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Music

September 16, 2005

Sounds

Hip-hop goes to finishing school

Angelo Ellerbee, hip-hop's Professor Higgins, teaches rap stars the rules of etiquette. Precious Williams met him in New York



"Sometimes I've had to approach rappers during interviews, ask them to step outside, discreetly hand them a bar of soap and a flannel and tell them to go wash their body," says Angelo Ellerbee, founder and CEO of Double Xposure, the world's only finishing school for rappers.

Known in New York as hip-hop's answer to Henry Higgins, Ellerbee charges about £140 an hour. He teaches clients how to pose for the camera, order in restaurants, get into shape, eat healthily and express themselves without "cussin' ". "It's an institute of knowledge," he says.

Ellerbee, a 47-year-old gay former ballet dancer, may seem an unlikely mentor for socially challenged urban-music stars, but his clients — who include Mary J. Blige, Sisqo and the rappers DMX and Ja Rule — beg to differ. His clients, he points out, are "from some of the rawest environments, where they don't know the basics of social skills and etiquette."

Bad manners, he says, are a worldwide epidemic, particularly in the urban-music industry, which is why he plans to open an office in London next year. "You people have slightly better manners, but it's changing. Rappers wherever they are in the world seem to pride themselves on being thuggish.

"Things have changed for the worse. During the Motown era, recording careers were well planned and images created and enhanced by professionals who helped the artist develop every aspect of themselves. Diana Ross and the Supremes came from poor backgrounds but they were fabulous and elegant. Those days are long gone."

Reclining in his office opposite the Empire State Building, Ellerbee is resplendent in a Gaultier pinstriped suit jacket. His office is decorated with signed photographs of clients. A typical challenge was the rapper DMX: "He turned up days late for a shoot with GQ. They had hired a tiger for the shoot and the tiger was getting tired of waiting for DMX, and everybody else was getting tired of waiting too. DMX would agree to do interviews and then only do five out of 25 of them. Eventually we had to resort to doing e-mail interviews, and then it would be me actually doing the interview."

Ellerbee prides himself on being resourceful — his mantra is "by any means necessary". He will do what it takes to whip wayward rappers into shape. Sometimes that includes teaching them how to read and write. "A quarter of my clients can't read," he says. "Nobody even knows because they can get away with not writing their lyrics down and simply reciting them straight into a tape

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recorder. But I have a subliminal reading test. I invite them to my house, put on the video of the movie *Native Son*, and get out the popcorn.

"Afterwards I hand them a copy of the novel by James Baldwin that inspired the book. I give them two weeks to read it and then ask them how they thought the book compared with the movie. The book is entirely, 100 per cent different, from the film. If they say it was the same, or if they have no comment at all, I conclude that they can't read but are too proud to admit it. And if they can't read a book, how are they going to read and understand a recording contract? "If you can't read, there's no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for you."

Ellerbee first noticed the plight of talented but illiterate and socially challenged artists when he worked briefly in PR at Chrysalis Records in the 1980s: "They were raw. They made fools of themselves often and had no idea. There was nobody to teach them the basic social graces that we should be taught by our parents."

Although Ellerbee grew up in the projects of New Jersey, his mother taught him manners. Now he's going back to the projects on a reality TV show called *Charmed* to share what he's learnt, like a modern-day *My Fair Lady*. Today, the etiquette guru is providing a crash course in manners to Field Mob, a burgeoning rap duo from Georgia. The rappers — who want Ellerbee to teach them how to behave in restaurants and impress music-industry executives — are late. Two hours late. "But that's still early for rappers," says Ellerbee. "They'd have to be five hours late before it's considered late. Some of them turn up days late." He chuckles to himself then shakes his sleek head.

Finally, Field Mob arrive, two and a half hours late, their waistbands drooping almost to their ankles. Ellerbee swoops out of his office to meet them and gets straight down to basics. "Y'all reading contracts these days?" he asks. "Do you have a lawyer?" The rappers mumble an incoherent response.

Ellerbee's assistants have set up a makeshift restaurant table in a corner office, with crystal wine glasses, candles and a damask tablecloth. The rappers are seated and wine is poured. "S***! He gave us real wine," exclaims one, taking a gulp.

"What's the first thing you should do when you sit down at a table?" Ellerbee asks. "Eat!" they say in unison. "The napkin," says Ellerbee, grimacing. "Do either of you know what to do with it?" There are confused stares. "You put it in your lap," Ellerbee says. "Not like a shawl around your shoulders. Don't use it to wipe your nose with. Making it in this industry is not just about getting cars and jewellery and women."

At the mention of the word "women" the rappers' eyes light up. "Some of these rappers get carried away by their fame and start imagining that they are Tom Selleck or something, that they are sex machines," Ellerbee whispers.

"They will demand a female journalist for interviews and then spend the whole time winking at her and imagining she is there to have sex with them. They lose the point of who they are and why the journalist is there and then get upset when the article comes out stupid."

Speaking of interviews, the Ellerbee alumnus Mary J. Blige challenged an interviewer to a fistfight early in her career. Was this before or after she'd graduated from the charm guru's boot camp?

"Mary," says Ellerbee fondly. "She needed work. That happened before I worked with her. Like a lot of people, she needed to learn to express herself without resorting to anger. It was a long journey. Working with these artists is like brewing real coffee: it takes time for it to be ready. The good stuff is not instant. But Mary has finally brewed into a lady. And she's reading books now, too."

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Rap on the knuckles: Angelo's tips for new stars

1. Stay as humble as blueberry pie out of your mama's kitchen. Be a pleasure to be around.
2. Defer to God no matter what.
3. Have commitment. Put in the work to promote yourself in the best light possible. Invest in yourself. Remember that it's your career, not your record label's career.
4. Remember that reading is fundamental and educate yourself. A class in accounting is a good idea too.
5. When travelling don't bring nine people along for the ride — remember that ultimately you're paying their expenses, not the record company. Leave the entourage at home.
6. Understand timing and punctuality.
7. Don't arrive at a photo shoot or interview high.
8. When meeting people for the first time remember that first impressions create a lasting impression.
9. Wash — you may think you know how to wash yourself, but do you? Pay attention to hygiene.
10. No cussing. Learn to be articulate. Try to talk about your life experiences without using the word "mother*****" in every (or in any) sentence.

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