

**Gus Englehorn**

**The *Hornbook* Album Story**

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glam flamboyance, ‘80s indie transgression, ‘90s lo-fi weirdness—into an alien transmission from the future. Now, if you stayed awake during high-school history class, you might remember that a hornbook is an early-education tool for children dating back to the 15th-century—a wooden paddle inscribed with the alphabet, numbers, and the odd Bible verse. (Think of it as the beta version of your iPhone’s notes app.) “When I was writing these songs, it felt like I was making a children's book—every song was a little story,” Englehorn says of the title concept. “But it also felt like a little bit of a cipher for our whole world.”

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*The Hornbook* was largely written in Maui but recorded in Montreal with producer Mark Lawson, whose C.V, includes one of Englehorn’s personal touchstones: *Who Will Cut Our Hair When We’re Gone?*, the gloriously ramshackle 2003 debut album from Montreal cult heroes The Unicorns.

“The Unicorns are a huge influence,” Englehorn enthuses, and certainly you can hear a similar childlike sensibility on *The Hornbook*, from the Dr. Seussian wordplay in his songs, to the ever-present mischievous glee in his singing voice, to the sandbox experimental approach he shares with his musical (and matrimonial) partner, drummer Estée Preda.

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**Gus Englehorn**

**The FULL *Hornbook* Album Story**

If **Gus Englehorn** didn’t exist, one of his songs would have to invent him. A former pro snowboarder reborn as a nomadic psych-pop prophet, Englehorn has lived a rollercoaster life that reads like one of the fantastical fables that fill his songbook. Back in January 2020, right at the dawn of the pandemic, Englehorn released his first album,***Death & Transfiguration***, whose opening jangle-punk sermon, “My Own Paradise,” proved to be a timely mission statement for a moment when we were all forced to retreat into our own private sanctuaries for months that felt like years. But even as life has since opened up again, Englehorn is still firmly situated in a world of his own madcap design. While his journey on this terrestrial plane has taken him from his native Alaska to Quebec to Utah to Portland to his current home (for the next five minutes at least) in Hawaii, Englehorn is ultimately a citizen of Planet Gus, an uncanny universe created through a big-bang collision between serene beauty and apocalyptic chaos, populated by folkloric heroes, creepy characters, and oversized insects alike.

With each successive record, Englehorn’s world-building process has become more elaborate and ambitious. Where 2022’s ***Dungeon Master*** walked the tightrope between DIY discord and prog-scaled storytelling, his third album, ***The Hornbook***, magically transmutes the entire history of 20th-century rock ‘n’ roll—’50s golden oldies, ‘60s garage spunk, ‘70s glam flamboyance, ‘80s indie transgression, ‘90s lo-fi weirdness—into an alien transmission from the future. Now, if you stayed awake during high-school history class, you might remember that a hornbook is an early-education tool for children dating back to the 15th-century—a wooden paddle inscribed with the alphabet, numbers, and the odd Bible verse. (Think of it as the beta version of your iPhone’s notes app.) “When I was writing these songs, it felt like I was making a children's book—every song was a little story,” Englehorn says of the title concept. “But it also felt like a little bit of a cipher for our whole world.”

***The* *Hornbook*** was largely written in Maui but recorded in Montreal with producer **Mark Lawson**, whose C.V, includes one of Englehorn’s personal touchstones: *Who Will Cut Our Hair When We’re Gone?*, the gloriously ramshackle 2003 debut album from Montreal cult heroes The Unicorns. And after wrapping up the primary recording sessions, Englehorn and Lawson actually did some 11th-hour tinkering in the loft studio belonging to Unicorns drummer Jamie Thompson, who contributed some guest soundscaping. “The Unicorns are a huge influence,” Englehorn enthuses, and certainly you can hear a similar childlike sensibility on *The Hornbook*, from the Dr. Seussian wordplay in his songs, to the ever-present mischievous glee in his singing voice, to the sandbox experimental approach he shares with his musical (and matrimonial) partner, ​​drummer **Estée Preda**.

