meaning of the word; it is something that is buried deep inside the way they have always perceived things. Although their company is built on thinking in new ways, unlike most companies stuck in the rat race, they believe time is on their side. Letting ideas marinate and mature, paying respect to the traditions that came before us, valuing quality over flashiness, is at the core of this growing company in the

middle of a neighborhood that stands at the cusp of the old and the new.

Lim closes his notepad, which he has filled with sketches of new ideas during our interview, and walks me to the door. On the way, he points to the couch that he and his wife Yong finally chose, after ten years of careful consideration.

"We're not couch people," he says offhandedly.

He bids me good-bye, and I can't help but feel his notebook is calling him to experiment and invent new ways of thinking that move us forward while honoring where we've been.

To learn more about this designer please visit: www.ystudios.com

# The Bullfighter: Knoend Design Company



n Knoend's Web site, all of the staff pictures feature smiling headshots. Ivy Chuang, the ecodesign firm's founder, is riding a mechanical bull. One-handedly.

Chuang is the mind behind Knoend, a new ecodesign company dedicated to bringing sustainable solutions into design practices and bringing affordable, smart, environmentally responsible products to the everyday consumer.

It's a tall order to build an entire business on ideals, especially in an industry fronted by men, but it's one she doesn't shy away from.

One of her colleagues, designer Jane

"The world does not need another chair, so the challenge in designing a chair is to design something that causes a new way to see the world, makes you sit in another way."

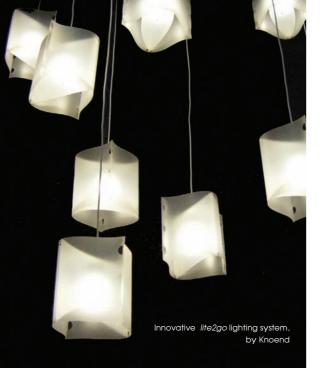
Rabanal, remembers meeting Chuang. "Here's this woman who had a dream, and she's doing it. It wasn't bogged down with bureaucracy. It was refreshing to see a company about ideals."

Chuang elaborates, "Knoend was created precisely because no other companies were entirely focused on ecodesign. Look, there's a ton of inventions already out there. The world does not need another chair, so the challenge in designing a chair is to design something that causes a new way to see the world, makes you sit in another way. That's the designer's dilemma. You want to create something that is beneficial to the world, but when you create something, you also add to the obsolescence cycle [of things eventually being discarded]."

"Knoend is about a new start. It's the opportunity to start from not just an idea but an ideal, and go from there. The hardest thing is to follow your ideals, but without them, it means nothing."

### The Round Table

In the legend of King Arthur, there are the Knights of the Round Table, a group of honorable men who were entrusted the fate of the kingdom. They meet at a mythical round table that has no head or foot, to signify the equality of the members. At this table there is, however, one seat—the siège périlleux ("dangerous chair") which was reserved by Merlin for the knight who would one day be successful in the quest for the Holy Grail.



The designers of Knoend seek a modern day holy grail: zero waste.

According to Wikipedia, "Zero waste is a philosophy that aims to guide people in the redesign of their resource-use system with the aim of reducing waste to zero. Put simply, zero waste is an idea to extend the current ideas of recycling to form a circular system where as much waste as possible is reused, similar to the way it is in nature. Zero waste is not just another form of recycling; it involves changing things at the production level. Zero waste depends on the redesign of industrial, commercial and consumer goods."

According to environmental entrepreneur Paul Hawken, "Waste is too expensive; it's cheaper to do the right things."

Knoend agrees. Their business model is built around the notion that products can be designed from the beginning to have a continuous life-cycle.

Chuang's eyes glint with a mission.

"80 million tons of waste from packaging alone goes toward municipal solid waste in the U.S. In contrast, there's just 40 million tons of waste from durable goods," she says, citing a 2006 study by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "That means there's twice the amount of waste from packaging than from the actual product."

