



# MUSIC BUSINESS JOURNAL

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## Preparing Artists for Stardom: Angelo Ellerbee

by

*Angelo Ellerbee is the founder and CEO of Double XXposure Media Relations, a full service public relations, marketing, and artist development firm. Ellerbee's client roster is deep and diverse. He has worked with some of the top artists in the industry including the likes of Mary J. Blige, Alicia Keys, Michael Jackson, Ginuwine, Roberta Flack, Dionne Warwick, and Nina Simone. Mr. Ellerbee is a staunch believer in the notion that head-to-toe artist development is what is needed most to ensure longevity in an ever-evolving music industry.*

### MBJ: Can we talk about the way you work for artists?

**AE:** I was raised on my mother's teachings. I grew up on faith, believing in God, and struggling against resistance. She said to me, "Never ever take resistance and live with it—rebuke it. Challenge yourself to do better and get more." My mother taught my siblings and I survival skills. So, I teach survival skills to my artists because I think that people need to know how to take care of themselves. Self-preservation is key, especially in this industry. I stand very firmly on the foundation that she gave me, and in my line of work I use everything she taught me.

### MBJ: I understand that you have a background in fashion. How have you transformed that into being a manager and publicist for over 20 years?

**AE:** I am still figuring that out. I started as a model relatively young in Paris at 16 and did that for two and a half years. I wanted a better life. My French was horrible, and still to this day I can barely speak one word of it. Man, I screwed up so many jobs at first. I would get lost and was always late because of it. When I left, my portfolio was not as good as it could have been. I rushed it because I wanted to go at the same time that my friends were. I ended up working in a soul food restaurant making fried chicken and collard greens for a portion of my first year. I wasn't getting any jobs. One day a photographer came in to the restaurant, we started talking, and I explained to him that I was a model. I showed him my book and he agreed that my portfolio was awful. He shot all new pictures of me, and I worked constantly for two years after that. I came back and started to sketch and design. I graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology and had some of my stuff sold in nicer department stores like Lord and Taylor—I made around 300 prom gowns. I was doing a lot of one-of-a-kind pieces, too. From that, I had the nerve to shop my designs around to potential retailers.

I was blessed with the opportunity of meeting James Mtume. Mtume is a four-time Grammy award winner who has written songs like "Killing Me Softly", "I Never Knew Love Like This Before", and "Juicy Fruit". His wife is a fellow designer and used to come to my fashion shows. She approached me once at a show and asked me about doing some collaborative work with her for her husband's latest album cover. She and I became close friends instantly—like family—and I would help her shop her designs around like I used to do with mine. She would talk to her husband about me. One day he came to me and said, "If you can do all this stuff for my wife, you should come work for me. I want you to manage me." I designed clothes. I didn't have any clue why he wanted me, but I agreed. So, I started working for the Mtume's. I must've gone to six meetings at CBS records not knowing what the hell I was talking about, and every time they would call him and ask, "Are you sure this is the guy you want to manage you?" Eventually, he told me "Angelo, when you talk to them you have to have the same balls that you have when you talk to your fashion people. What I do is naked and you need to dress it up the way you need in order to pitch it to people." After that, I understood.

That's how I got into music. I created his corporation. At that time he also had a production deal with Sony Music. I started to manage several of the artists he was working with—clearly not knowing what I was doing. I was smart enough to be able to add what I needed and put the pieces in place. Mtume is a highly intelligent person, and was really my guide through it all. He got the opportunity to score a major motion picture, called "The Native Son", which had Oprah Winfrey in it. I was so happy that we got him the opportunity, but now he wanted me to get him some publicity. I turned his basement into my office, and I went and bought hundreds of newspapers and magazines. I called all of them telling them about the new film, about Oprah, and that my client, Mr. Mtume, had done the score. I got the press' attention. Thus, from fashion came music.

### MBJ: Are you still active within the fashion community?

**AE:** I've incorporated it all still to this day, both fashion and music. I look at what I have now as sort of a one-stop-shop. Fashion is truly married to music. Look at Lady Gaga, who has taken fashion to another level, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, and all these people. I don't think we sell just music anymore. We sell image and style. When you go to a magazine stand or go online, you see how these people look first. Then you get into the music. Whenever I have a new artist, I focus on the importance of image and style first before looking at their music.

### MBJ: How do you recruit clients?

**AE:** I don't, really. Sure, if you would like to become a client you can go to my website or call the office, but I have 30 plus years worth of relationship building under my belt. Most of the clients I have come to me as a result of some sort of referral by association. Building relationships is paramount to everything else.

### MBJ: What kind of things do you work on with artists?

**AE:** Let me start by saying that I'm a hands-on guy, especially when I see something special in an artist. A young girl from Long Island came to me earlier this year. Her name is Stephanie Courtney (not to be confused with the comedienne). She looked like a mess, and to me, her sound was not much better. I had a feeling there was something to her, though. She was warm and polite, and her father was equally as nice. She came back to sing for my staff who thought I was crazy for taking this girl on as a client. I had her go through our artist development program. We worked on hair, skin, makeup, clothes, and style. At the same time, we set her up with voice and dance lessons—she had some amazing teachers. She did them all without complaining, was always on time, and was always happy to do anything we asked of her. Her work ethic is incredible. Now she sings like a bird. On top of that, we aligned her to an anti-bullying campaign, for which she wrote a song. I teach my clients that it's important for them to be able to give back to the community.

