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POP LIFE.

With 'Henge,' Gus Dapperton Sheds Light On The Human Condition



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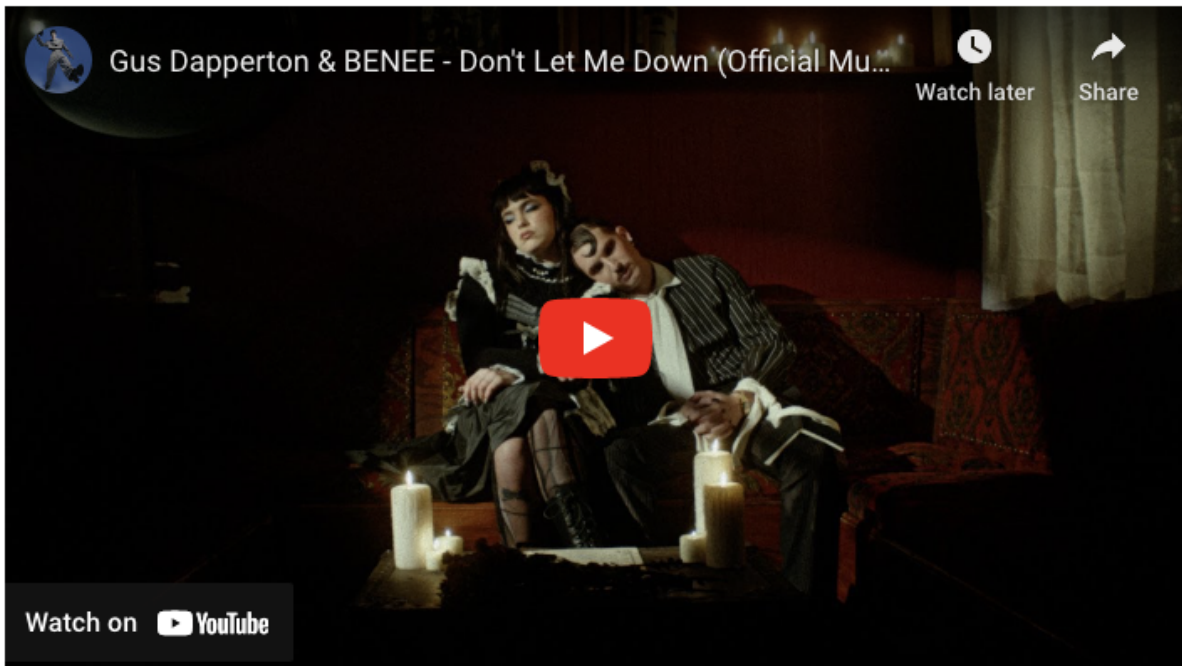
Gus Dapperton started sprinting. It was the fall of 2020, at the tail end of an all-night, chaotic adventure that would only happen in New York City, when he got off the train in Brooklyn and was met by the beaming sun beginning to rise over the skyscrapers. He didn't know why his instinct was to run upon seeing the sun, but in doing so, his body cued his mind to explore what he had been carrying inside.

“Sunrise, tearing down the old / In a moment's time, all is set in stone / Sometimes I like to run the road / Though the light moves fast, I still race it home,” Dapperton sings on the acoustic-based, lilting “Wet Cement,” which he penned in the summer of 2021, becoming the first song for *Henge*, his major-label debut album out via Warner Records on July 7.

“I wrote down song names ‘Sunset’ to be the intro and ‘Sunrise’ to be the outro before I even had ideas for the songs,” Dapperton tells Uproxx via phone in late June. “The lyrics are loose enough to paste your own experiences in and relate, but from my point of view, there’s a really strong concept of this person who’s lost in this New York City underworld. As the sun sets, they get trapped in this underworld and have to make it home before the sun comes up.”

Dapperton’s muse became the annual phenomenon known as “Manhattanhenge,” when the sunset perfectly aligns with the street grid of New York, New York.