"We wanted to create a product where the impact from packaging is reduced. With *lite2go*, the packaging is the product," she says proudly.

Lite2go is the company's premier product, a multifunctional lighting system that converts packaging into a lampshade in 30 seconds, all with nontoxic, biodegradable or recyclable materials.

"It was the fastest design process I've ever come across. It was three weeks. Then just six months to source and produce the work," says Chuang.

Rabanal, one of the co-designers gor *lite2go*, recalls, "We would make paper models in a really close, intimate space. It was literally putting all our heads together around one table."

This statement conjures up an image of knights wielding pens and X-acto knives instead of swords, spurred on by a quest for sustainability instead of glory.

Design may be considered by many as an exercise in aesthetics, but for these designers, it is an exercise in meaning.

### The Designer's Dilemma

Knoend just signed the Designer's Accord, the treatise for a global movement which insiders often refer to as the Kyoto Treaty of Design. It is a call to designers to manifest design with regards to societal and environmental impact.

The Accord, which was conceived by designer Valerie Casey as she sat on a jet shuttling between a client that was the world's largest delivery service to a client that was one of the world's largest paper manufacturers, has a code of conduct similar to the Knights' code of chivalry.

It includes these tenets: Do no harm; communicate and collaborate; keep learning, keep teaching; and instigate meaningful change.

"In the male-dominated design world, it makes sense it would be a female who steps up and says we need to do something [about the way we are impacting our world]," Chuang muses.

The survival of her company will depend not only on the strength of her ideals, but her marketing plan and who, exactly,

will take up arms beside also on her.

"People have approached us to carry our line in places like online discount outlets, but we want the places selling our products to be directly in line with what Knoend stands for. Discount outlets create a mentality of 'buy it for less, and just throw it away after you use it' ... we're not willing to do that just to sell our product."

Although the line is now carried in 10 different states, all of their retailers are small, boutique shops.

"We need to find a distributor," she says.

"[Knoend] really is a new start about how we relate to the things we consume or own that is based on ideals. We want to work with distributors who also have those ideals, and we're willing to wait for the right opportunity. But what's the end goal? Exposure or values?" she asks.

"We want more environmentally friendly products to be accessible and affordable to as many people as possible, but there's a conflict of identity if, for example, our products are sold by Wal-Mart, where there are a lot of labor concerns."

We spend a few moments talking about the shopping behemoth, and the many controversies surrounding it. I take notes after notes on the list of reasons why Wal-Mart is not a sound partner for the eco-driven business, and it occurs to me that maybe this shouldn't be in print. Knoend, is, afterall, a small seedling and Wal-Mart could be a big business partner.

I ask her if I she'd like me to not mention her comments on Wal-Mart, in case she does ever want to work with them, and the answer comes without hesitation. "No. Write freely."

Chuang explains, "I believe in absolute authenticity and complete transparency. We will admit our faults and our ideals at the same time. We're just starting out, and we do the best that we can do. And that's where you start."

### The Creative Sandbox

In her company picture, Chuang is a bullrider, but the way she wears her values— like a brilliant red cape—makes me think of the passionate fearlessness of a bullfighter—except it isn't for show. This appears to be

a theme as I speak with these designers. Design may be considered by many as an exercise in aesthetics, but for these designers, it is an exercise in meaning.

I wonder where the steel of this perspective originated. Rabanal provides an answer: from imagination and necessity.

"My awareness about the environment is culture-driven; it's just the way I live and think. It started when I was a child. When I felt I didn't have what I wanted, I learned to be creative and innovative," she says.

"When I was a kid, I loved music and I always wanted instruments to play—but we couldn't afford them. So I had to figure out ways to experiment with music by making my own instruments. The first was a snare drum I made with a tin can and coins attached all around it. I hit it and it made a snare pop, and I thought, wow, that really does sound like a snare drum!" she laughs.

