

ISAAC DUNBAR

Isaac Dunbar knows full well that when you sign up to be a pop artist these days, you sign up to be an influencer. Someone who shapes culture. At 16, Dunbar has thought a lot about what he wants to put out into that culture and the impact it can have. He has thought a lot about how he wants people to feel — mainly for them to know they are not alone, the way listening to artists like Lady Gaga did for him growing up as a mixed race, artistic, “flamboyant” (his word) kid — the son of a Liberian father and an Italian mother, in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. And it seems to be working. Since Dunbar posted his breakthrough song “pharmacy” on Soundcloud in 2017, followed by the EP *balloons don't float here* earlier this year, his DM feed is filled with kids telling him how much his music has helped them through dark times.

“Young people are struggling with how they look,” Dunbar says. “They struggle with not wanting to get out of bed. With seeing how pretty that model looks on Instagram. They struggle with feeling like they’re not skinny enough. With not having abs. With the pressure of not knowing what they want to do in life. With school, writing papers, college tuition, being broke. Having tough parents. They struggle with their sexuality. With drugs, nicotine addiction, alcohol problems. They struggle with the same things adults do.”

Describing his music as “self-aware alternative-pop,” Dunbar makes lush, synth-driven music, which he writes, performs, and produces himself. He offers listeners a shared experience. He knows anxiety is born out of isolation, so he takes great care to ensure that his lyrics connect on the deepest possible level. The effect is made even more compelling when paired with Dunbar’s upbeat, sing-song melodies and potent hooks. Case in point, Dunbar’s latest single “body,” which captures the insecurity of hating your body and knowing it’s not healthy to hate your body. He sings: “You know how I feel about my body / All the ripples and tears / Why can’t I see me in the way that they all do? / All that I see is years of girth and hours of misery.”

“I don’t one hundred percent love my body,” Dunbar admits. “When I look in the mirror, what I see is chubby fifth-grade me. My friends can tell me I look fine, but I don’t feel it. And I want people to know that about me, so they have permission to be vulnerable as well. It’s really important for self-healing. So I wrote this song about body dysmorphia. Music is such a powerful tool when you’re talking about something dark. Even if you don’t offer a solution to that problem, at least you can be a person who sympathizes with other people who have the same problem.”

Dunbar’s other songs are equally personal. The hip-hop-influenced “fruits of the spirit” is about someone in his life he feels is unwilling to accept him as he is and wants him to change. “It’s like someone is overfeeding you so much about how you’re living the ‘wrong’ lifestyle that you throw it all up and become the complete opposite of what that person wants you to be,” he says. “I wrote it because for a long time I struggled with thinking that I had to be different and this is me emerging from all those lies.” Another song, “onion boy,” is a lesson in what goes around comes around. “It’s about a

challenging person who makes fun of everyone because he's insecure himself and he covers it up with stink," Dunbar says. "You know how when you peel the layers of an onion, it makes you cry? That's when you get to the stink of things. If you treat people badly, you're going to get treated badly."

Dunbar has gravitated toward music to soothe himself ever since he was little. (Maybe it's because his dad lulled him to sleep with Al Green records.) Growing up in the town of Barnstable on Cape Cod, Dunbar was bullied for being different. "I never fit in," he says. "I tried, but it didn't work. So when other kids were hanging out with each other, I was nine years old and cocooned in my bed scouring the Internet for new music." Always having loved to sing, he taught himself to play piano and keyboards from YouTube tutorials. When he was 10, he noticed that Lady Gaga had tweeted a list of producers she worked with on her album *Art Pop*. One of them was French house producer Madeon. "I saw that he had this program called FL Studio," he recalls. "I illegally downloaded it at a Barnes & Noble in Hyannis, Massachusetts. And that's how I taught myself to produce music." At 12, Dunbar began posting his own songs on Soundcloud and slowly building an audience. Two years later, one of those songs, "pharmacy" was reposted by the blog We Are Going Solo and managers and record labels began hitting him up.

Since then Dunbar has signed with RCA Records and relished Zane Lowe premiering "pharmacy" on his Beats 1 show. "I was in a culinary class at school when my manager texted me and told me to go on Apple Music. I screamed and the teacher took away my phone," he recalls with a laugh. Dunbar also hit the road for a tour with Norway's Girl in Red, where audiences came early to witness Dunbar's kinetic, self-assured live show and sang along with every word. He has continued to win over fans and critics with tracks like "blonde," "mime," and the keenly observed "freshman year," which earned him coverage in FADER, Ones to Watch, The Line of Best Fit, and other tastemaker blogs, each praising its heart-breakingly authentic account of high-school bullying and teenage anxiety. The song encapsulates the misery from its opening line: "F you Joe, and Casey Knight, and even Becca, ew!" before Dunbar turns it back on himself: "You caused some hell on my daylight / I did it back to you."

"Even though 'freshman year' is saying, 'F you,' it's also acknowledging that I might be in the wrong as well," Dunbar says. "I did ask their permission to use their names, even though they were my enemies. I feel like that song shows growth from when I wrote it at 14, to now when I realize that maybe it wasn't the best thing to do."

But it was seeing the audience sing all the words to "freshman year" during a show in Seattle that really crystallized the effect his music has on people. "I literally started crying," he says. "I could cry again thinking about it. In that moment, people were reflecting back to me what had happened to them in the past. I could see it when they sang those lyrics. And it was amazing."

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