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Is It Hip to Be Cool? Not in This Charm School

By Bob Morris

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"KEEP it real" is a popular expression in the rap music world. It means don't lose your edge or your anger. It means don't forget your "homies," the friends you grew up with and who haven't made it.

Angelo Ellerbee, who teaches rappers and other emerging black music stars about things like salad forks, proper language, dressing appropriately and the value of reading, says he knows the importance of keeping it real. But he also believes that reality shifts with each situation.

We are all actors," he said. "And in our daily lives, we walk onto many different stages. You can't say to Barbara Walters: 'Yo! What's up?' It wouldn't go down."

Mr. Ellerbee is the founder and president of Double XXposure, a 10-year-old publicity, management and image-control company that is often described as a charm school for rap artists. And Mr. Ellerbee says it's the only company of its kind. His clients have included the singers Mary J. Blige, Patra, Shabba Ranks and Eric B., who, with record sales in the millions, have to be taken more seriously than they often behave.

RCA Sony and Uptown record labels, among others, rely on Mr. Ellerbee to return their human investments with slightly smoother edges after a 24-week course.

He's often referred to in the media as the Henry Higgins of the black music world. And if much can be learned from Shaw's "Pygmalion" about human relations and the modern social order, so can a day at Mr. Ellerbee's office.

There were smoke and mirrors there on a recent Friday morning. The smoke was from the cigarettes Mr. Ellerbee was inhaling with slightly overstated grace. The mirrors, gilded, hung on the walls in a room laden with chintz and other suggestions of opulence. Mr. Ellerbee was wearing a waistcoat, ascot, vest and velvet slippers with embroidered crowns. If necessary, he could have changed into the construction boots, baggy jeans and funky caps he keeps handy.

"I like people to feel comfortable around me," Mr. Ellerbee, 38, said. "I dress so people can relate. I'm going to a school next week in East Orange, and I already picked out the black jumper I'm going to wear. The kids will think it's phat, so they'll listen to me when I tell them not to do drugs."

Like any good arbiter of etiquette, he knows that little things, like looking people in the eye during a conversation, can make life easier. He knows that reading is not only good for the mind, but also useful when multimillion-dollar contracts are involved.

"I think education is important," said Mr. Ellerbee, who usually bills his clients \$250 an hour.

He grew up in a housing project in Newark, attended the Fashion Institute of Technology, lived in Paris, trained at the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater in New York and worked in the publicity department of Chrysalis Records before starting his own business.

"These days," he said, "children are being raised by children. Who's going to teach them respect?"

Mr. Ellerbee's first client of the day was a handsome young reggae singer named Yvad (pronounced ee-VAHD), who lives in rural Jamaica and recently signed with the Tuff Gong record label. Yvad would be getting a second dose of Mr. Ellerbee's "interviewing technique" class before heading out for 10 press interviews later in the afternoon.

"Here's the situation," Mr. Ellerbee said to Yvad, who was sitting face to face with a staff member who had assumed the role of a monstrously critical journalist.

"Your job is to make him love you," Mr. Ellerbee told the singer. "Not your music -- you. You're going to make a friend by turning this interview into a conversation. You're not going to play into his negativeness. You're going to play over it."

Mr. Ellerbee clapped his hands like an old-time Hollywood director, and they began. Yvad, a shy Rastafarian with an appealingly languid posture, wasn't aggressive enough to talk over anybody. He's a listener, given to long pauses and stroking his goatee while thinking.

It wouldn't do.

"Don't think about the question, just answer it," Mr. Ellerbee yelled at one point.

"You look so bored!" he interrupted seconds later, as he yanked a big mirror off the wall. "You have to show some excitement! I'm going to hold this mirror right here so you can look at yourself and tell me what you think your facial expression is saying. Do you feel you have good eye contact? Do you feel yourself looking out the window or at the floor? Be honest!"

Yvad looked more pained than a patient in a dentist's chair.

"When I pause," Yvad said, "it's just because I'm thinking. When I lower my head, it's just a thought coming."

I T wouldn't do.

"You have to think of each interview as the sale of records," Mr. Ellerbee said. "Let's say 500 units. This interview could be a platinum record for you."

Yvad nodded. He may come from a highly spiritual culture, but he also understands record sales. After a few more harangues from Mr. Ellerbee, it was time for him to go off and meet some real press.

"I don't want to hear from anybody after your interviews today that you're shy," Mr. Ellerbee told the singer. "Look them dead in the eye and sell it like you've never sold it before."

Yvad, who believes that his music comes from the spirit within and that his work is just a part of "the Father's wish," smiled.

"All right," Yvad said, as he walked out of the office. "One love."

"One love," Mr. Ellerbee replied.

Nothing is new under the show business sun. Several decades after Louis B. Mayer was having his stable of stars clothed and groomed to reflect the good life as he saw it, Berry Gordy set up a finishing school at his Motown Records. There, under the direction of Maxine Powell, Marvin Gaye improved his walk and learned to keep his eyes open when he sang. The Supremes, three young women from a Detroit housing project, learned to shimmy in a nonvulgar way and to look happy, not pained, when they sang.