"I made guitars out of tissue boxes and rubber bands and motorized trucks out of a thread spool, toothpicks and rubber bands. I even figured out how to modify this design to make a motorized raft. We had a fishpond, so I made a harpoon from a bamboo backscratcher, a clothespin, a needle and thick rubber bands."

The Designer's Dilemma of wanting to create something beneficial for the world, but at the same time reduce the impact of the products created, is a complex one.

Her clear memory of the components of each of her inventions is amazing.

"When you're a kid, the idea of invention is easy—it was simply mixing entertainment and needs. It's taking what you have available and making the most use out of it, which is what/where I think I am today with design."

The Designer's Dilemma of wanting to create something beneficial for the world, but at the same time reduce the impact of the products created, is a complex one. It seems as if Knoend's designers, with their specific business niche, can often find themselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place. And it seems they take it in stride, instead choosing to settle down and make a seat out of the rock, because they know it's a place they are willing to be.

"We want to collaborate. We want to be as collaborative as you can be, and invite people to make that change in thinking," says Chuang.

"Startups are hard. It's the hardest things anyone can do. But it's also the most rewarding thing I have ever done—to conceive of something and make it a reality."

To learn more about this designer please visit: www.knoend.com



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### The Quiet Rebel: Malcolm Fontier

here are pictures of Malcolm Fontier: in a simple white T-shirt and blue jeans, lounging next to a sleek motorcycle and even sleeker messenger bag; riding a dirt bike across a mud-splashed backroad with his fiancée Gabrielle; on top of a mountain, relaxed and smiling.

Fontier doesn't sweat the small stuff.

When his college classmates were groaning over calculus, he spent class time doodling, confident he could eventually transform his pastime into "legitimate sketches that someone might actually pay money for."

He was right—after college, he received several job offers and after much deliberation, opted for the job closest to the beach.

It is perhaps this unhurried openness to taking the road least-taken—and enjoying it—that is the foundation to the success of Malcolm Fontier, designer of the line of streamlined accessories by the same name.

### The One Person for All

The simple ease with which Fontier lives and designs belies the complexity of his upbringing.

Fontier was born into a multi-cultural family to a Chinese American mom and European African dad. With family on four continents, Fontier quickly learned to be immune to the stress of holiday travel while gaining a unique, global outlook.

He shares a passion for design with his father, Leon Fontier, who is the creative mind between the elegant pewter brand Fontier Designs. Leon was born in the Congo and educated in Belgium, before moving to Central New York to develop his artwork, which is now a part of the permanent collections of the Yale University Art Gallery, the White House collection and many private collections.

The boy who was nicknamed "Howcome Malcolm" because he always wants to know why found himself being a child-protégé inventor, using his dad's craft workshop to develop "world-changing" inventions like the fishing rod holder for his dirt bike. "It was a huge success with the neighborhood kids," Fontier recalls. His curiosity never fades.

### The Adventurer

Today, Fontier continues to focus on "redesigning neglected product areas, striving to merge 'funk' and function in the objects and interiors that appeal to other adventurous go-getters." Fontier is constantly discovering new inspirations, and continues to fuse his honest design style and egalitarian personality in all of his work.

"Admittedly, growing up on a farm in upstate New York to hippie parents of African, Asian and European decent, in a house they built by hand, is a bit out of the ordinary. But this slightly non-traditional setting probably set the stage for my current beliefs and the direction of our company."

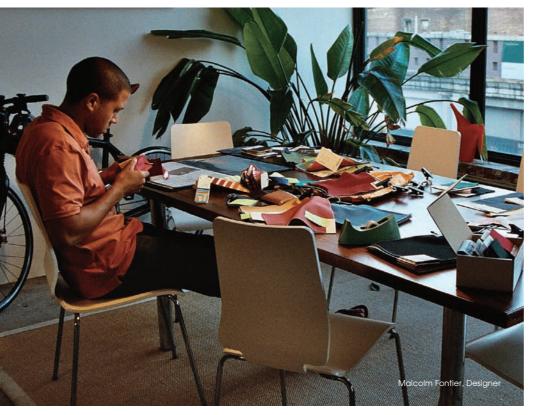
Taking a cue from his adventurous parents, who settled on their upstate New York farm with plans to live off the land, Fontier has learned to turn chance into inspiration.