“Gus is the only person that I’ve ever walked into a session with and had basically a PowerPoint presentation of the concept of *Henge* — the album, the vision, the arc, and the story,” says Ian Fitchuk, Dapperton’s *Henge* co-producer and two-time Grammy winner for his production on Kacey Musgraves’ *Golden Hour*. “That was amazingly inspiring for me to just want to find a way to keep that momentum going. I wish more people would walk in the studio, like, ‘Here’s the world I’m creating; you want to be a part of it?’”



It took about a full year for Dapperton to gain PowerPoint-level clarity. He was trapped in early 2020, as everybody was suffering through the indefinite aura and unpredictability of the initial COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. “Supalonely,” his double-platinum earworm with Bennee, was going viral, charting on *Billboard*’s Hot 100, Radio Songs, and Streaming Songs charts, but Dapperton felt abandoned by who he thought he was and the tightly held beliefs atop which he’d built his identity. He questioned everything.

“I always believed that quality would prevail and good art would prevail. At that time, I didn’t think that it mattered,” Dapperton says.

Throughout his Warwick, New York adolescence, Dapperton was painfully introverted. His parents set up a camera in front of the television when Dapperton and his sister were young children, and they would watch themselves dance, allowing him to fall in love with music within the comforts of his home. Luckily, he could also discover GarageBand without having to venture outside of his comfort zone. He wasn't one to attend parties or go out of his way to hang out with anyone, but an eighth-grade class project forced him to collaborate with his peers. (They won, and their song was played on a local radio station.)

"I was just making a song today, and that's when I feel the most happy — just by myself making a song," Dapperton says. "Because of my career, I've had to be extroverted and sort of train myself. I get this nervous, butterfly-like adrenaline rush from socializing with people. That was something I worked on for so long. When COVID happened, it erased all the work I had done with that part of me."

Orca, Dapperton's September 2020 sophomore album, helped him relearn that part of himself and reinforced that he was never wrong for believing his music mattered.

"My sister, my family, and my partner — my sister particularly — had listened to those songs a lot, and [my sister] told me that they were keeping her sane and whatnot," Dapperton says. "After I released the first song, 'First Aid,' I got a lot of people reaching out to me with things that they'd never said before about my music. In the past, people were just really excited by the sound and just me. With these particular songs, people were interested with the lyrics and how it was making them feel. You know, a lot of people saying that it was saving them in this time."

Dapperton took that reassurance and ran with it. *Orca*, in his eyes, orbited around "mental health" themes, but the subject matter remained vague enough to be universal. *Henge* is even more universally resonant because it finds Dapperton completely unafraid to explore and subsequently expose his vulnerable nuances.

“Everything on the album [represents] the battle between seeking out chaos, freedom, and change, and then also having that part of you that wants safety, routine, and monotony,” Dapperton says.