Heck, the first sound we hear on ***The Hornbook*** is Englehorn and Preda launching into the old nursery-school standard, “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” But Englehorn swiftly refashions that traditional worksong into a chain-gang chant of his own: “One-Eyed Jack,” a two-part saga about a mythical messianic deity that swiftly transforms from a dusty folk stomper fit for working on a railroad into a veritable runaway train of a song, as Preda steps on the accelerator while Englehorn steers us off the rails. “I never have a plan,” Englehorn admits. “I just came up with that riff, and liked playing it real slow and sludgy. The whole time I was imagining people working on a railroad, all singing a song together as they're hammering. But then I thought it was too slow to be like that the whole time, so I did a time change. The song starts out like a worker on the railroad, but then when it starts going fast, it feels more like he was going through another dimension, like in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where there's all these colors and time is warping... eventually, it kind of all came together.”

The word “childlike” is often used as a synonym for “carefree,” “cheery,” and “playful,” but ***The Hornbook*** reminds you of what it’s truly like to be a child, when you look upon the world with both awe and confusion, and start to understand that life isn’t all puppy dogs and balloons, and that evil exists beyond the make-believe confines of storybooks. “That's the zone I work in a lot: between innocence and the loss of innocence,” Englehorn says. The stargazing glam hymn “The Itch” floats in that liminal space, with lyrics that blur the line between underwater fantasia and real-world paranoia. “I started imagining a person sinking to the bottom of this riverbed,” Englehorn explains, “and as they sink, they begin to sing this mantra: 'I am a jewel on the riverbed!' It's someone who's *not* at peace trying really hard to convince themselves they are at peace, through some sort of meditation exercise.”

Neither a comment on the state of our planet nor a purely escapist reaction to it, ***The Hornbook*** is more about viewing life through an augmented-reality headset, pulling IRL references into its phantasmagorical scenery, whether Englehorn is feeding lines from the medieval English folk song “Scarborough Fair” into the nervy post-punk propulsion of “Thyme,” or using a friend’s intoxicated late-night encounter with a talking shrub (no, really) in Portland as the basis for the doom-folk meltdown “Metal Detector.” Within the latter track’s nightmarish milieu, you’ll hear a surly spoken-word cameo from Englehorn’s childhood hero, **Butthole Surfers** guitarist/producer **Paul Leary**, who agreed to mix the album after Englehorn asked his label rep at **Secret City Records** to cold-call him on a whim. “I remember in the 90s, I was standing outside of a Sam Goody in Alaska, and I heard ‘Pepper’ for the first time, and I was just so blown away by it,” Englehorn recounts. “Paul was super-cool and nice. Working with him was like a dream come true.”

But while ***The Hornbook*** gamely inherits the acidic aesthetic pioneered by the Butthole Surfers and fellow Austin eccentrics like Roky Erickson and Daniel Johnston, the album also charts Englehorn’s continued growth as a songwriter and craftsman. As a counterweight to the album’s impulsive energy, the valorous medieval epic “Roderick of the Vale” (named after Englehorn’s dad—who, for the record, is not a sword-wielding knight who lives in a valley) is a patient, slow-building anthem that exhibits a newfound grace and grandeur, while the blissfully bizarre “Sweet Marie” suggests Syd Barrett on a ‘70s Laurel Canyon retreat. But there is perhaps no better advertisement for Gus Englehorn’s modus operandi than “A Song With Arms and Legs,” a surrealist lullaby built from the premise that songs are not simply an artist’s creative output, but actual living organisms that are always changing shape.

“It’s so funny,” Englehorn observes. “I'll be listening to the radio and Oasis will come on, and I'll be like, 'Oh my God! How do they do it?' So then I'll look up the tabs and I'll study the song... but then all of a sudden, two months later, I've got something weird like 'Metal Detector,' and I'm like, 'Why!?!' I want to sing pretty and write the perfect song where everything makes sense... but it eludes me!”

So when we say **Gus Englehorn**’s songs are “childlike,” we mean they’re literally like children—they grow and evolve in unpredictable ways that their creator never intended, developing minds of their own. But through these tumultuous transformations, new ways of seeing the world open up and naivete gives way to wisdom. In that sense, **Gus Englehorn**’s version of ***The Hornbook*** isn’t all that different from its 15th-century educational antecedent—it’s a vessel for mind expansion and spiritual growth, albeit with a bit more reverb.