"Well, the living-off-the-land part didn't really work out that well when they realized they were not cut out to be farmers. But, they did hang on to a lot of the original ideas and continued to garden and hunt, and when they shopped it was mostly organic food."

He lets out a little secret, "To be honest, I hated the homemade granola and cheese. I wanted Snack-Packs, Doritos, and white bread like the rest of the kids!"

"But now, as an adult I appreciate the good stuff much more and my thinking is more in line with my mother's when she was shopping for us 30 years ago. So, when we started sourcing materials for our line, it was a little like shopping for food—you can choose between Fruity Pebbles and something a little more natural and friendly."

The man who doesn't sweat the small stuff became committed to the idea that small things actually can add up—in a good way.



"We believe that to really make a difference it takes changing the small little things that we do and buy, which all add up—and this is a lot easier to do when responsible products blend into your current lifestyle easily. So, with our product line and business we make the choice of vegetarian and more earth-conscious materials as a foundation of the brand ... but we keep great design and functionality as the face. We hope that we can be a part of people buying great products that are made responsibly as the norm rather than a few consumers seeking out a few brands that scream green."

It was an easy choice for Fontier and his company to take the offbeaten path, but it wasn't simple to find alternative ecofriendly choices for his products.

"The natural choice for high-end bags and wallets is leather, but since I have always been turned off by the nasty things that you see in commercial farming, why would we want to use leather? As we started looking at nonleather options, [we initially considered] PVC (polyvinyl chloride) because it is the cheapest, easiest nonleather material to find, but it gets tons of negative press as a possible carcinogen and a nasty material to process and recycle. So we looked a little further. We settled on PU (polyurethane) for a leather alternative on all of our products."

Their commitment to great, sustainable design took them to all four corners of the globe.

"The idea for the line that you see here was hatched over drinks in France, sketched out on long plane flights, researched in Hong Kong and refined on the beach in Brazil (not to mention the countless, less glamorous hours contributed at the office)," illustrates Fontier.

"It has taken a lot of time and effort to find materials that would make our line just right and still allow us to feel good about what we are doing, but in the end it's really rewarding."

The quiet rebel, who often prefers to let his work speak for him, glows as he

remembers some of the most rewarding moments of his journey.

"We have changed others' thinking about the viability of going animal and/or earth-friendly. A few of our vendors had doubts when we told them we wanted to create a line of high-end accessories but we wouldn't use leather. They agreed to give it a shot and are now fully convinced of the potential."

With the launch of their new line, Fontier looks toward creating a broader ripple of change.

"Now the exciting part is that we get to put our products in the hands of buyers and we think we will get the same reactions—and, along the way, perhaps change many more people's perceptions of earth-conscious products and eventually we play a part in changing consumers' buying habits."

"How-come Malcolm" still feeds his curiosity through his company, demonstrating you don't need to compromise looks or your conscience. The designer who won the hearts of the neighborhood kids by giving them the ability to bike and fish, believes you can find adventure anywhere by connecting with people everywhere—what is uncommon to someone here is common to someone else.

"Anytime we travel it influences and inspires us. We always try to get off the beaten path and meet the local people to get a real feel for the culture and country. We usually travel very modestly and avoid the swanky tourist-oriented destinations."

"When you travel and see people living with much less than we have here in the U.S., yet sometimes seemingly better off, it affects our design work. It keeps things in perspective and reminds us not to be too materialistic even though we are working in a very materialistic industry."

His motto is simple and direct: Don't just venture, venture boldly. Each day is a new adventure if you find it in the small stuff. \(\cap \)

To learn more about this designer please visit: www.malcolmfontier.com



Mojito, by Malcom Fontier





