

# POP / There's no business like the PR business

Angelo Ellerbee can change your image. Ask Mary J Blige. Ask Michael Jackson. Michael Odell meets the make-over man

- **MICHAEL ODELL**

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"When I walk into a meeting I want that situation to revolve around me."

Professional image-maker Angelo Ellerbee has a battery of attention-grabbing strategies. He's charming, articulate, immaculate. If that doesn't work he tries a little arm-tugging earnestness. If that fails there's always option three.

"I was once in a record company meeting and I noticed that things were being discussed but their eye contact was way over there some place. So I just said 'Hey, could you guys just pay me a little respect. I'm here okay!' " Ellerbee gives lessons to the stars in getting noticed and plans to export his services to London starting in March. Business is booming for the former dancer, who has developed a niche in America's black music industry, charging \$250 an hour for his services.

"Black artists have been getting ripped off in the music industry for years," he says. "If they want longevity in this business then they have to learn how to work in a white world and respect themselves. I got my inspiration from the way Berry Gordy used to groom his stars at Motown. I want to carry that tradition on."

He estimates that 30 per cent of rap and ragga artists are illiterate, coming from "ghetto" life to a white-dominated music industry and media. "It's embarrassing for them, it's embarrassing for me and it's embarrassing for the record company when one of these artists enters a television studio, sits in front of the autocue and has to tell the producer, 'I'm sorry, I can't read'."

With every client, Ellerbee begins his 24-part programme with a covert video operation.

"If it's a gangsta rapper I ring them up and say 'I'm coming over'. We eat the food, we watch the movie and I say, 'Did you enjoy that?'. Then I say 'Okay, here's the book'. A couple of weeks later I ask them questions about the differences between the movie and the book so I can assess what their comprehension is like."

His pioneering work on celebrity moodiness worked its magic on soul singer Mary J Blige. The self-styled queen of hip-hop soul was an instant sensation with the release of her 1992 album, *What's The 411?* However, black British audiences were outraged when they found themselves on the wrong end of her attitude when she played her first London show in June 1992. Arriving late, she sang three songs, disappeared for a 40-minute interval and eventually returned for another brief stint before being booed off. In the aftermath she cancelled all interviews and received hate mail at her London hotel.

Three months ago, Ellerbee was called in. His task was to turn the bruiser from Yonkers into a pussycat. "We had to work on some personal problems with Mary," says Ellerbee, wincing with empathy. "We had to look at some of the reasons why people might have not liked her."

Blige is now a confident and personable interviewee, admits the London debacle was her fault and has even written a song about it on her new album. Meanwhile Ellerbee says his work with her is ongoing and he still takes a day-to-day role in her life.

For Ellerbee there is no scandal, no hemorrhaging of public confidence that the right amount of balloons and streamers cannot fix. Last year he was brought in by Michael Jackson as allegations of sexual misconduct by Jordan Chandler threatened to engulf him. Ellerbee persuaded the star to receive the Children's Choice award from thousands of New York schoolkids.

"He didn't want to do it. I said, 'Go back to the scene of the accident and make it right'. He did and it was a great day," he recalls with pride.

Ellerbee is still unsure about what to expect from British artists. Though he has worked with ragga DJ Shabba Ranks, who he helped steer from his "All gays should be crucified" outburst on The Word towards Aids charity work, he finds British soul singer Wayne Marshall "outrageous".

British stylist Judy Blame, who has helped create the images of Neneh Cherry, Massive Attack and Bjork, thinks Ellerbee's intensive, showbiz approach to celebrity grooming is superfluous to more down-to-earth British artists.

"Music in this country is more sussed," he says. "How artists look and behave here is part of them. If I told one of my clients they needed to improve their manners, I'd get a smack round the head."

Ellerbee is undaunted and talks with passion of the artists who he feels need his help.

"I would love to work with Aretha Franklin," he says with a mix of awe and compassion. "She is the queen of soul but someone's gotta say 'Aretha, stop it. The queen of soul should not wear a smock!' "