### MBJ: Do you also teach them about the business-related aspects of music?

**AE:** Very much so, yes. Industry education is incredibly important. You need to know what has been written in your recording contract, you need to know about publishing deals, endorsement deals, and things of the like. Technology has circumvented this somewhat. With the Internet, new artists are quickly achieving levels of success without being prepared adequately for all of it. They don't last very long, do they? If you invest the time, teach the necessary skills, and prepare an artist for what they will face, then that artist will have a longer career. When an artist studies the business of music, he or she must understand that every entity is important. You can't go and get a manager without knowing about the work that he's supposed to be doing for you. He's managing you, but you also need to be managing him. Wouldn't it be great for you to know all of the who's, what's, when's, where's, and why's so that as this manager oversees your business you know the effect that his decisions will have? It's a real functioning business, and you have to indulge in every aspect. If you don't, you're here today and gone tomorrow. We've seen evidence of this. In the past, I've spoken out against certain hip-hop executives regarding the day in time when rap music was gaining popularity. These executives were ripping these young artists off by taking their publishing rights and their royalties. They now live in mansions and their children live a life of luxury, while the rappers who made the music have come and gone. Those executives didn't care about the artists, and the artists didn't know anything about the business. Where are the artists now?

### MBJ: Do you think that artists need to be as scrutinized in the media as much as they are?

**AE:** I firmly believe that artists should be held accountable for their behavior just as you and I are. At this day in time, an artist has the ability to be more influential than the President. Our own children want to be like the artists they see. You have a problem in urban communities today because artists in music videos are glorifying this materialistic lifestyle in which you have jewelry, tons of cars, and 500 women. A lot of artists don't realize that they have to take this seriously and think about how their words affect their audience. Artists need to especially take responsibility for committing crimes. The consumer is watching them and taking it all in.

One of my artists, Ginuwine, went through a really hard time with his parents both dying in the same year. He was suffering from mental health issues and ended up doing drugs to help him deal with everything. Part of what I had him do was to talk to the public about it, because it's important that you take responsibility and give back by sharing your experiences thus allowing other people to learn from them.

### MBJ: Is it unfair for an artist to have to live up to public expectations?

**AE:** I really respected Charles Barkley for saying, "I am not a role model." He acknowledged that he's fallible and that he's human. Unfortunately, that's not really how it works in America. You have to realize that any public figure, whether positively or negatively influential, is going to be idolized by someone. That's a conscientious decision that an artist makes when he decides to call himself an artist. That's just the way it is.

### MBJ: How do you handle artists' crises?

**AE:** I've had to deal with a lot of those, and people come to me most often when they have a crisis. I worked with Michael Jackson in the 90's when there was the alleged situation with that little boy. I got to know him, he told me he did nothing wrong, and so I had to carefully examine the problem. The media was relentless, too. I always find that touching on the source of an issue is typically the best approach. The source of the issue was children, so I worked to help create the Children's Choice Awards. A lot of high profile people were there, including Governor (of New York) Cuomo's wife. I packed the auditorium with 3,000 kids, and Michael ended up being the recipient of an award. Also, presenting the award to Michael onstage was a handful of children. The crowd loved it. It was such a press-driven event that whatever they thought of Michael was no longer what it was. This was, of course, until new allegations started popping up.

I've dealt with DMX and his drug problems throughout a portion of his career. I personally managed him for five years and was his publicist for two. Going back to the source of the issue, I learned that he has a fear of abandonment from his father leaving and his mother always working to support the family. I try to really get to know my clients as people, because I feel that I'm better prepared to handle the situations that they get mixed up with if I can really get to the root of the issue.

### MBJ: Are some artists' crises not manageable or fixable?

**AE:** For sure, but it's always preventable. So many artists don't take the time to think before they speak or act. A lot of them just react and it's not always pleasant—even for the ones that mean well like Sinead O'Connor when she ripped up the picture of the pope. One has to ask the artist whether or not they realized they did something wrong. I always tell people that America is "gangster". When you do not go by the customs of the masses, you get shut down. After Kanye West got on the stage at the VMAs and embarrassed himself, he got shut down for a long while. Fortunately for his career, he's managed to come back from it for the most part. You have to wonder, however, how many opportunities he has missed and how many people won't work with him now.

I think that the record labels' reluctance to take the time to develop artists like it used to do is the hugest mistake ever. I understand the need for "artistry." There are certain things, however, that should not change in modern times. One of those is artist development. Diction, speech, and manners are what allow an artist to succeed—as well as knowing when to shut up.

### MBJ: Do you think most artists need to be developed?

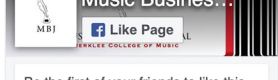
**AE:** To reach their maximum potential, absolutely yes. For me, it's not about the Beyonce's of the world. It's about the people who are trying to get to that same level, who have previously lacked the opportunities and chances to get there. A lot of publicists won't work with an artist who they feel "won't cut it" or is a "lost cause". When I started my whole artist development program, people laughed at me and thought I was totally insane for teaching things like fashion and etiquette to artists, especially to rappers. When I started my business, I tried to emulate Berry Gordy. He realized that his people were being shunned by mainstream America; so he taught the people under his tutelage how to walk, talk, dress, and meet kings and queens. I try to teach the same thing to my clients, and provide them with the best chance to succeed.

By Aaron Gottlieb

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