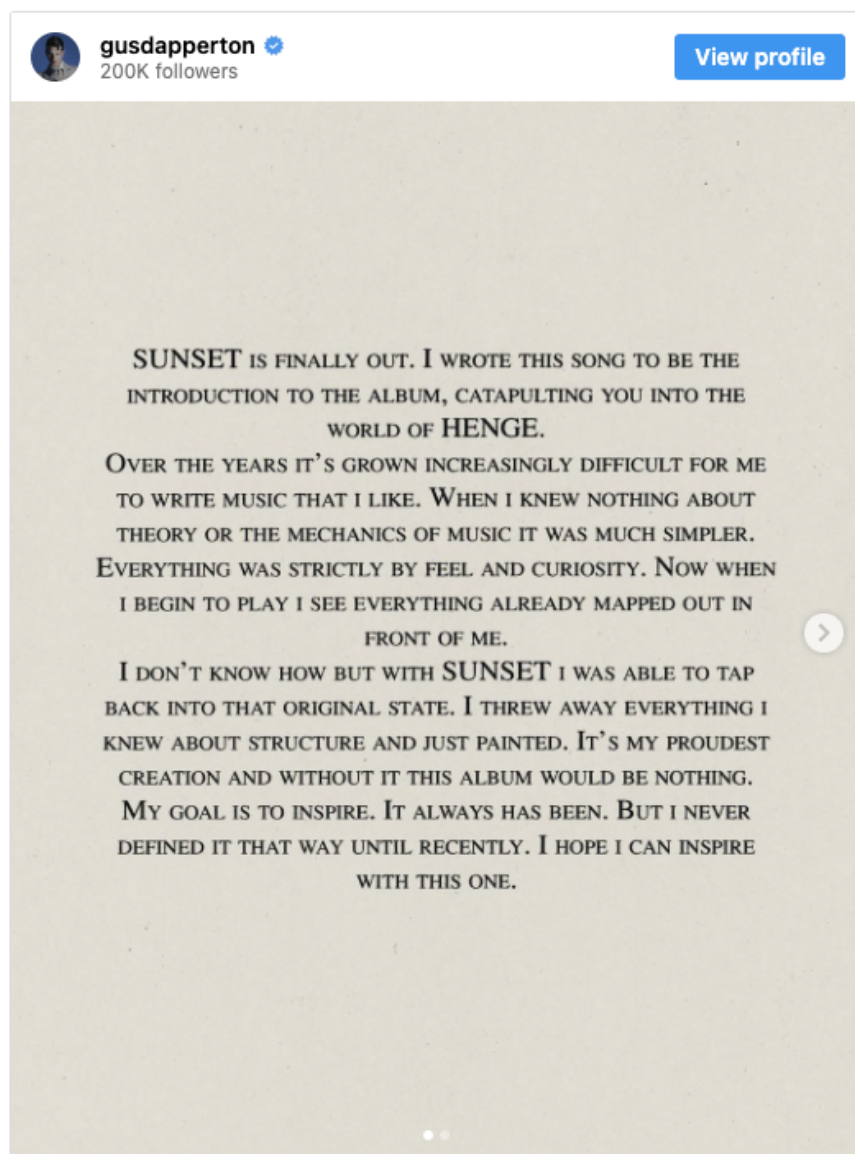
The frenetic, synth-fueled “Midnight Train” captures the chaotic confrontation of daunting dichotomy (“Midnight train / Fire and ice in my veins”), while “Spent On You” more tenderly reveals Dapperton’s longing for someone to call home (“I’d dig my own grave if it meant we could make it right”).

“I love that [*Henge*] is a cohesive thought,” Fitchuk says. “‘Sunrise,’ ‘Sunset,’ when he described to me the feeling of walking through the city and the images that he had in his mind, creating it, it’s not just like, ‘Here’s a pile of random songs that I think are cool and hopefully people will like them.’ It’s actually much like how you would watch a film or read a book. There’s a contour and a flow to it.”

Fitchuk continues, “Because of the way that music is being consumed, to me at least, it seems it’s a little bit more rare to be able to pull that off and have an album that you really feel like, from top to bottom, keeps you engaged and tells a story.”

Dapperton holds his fans’ attention by appealing to multiple senses. Each of his projects has featured him with a different hair color and style on the cover, an intentional through line that *Henge* continues.

He started with a whiteboard, pinning photos and styling a moodboard, with the sonic palette as the engine. Eighties synths are scattered across *Henge*’s 11 tracks, which is reflected by Dapperton’s ’80s-style suits worn during this era. “Sunset,” the atmospheric, immersive *Henge* opener, plays in swelling synths that drop into a shuffle beat-like guitar and swing beat, resembling jazz from the 1920s prohibition era.



The image shows an Instagram post from the user 'gusdapperton', who has 200K followers. The post features a blue 'View profile' button in the top right corner. The main content is a text-based announcement on a light beige background. The text is centered and reads: 'SUNSET IS FINALLY OUT. I WROTE THIS SONG TO BE THE INTRODUCTION TO THE ALBUM, CATAPULTING YOU INTO THE WORLD OF HENGE. OVER THE YEARS IT’S GROWN INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT FOR ME TO WRITE MUSIC THAT I LIKE. WHEN I KNEW NOTHING ABOUT THEORY OR THE MECHANICS OF MUSIC IT WAS MUCH SIMPLER. EVERYTHING WAS STRICTLY BY FEEL AND CURIOSITY. NOW WHEN I BEGIN TO PLAY I SEE EVERYTHING ALREADY MAPPED OUT IN FRONT OF ME. I DON’T KNOW HOW BUT WITH SUNSET I WAS ABLE TO TAP BACK INTO THAT ORIGINAL STATE. I THREW AWAY EVERYTHING I KNEW ABOUT STRUCTURE AND JUST PAINTED. IT’S MY PROUDEST CREATION AND WITHOUT IT THIS ALBUM WOULD BE NOTHING. MY GOAL IS TO INSPIRE. IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN. BUT I NEVER DEFINED IT THAT WAY UNTIL RECENTLY. I HOPE I CAN INSPIRE WITH THIS ONE.'

