

Double Exposing ANGELO A. ELLERBEE



Photo: Courtesy of DOUBLE XPOSURE

As Told To ERIC D. HATCHER

He has been called damn near everything in the book: Image Creator. Style guru. Star maker. Visionary. The Berry Gordy of the '90s. But for Angelo A. Ellerbee, spoken words are incomparable to the visual presentation of self and others. You see it in the faces and demeanor of his clientele, a roster itself which reads like a *Who's Who* of Black folk in showbiz: Boyz II Men, Nina Simone, Anita Baker, Grace Jones, *En Vogue*, Patra, Roberta Flack, Salt-N-Pepa, Denzel

Washington, Iman, Antonio "Huggy Bear" Fargass, Jocelyn Brown, Sibyl, Carl Payne—the list is endless.

From fashion designing, to evening and sportswear collections for Sachs Fifth Avenue and Bloomingdale's, to modeling for Yves St. Laurent and Givenchy, to acting in the off-Broadway production of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, Ellerbee has donned many hats. During the leaner years of his success, he studied with the acclaimed Alvin Ailey Dance

Theater and hosted a cable show called *Ellerbee's Eyes On Fashion*.

It was no surprise in 1987 he left *Chrysalis Records* as director of Publicity and Artist Management. It was totally instinctive. Having noticed the difference in how pop and rock artists like Pat Benatar versus rap groups like Gang Starr were treated by record companies, the Newark, New Jersey native knew one thing: He wanted to provide young entertainers with the fundamentals of survival

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in an industry where "each one teach one" is virtually unheard of.

Today as Ellerbee plans to expand his Manhattan-based PR company to include a Latino promotions division, his latest project is to open new offices in California, the Caribbean and Great Britain

In all honesty being a publicist has been difficult. It hasn't been an overnight success. I started my business in the basement of my home in New Jersey. Me and my AT&T phone were about as Double XXposure as you got. I had an assistant drop by my house two or three days a week just dealing with Double XXposure while I worked my nine to five at Chrysalis. Eventually, when I founded Double XXposure, I had to persevere in a marketplace and business where I was totally unknowledgeable. My background is fashion design, and I was very fortunate to work as a promoter for James "Juicy Fruit" Mtume's production company.

I will always be indebted to him because he made me understand this industry. He taught me how to accept and love myself and gave me the will to say, "I can do this no matter what the odds are." And I'm being very frank in saying that it's, one, difficult being Black, then it's, two, difficult being Black and gay. People are, however, more accepting today than they were in yesteryears. I've had to work to make sure people are not into my sexuality but into my ability to be a professional. I'm not ashamed of who I am, nor of what I stand for, nor am I trying to teach people about my lifestyle. To find out about where I come from, you have to find out about me and not about my sexuality.

I've learned that I'm an actor in this business, too. It's important to adjust to all types of personalities, so I deal with all kinds of issues. That's the uniqueness of my profession. My personal life does come to be a part of my clients lives and they have to adjust to that as well, like I have to adjust to who they are. So it becomes a two-sided street and if I'm not fair and honest about where I come from, how can I ask for them to trust me? How can I ask them to be a part of my life?

When I worked with Shabba Ranks, I knew from jump street that he was someone who needed a better understanding and acceptance of all mankind. Even after he made those anti gay statements, he always said to me, "I'm willing to learn, to know better." So for him, it becomes a question of appreciation of humanity.

The strangest aspect of my career is that my work is what I live for. The teaching of it all. As for a personal life, I don't even know what that is. I've learned to sacrifice. At thirty-eight years old, there's absolutely no one in my life but "Double Xposure" with the two X's. That's all I have. Friends are few in my life, but that's one of many sacrifices I've made along the way.

What has enabled me to survive and continue to do for others through Double XXposure is the almighty God. I'm not a born again Christian, but I was raised a Christian and God has been good to me. There should've been every reason in the world that my business closed many years ago. I didn't start my company with a lot of money, and everything that could have happened to prevent my growth did happen. But since then I've walked with God's faith. There's nothing magical about what I do. In the morning I take thirty minutes and I pray: "Lord, take me through this. Whatever it is, take me through this because I know that I cannot go through it alone."

Perhaps the biggest lesson I've learned as a publicist is to keep my mouth closed on particular subjects. I had to learn that the hard way. I'm an outspoken person on topics that are dear to me, but I've learned the importance of watching what I say. Recently I was asked to appear on *Geraldo*. They invited me to essentially gossip about several celebrities and, of course, I was not going to have that. I would never betray my client's trust.

That's why I take my time before I go into a project. I want to know what you're about beforehand because my business dealings are like a marriage. I'm always going to have hands-on involvement because it's me who my clients are coming to. So I really have to understand the client and if it's not right I'll tell ya'. And yes, I have given clients their money back, and I've referred people to other PR companies.

One client that I have been enthusiastic about is Mary J. Blige. The day that we met I fell in love with her. She reminds me of the girls that I grew up with, the hard-knock girls who weren't treated fairly. Often I have to read people who think they know all there is to know about the Mary J. Bliges of the world.

Let's examine this for a second. You live in the projects of Yonkers and some one discovers that you can sing. You deliver your tape. They make a record. Now you're on tour. Who is at fault here? No one said, "Mary you're making a

record and you need to know about diction and speech and mannerisms and etiquette or understanding how to deal with the media in order to get the mileage out of your career." Who prepared her? Is it really Mary who's at fault or what was behind her?

Veronica Webb wrote an article in *Interview* a while ago about Mary and I lit up like a Christmas tree. I wondered how could Ms. Webb write that article knowing what she knew about Mary's background. Webb's article took Mary down two knots. The title read something like "The Fight That Almost Took Place." Well, you got to remember that you're not the grand prima donna walking down the runway. You're a journalist interviewing a hip hop vocalist who is queen in her industry.

At first, being Mary's publicist, I was pissed. Then I laughed. We must stop destroying our own. If you know where a person is, take yourself there for a minute. Understand who and what you are dealing with. If you do that, then you'll be able to treat a situation fairly.

There are millions of young people who look up to Mary J. Blige. I don't care what you say about her, somebody loves her to the sound of 3.5 million records. The only way that we're going to help someone like Mary, is to begin to educate them about the finerities of life, not take away their survival tools, but to bring it all together as a collective.

And I still believe that young people are being raped without grease, and the pain is forever. They are raped of their knowledge of this industry, so many of them sell five million records and return home with \$10 because they aren't equipped to handle the daily ins and outs of this business. No one has educated them about "recoupment." When you want to get into a limousine eight times a day and live in a fancy home and take makeup artists with you everywhere you go, that's all your money that they're spending.

What I suggest artists do is get a Volkswagen, get a teacher and learn how to do your own makeup, understand foreign exchange, learn how to pack lightly, and find out what career planning is all about. Somebody has got to tell the story. How did Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Ruth Brown and Diana Ross stick around for so long? Because somebody said to them, "This is the way that you do it."

There's an old saying that goes: "It's not about who wins the race, but it's who stays in the race." I just want to stay in the race a little bit longer. **BE**