Mr. Gordy's goal was to make his stable of artists acceptable to white, middle-class America. Although Mr. Ellerbee believes every artist should be able to dine with the Queen of England and the chief executive of Sony, not to mention Barbara Walters, his etiquette training is often about harm reduction, rather than fine-tuning.

"Angelo takes the element of surprise away," said Mary Moore, the publicity director for black music at RCA records, a frequent client of Double XXposure. Surprise, she said, is the behavior that new artists exhibit that sometimes offends executives, listeners and journalists.

A couple of years ago, for example, Shabba Ranks, a Grammy Award-winning reggae star, stated on network television that if God had wanted homosexuality, he would have created Adam and Steve. Mr. Ellerbee was contracted by Epic/Sony Records to work with Mr. Ranks right after that.

Ms. Moore knows the dangers of becoming too smooth and slick in a field in which being bad or even a criminal isn't necessarily bad for record sales. "There's nothing wrong with a rapper being real," she said, "as long as they're not awful."

Having been out on promotional tours with newly signed rap groups, Ms. Moore has seen awful. She's seen singers in restaurants reject fancy meals and show up at private parties with large groups of rude friends she couldn't accommodate. She's seen rappers throw fits in hushed hotel lobbies when their rooms weren't ready. She's seen young artists tell morning radio hosts that it's too early to be doing an interview, then take CD's from the bins on the way out of the station. She's seen them do all kinds of things to sabotage their careers long before they're successful enough to be calling all the shots.

"I usually just tell them that they could use some work," said Ms. Moore, whose company, RCA, signed Elvis Presley in the mid-1950's.

"Elvis was the original behavior problem at RCA," she said.

Mr. Ellerbee takes credit for masterminding the image make-over of Patra, the Jamaican "ragamuffin" reggae singer, who went to him in ripped jeans and departed with a penchant for Todd Oldham and Dolce & Gabbana. Mr. Ellerbee's time last summer with Mary J. Blige, the rhythm-and-blues singer who has two platinum albums and a terrible reputation for rudeness, ended more disconcertingly.

Ms. Blige left Mr. Ellerbee's 24-week course in the fall with only seven classes to go. Not long after that, the singer was captured at her worst in a profile for Interview magazine by Veronica Webb, the supermodel. In the article, Ms. Webb described how Ms. Blige smoked pot, opened a Heineken bottle with her teeth and tried to pick a fist fight with her.

"That interview bothered me," Mr. Ellerbee recalled. "Does the public need to know that Mary opened a beer bottle with her teeth?" he asked, adding that the singer should have canceled the interview if she was having a bad day. "Mary J. Blige doesn't need a bodyguard at her side night and day. She needs a publicist."

At about noon, another singer whose background and demeanor are about as different from Ms. Blige's as rap is to easy-listening music, appeared in the carefully lighted midtown offices of Double XXposure.

It was Rhonda Ross, an unsigned jazz singer and songwriter who also happens to be the daughter of Diana Ross and Berry Gordy. This day's session was an image consultation. Mr. Ellerbee loaded her into a hired sedan to go shopping.

"I detest shopping," said Ms. Ross, 24, a petite Brown University graduate who prefers bookstores and having clothes made for her by a designer friend. "But I like looking good." And she was, wearing a black ensemble of knee-length boots, miniskirt, her fiance's coat and a turtleneck that belongs to her mother.

On the fifth floor of Saks Fifth Avenue, Ms. Ross and Mr. Ellerbee joined up with his creative director and an assistant. Like a little bird, Ms. Ross flitted from one item to another. Nothing appealed to her on the fifth floor, so they proceeded to the designer clothing on another floor, where prices were four times as high and Ms. Ross seemed more inspired.

She tried on some shoes by Chanel that Mr. Ellerbee recommended. No.

A shantung silk blazer by Dolce & Gabbana. No.

Some lipstick. No.

Because she's engaged to be married, she looked over the wedding gowns, too.

"Everyone says your wedding gown's supposed to make you look like a princess," she said. "But I want to look like a queen. I want my gown to make me look like I have strength."

Mr. Ellerbee, who is also consulting with Laura Branigan on her image, looked a little cowed by Ms. Ross. He recommended a veil.

"It's very nice," Ms. Ross said politely. "But it's too billowy. I'm having something made that's more like a crown."

Back in the car, Ms. Ross, who purchased nothing, said she enjoyed herself. "Another hard day of shopping and entourage," she said.

Mr. Ellerbee laughed. He often finds himself on shopping excursions with recently wealthy, poorly educated post-adolescents who don't know what they want or want the wrong things, and he seemed deeply grateful for the taste and manners of Ms. Ross.

"Rhonda," he said at his office, after saying goodbye to her "is very rare."

Then he let out a little sigh and turned his attention back to thinking about all his clients from the real world, or in this case, perhaps, the world of the real.