

Dapper Dan

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“How Dapper Dan Contributed to Connecting the Gap Between Music & Fashion”

Daniel Day, known as Dapper Dan, is a Harlem fashion designer who gained popularity during the late 80s and 90s. Gaining this popularity through his creativeness in restyling and reworking traditional name-brand clothes while enforcing streetwear and a gangster identity, Dan began to set the trend as a significant member of the fashion community. (Romero 2012 p54). Fashion pieces originally garnered towards a certain class in America's society, became pieces others felt comfortable wearing through Dan's revision. Dan's rework of his pieces allowed for society to further note how one's identity should be the essence of one's fashion style and beliefs.

During the time of his reign in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, fashion during this time was heavily defined through hip hop culture, girl bands, black families depicted on television shows, and more concerning the Black identity. From the prints shown to be worn in iconic Black television shows such as *Moesha* to African colors and textiles used by celebrities such as Queen Latifah, these fashion trends became the movement of American society during this time. (Flanagan 2020). Through this historical context, society today can understand exactly how and why Dapper Dan was able to use these Black trends as inspiration towards incorporating designer wear into the pieces he made that fit that Hip-Hop lifestyle illustrated. By diving even deeper into the history of Dapper Dan, one is exposed to the effects segregation had on the lives of Black Americans who either had to flee from the South or, like Dan and his family, stay in Harlem because racial inequality did not allow for them for these groups to have access to better communities. (Adegoke 2021). Thus, while America had an appreciation towards the using the Black lifestyle as a fashion trend, the same country refused to give this group the economic and financial equality one deserved as an American citizen. By understanding this context of the 20th century, one further understands just how difficult it had to have been for

Dapper Dan to choose this field as a hustle as the remainder of society already targeted him simply because of the color of his skin.

As briefly stated, Dan's pieces were typically hip-hop and gangster life-inspired which was the trend of American society during the 1980s and 1990s, and thus, many celebrities during his reign who also related to these same cultural views and traditions felt comfortable with Dan's pieces that incorporated these factors as inspiration while using luxury designer prints. (Romero 2012 p83). It was during an educational program to Africa, from his school in NYC, that opened Dan's eyes to the world of fashion, allowing Dan to further pursue fashion when he came back in the States promoting the promotion of his fashion store and other activities in its relation. (Cooper 2017). However, instead of jumping into the fashion world without his own sense of who he was as a fashion designer, Dan recognized who he was as an individual due to his surrounding circumstances—a Black man living in American society. This led to Dan incorporating the music he enjoyed that addressed the struggles of racism and inequality in the world, thus leading Dan to maintain revision pieces that illustrated street and gangster overall. (Romero 2012). This further led to Dan beginning to design and have a hand in the styling of many Hip/Hop artists who trended during the era of the '90s.

However, just like any other field in society today, revamping another brand's design and logos to be used in differing ways than originated can also be noted and described as a legal issue rather than a breakthrough to new methods in the world of fashion. This negative belief garnered towards the concept of revamping can be seen as it occurred towards Dan during his years as a designer who focused on recreating using brand names. Dan's specific use of using name brand logos such as Louis Vuitton on the clothes he created, was done considering seeing the expressions and crowds that would form when individuals did wear these luxury names in their

community. (Dan 2019). Upon taking up these logos and incorporating them into his pieces to create more happiness within his community, in 1992 Fendi had raided his future boutique and Dan faced lawsuits concerning his reworked logo prints. (Safronova 2018). The boutique, as shown in the primary image below, showcased various designer pieces Dan had recreated to comfort the everyday individuals in American society. From Dan's style alone in the picture, one sees as comfortability was a major factor for Dan during this time and one can further relate that to Dan's love and comfort in Hip-Hop music specifically. However, while these bigger brands illustrated that while Dan did recreate his pieces, it was nonetheless used with the brand's own clothes, thus violating varying brand copyrights suggested by the companies. (Gallagher 2018). This resulted in Dan shutting down his boutique and thus, falling back into the shadows of a world that had shown not to accept his modifications as his own creative pieces themselves. It was not until 2018 Dapper Dan made an appearance once more in the world of fashion.

Dapper Dan's significance towards the world of fashion, with his incorporation of cultural factors as major forms of inspiration, can be seen even further in his acceptance under the diversity council under the Gucci brand. (Gallagher 2018). Back in 2018, Gucci had been noted to incorporate one of Dan's fashion pieces in a piece Gucci promoted as their own original work. (Gallagher 2018). Once this was analyzed and figured out by various Black communities and others within the fashion industry, it led to outrage over Gucci using Dan's creation without giving him any credit whatsoever. This led many in society to look at Gucci as out-of-touch with various social uprisings and movements occurring in various African American communities that were garnered towards better treatment of African American people overall in society today. Though it was shelved as rumors from the Gucci staff suggested that the stealing of Dan's own idea was to be considered as a homage to the designer, Gucci knew the backlash that was

awaiting them for the months that followed and thus teamed up with Dan for a capsule as well. They released a limited-edition book, “Dapper Dan’s Harlem” and made Dan the face of the #GucciTailoring campaign. (Schneier 2017). Gucci furthered to ‘support’ Dan by providing the funding needed by dan in terms of fabrics and more for his own designs. While some in society might see Dan’s employment and funding as a diversity hire, when one educates themselves on the significance Dan has had throughout his years for the meaning of fashion today, one can further understand how Dan was a necessary hire by the Gucci team in more ways than diversity.

Dan’s eye for incorporating a meaningful message socially, maintaining his own identity with his music taste, illustrates to society how one can not only relate their sense of fashion to varying cultural factors one experiences and believes in, but also take pride in that fact publicly through clothes. While incorporating the cultural aspects of Hip-hop, such as a sense of streetwear and comfortability in one’s skin, Dan furthered in using his fashion to change the viewpoints of society overall. (Brown 2017). One understands this fact through Dan’s allowance of individuals to wear stylish clothes that were not over-priced or garnished towards the wealthy of society. Here, Dan illustrated to the American society that one did not need old money status or White skin to enjoy a sense of high fashion, but rather, simply an understanding of one’s own identity overall which was not promoted in the fashion world before Dapper Dan.

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Dapper Dan contributed to not only building the connection of the gap between music and fashion through his incorporation and use of his identity concerning the Hip-Hop and Rap genre of music he adored throughout his life but also in the way others in society understood individual fashion sense. While the hype in fashion during this time was illustrated by one

owning name brands and/or being sexy and classy, Dan showed society the need for one's own identity and comfort to be one's major factor when piecing together one's outfit overall. As shown in the primary source, Dan chose an outfit he created that illustrated comfort over standing out excessively which was praised and adorned by public media instead. His love for Hip-Hop allowed Dan to notice the need for clothes that made people both happy and stylish rather than just focusing on the latter. Upon seeing how that occurred as these individuals wore name brands such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci, Dan took it upon himself to use his skills as a designer to incorporate it for members of his community that could not afford the real thing. One might question why a designer would do so in today's time, however as addressed in parts of this paper, the environment that surrounded Black Americans left them suffering economically, socially, and financially. Leading one to be unable to attain an LV bag their White schoolmates might have had. Thus, through maintaining his own identity by gaining inspiration from the music he loved to listen to and who he was as an African American, Dan was able to educate how music, alongside other cultural factors, helps one identify and find a fashion sense that is true to oneself while incorporating a sense of luxury.

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