

MC Manners

At the **Double XXposure** school of etiquette, hip-hoppers learn it's better to be a charming man than naughty by nature.

THE NOTION OF well-mannered hip-hop stars seems absurd. Don't we seek out and applaud bad behavior in our favorite rappers? Doesn't a courthouse appearance count for much more than an intricately choreographed live show? In a cramped Manhattan office, the publicity firm **Double XXposure** is laboring to shatter this perception. The company offers an artist-and-consultation course that is, in effect, a charm school for rappers. I turned up recently hoping to catch Ol' Dirty Bastard arranging doilies, or Eightball & MJG composing an effective thank-you note. But under the tutelage of loquacious CEO and industry vet **Angelo Ellerbee**, artists who place longevity over notoriety—Mary J. Blige, Eric B., Gang Starr, Biz Markie, and Patra to name a few—have learned the dual importance of boning up on their business sense and properly chewing their food in public.

Driven beyond endurance by years of watching unprepared artists being unleashed on the marketplace, **Ellerbee** reached back to the methods of fabled Motown despot Berry Gordy. "He took the Diana Rosses and the Mary Wilsons and said: 'I want you to be able to meet the king and the queen. I want you to meet the president and the vice president. But before you can, I must develop you.' So he hired this wonderful lady who taught charm, taught them how to hold a teacup, taught them how to stand in high heels, and all these other things that we look upon as being socially rudimentary."



Teacher's pet: **Angelo Ellerbee**, right, schools Yvad in the fine art of table manners.

In order to see Ellerbee's methodology in action, I sat in on the interview-technique session being carried out in his soothingly cream-colored office, which that day doubled as a classroom. The artist learning the many ways to deal with the press is a modest, diminutive Jamaican lad known as Yvad (Actually, it's Kevin Davy. What's up with this school of thought that says reversing your surname makes you enigmatic?). Yvad is proficient in throaty, acoustic Seal-like contemplation but, when faced with the yowling, ravenous maw of the print media, he's a babe in the woods.

Ellerbee drafts in a pair of employees to masquerade as, respectively, the journalist from hell and the dream reporter. The negative hack stomps in. "Respect," mumbles Yvad. "Don't sit down," coaxes **Ellerbee**. "Get up and greet him." Yvad shakes the hand of the press maggot, who proceeds to shred his single. "Take charge," coaxes the teacher. "Break down his negative. Tell him you're refreshed by reading his articles. Make a friend." You'd make more of a friend if you cut the guff and slipped him a fifty, I find myself thinking, but in my role as the silent observer, I can't comment.

Enter an assistant in the role of positive journalist. "Respect," mumbles Yvad. "Your music sounds different, unique, tranquil, relaxing..." burbles the fan. Yvad monosyllabically communicates his gratitude. **Ellerbee** shows him how it should be done. "I've got to tell you I really like that sweater," he oozes to the faux-journo. "Where did you get it? Maybe you could show me where I could get something just like that." Unbelievably, he continues in that vein. "I've got

to tell you, for someone of your stature to come out to interview me—I find it incredibly flattering." He turns off the sweltering charm and addresses his bemused student. "Look him in the eyes. No fiddling around. No slouching in the chair. Take a position." Your position will be prostrate with a print dagger sticking out of your shoulder blades should you attempt to address a journalist in that fashion, I want to say, but again, I keep quiet.

Does Ellerbee's etiquette boot camp actually work? He lists his success stories for me—Eric B., formerly an ominous wall of silence, is now, apparently, in the market for his own daytime talk show. He rhapsodizes about the success of his star pupil Mary J. Blige. "I would send her flowers every morning because she was a lady in my eyes. And she still is."

That singer, however, recently showed up in *Interview* magazine, making free with colorful colloquialisms, yanking the cap off a Heineken bottle with her teeth, and generally acting in a less-than-ladylike fashion. Ellerbee's comment on his client's behavior: "I would like to think there will come a time when I can say to female clients, 'What time is it for you? From now on, I want to know all your moments.'" But isn't **Ellerbee** in danger of constraining his clients' outlaw appeal? "It's a persona. They're merely actors and actresses. And someone needs to tell them where the stage is and when the performance ends."

Meanwhile, back in class, Yvad waits patiently for his lesson in table manners. As he grapples with the complexities of the fish fork, he mutters, "I thought I'd already learned to eat." ●