“Those two eras, the sounds were dictating the aesthetic in my head. The hair I’ve been doing is almost like a flapper style. The makeup is more eighties, I think,” Dapperton says. “I never was a good singer or a good guitar player. I just had something that I wanted to say, and so I would use all the tools around me to do it. I don’t really consider myself a musician as much as a creative director, or like a master of none — doing all the things, not being an expert at any of them but having a direction and an opinion on where to go with all of them.”



Dapperton’s acute self-awareness was refreshing for Fitchuk. It was a seamless entry point to evolve Dapperton’s sound and reposition him within the pop prism without compromising his artistic integrity.

Dapperton grew up on traditional pop stars like Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, and The Beatles, while also loving old-school hip-hop fixtures like J Dilla, Madlib, MF Doom, and The Notorious B.I.G. In high school, he especially keyed in on the all-encompassing approach of Odd Future and Tyler The Creator. What they all had in common was a mastery of songwriting and a reputation for producing albums with “no filler tracks.”

“I think everyone, despite how cool they are or whatever, has this subconscious desire for melodies to be catchy, simple, and good,” Dapperton says. “There are a lot of things I don’t like about pop music, but I think there is an art to a really good song, and at the end of the day, I’m trying to make songs that are powerful.”

“Phases,” a poignant reflection of a relationship gone wrong, was the first song Dapperton played for Fitchuk when presenting him his *Henges* PowerPoint. From there, Dapperton and Fitchuk wrote and recorded intermittently across one year. They traveled to Los Angeles for a day or two. Fitchuk flew to New York to spend two weeks working from Dapperton’s apartment. Dapperton returned the favor by going to Nashville, where Fitchuk resides, to finish “Homebody,” a reclamation of Dapperton’s introverted tendencies with the impossibly melodic hook, “Homebody, I’m a / Nobody, but you’re / Somebody to me.”

Dapperton has fond childhood memories of chanting Taylor Swift songs with his family in the car. His dad cranked the volume — “Love Story” was a staple — and inhibition went out the window. When asked which *Henge* song possesses the most potential to be belted in the car, Dapperton chooses “Homebody.”

Fitchuk was drawn to another track while stuck in the car after testing positive for COVID-19 on the day they completed “Horizons,” an ascending, piano-driven anthem about shedding past afflictions in favor of boundless hope.

“I just felt myself dying, sitting at the piano as the day went on. The next day, I’m finding a rental car and driving 16 hours back to Nashville with COVID. I’m jamming that song over and over and over, hoping that it makes the project,” Fitchuk says. “But in that moment, all that you can ask for is that it excites you and inspires you.”



Different people claiming different tracks as a favorite is, arguably, the truest mark of a great album. Dapperton will witness that play out in real time across his headlining *Henge Tour*, a long-awaited embrace. The US leg is scheduled to begin on September 14 and wrap on October 21 before the European leg extends from October 31 to November 8.

“My holistic life mantras all come into my music a lot,” Dapperton says. “You have to experience pain in order to experience pleasure, and the inconvenience of expressing yourself — the reward is greater than the risk. I think all my music just revolves around feeling pain and then making the songs as therapy and a release of tension.”

Dapperton didn't back down when his world came crashing down in 2020, peering around scary internal corners and marinating in an uncomfortable underworld to uncover the value in traversing a rubble path if it leads to something beautiful.

"All we ever had on paper / Was a wild imagination / All we ever had to wager / Was my wild human nature," Dapperton sings on "Horizons."

With *Henge*, all bets paid off.