

## Artist Management Interview

Elliott L. Harrington  
(SOJA)

Fall 2012  
MUI 430  
Missa Goodier  
Shelby Shaffer

Elliott L. Harrington, the manager for the popular reggae group SOJA, kindly agreed to an interview with Missa and Shelby. Elliott grew up in Arlington, Virginia and always had a love of music and business. He describes his father as a businessman and his mother as a creative-type; the fusion of these two gave him “the best of both worlds” when it comes to the music industry. He attended Bishop O’Connell High School, where he met his future best friends and employers—SOJA. A little-known reggae band at the time, they performed at his high school and, as he describes it, there was an instant connection. The lyrics and music spoke to Elliott and he invited the band to play at a house party he was throwing that weekend. This was the beginning of their long lasting friendship and career.

Neither one of us had been big SOJA fans before the opportunity for this interview came up and it was really by chance that Elliott turned out to be our interviewee. Shelby contacted her previous employer at Jiffy Lube Live to ask if he knew of any artist managers who would be willing to do an interview. Elliott’s information came back about a week later and we were told to contact him right away. Immediately we sent out an email.

Our intent was to conduct an in-person interview with Elliott because we knew he is employed by Red Light Management and they are based in Charlottesville; however, he is actually based in Arlington. On top of that, the band was about to embark on a month-long tour in Brazil. Elliott was not very easy to keep in touch with while in South America but as soon as the band returned our patience was rewarded with an hour long phone interview and, surprisingly, an opportunity to meet Elliott in person at SOJA’s Halloween concert in Charlottesville the following Wednesday.

The experience was incredible and we learned a lot from Elliott about the industry and what exactly has worked for him and his band. We found out very quickly the passion Elliott has for the band's music and the friendship that has come from it. He shared with us SOJA's past and how the band's path crossed with his and continued to cross again and again until they finally intertwined purposefully. Elliott's role took on a natural progression until finally the band asked him to officially become their manager. After learning the band's history and gaining a little perspective and advice from Elliott he shared his vision for SOJA's future as well.

Elliott's career in the music industry started as a DJ and progressed to concert promoter, to booking agent, to tour manager, and finally to a full time manager for SOJA. Doing all of these different jobs has been incredibly beneficial to him as a manager. He says the focus of his job is to look at the big picture, and facilitate making it happen; because he knows what each person does, he is able to know what steps are being taken and what goes into his plan. He says it can sometimes be difficult to delegate tasks because he often thinks it would be faster to just do it himself, but told us that a part of being a manager is letting people do the jobs they are good at and know that it will pay off to have that person be the one focused on the task. Other skills he cites for being especially helpful include being a good negotiator and having an interest in business. He was once a telemarketer, and while it wasn't a music industry job, he says it really helped with his ability to talk business with people and negotiate deals.

One of the things Elliott mentioned in our interview that really stuck with us was how much trust went into the artist-manager relationship and what that does for the band as a whole. Elliott believes that trust is the number one thing a successful artist-manager relationship must have. The artist must trust the manager and the manager must trust the artist. Elliott and the members of the band are self-proclaimed best friends and have complete faith in one another.

The band completely trusts Elliott's judgment. For instance, Elliott mentioned that for tours he will put everything together, all the dates, venues, etc. and then will give the band the itinerary. They will then blindly step onto the tour bus completely confident in the decisions he has made for them. They have unparalleled faith that everything will go smoothly because Elliott is the one who has set everything up for them.

Elliott is invested in his band in a way that we have come to understand as very helpful in this business. Things can get tricky when an artist's manager is close enough to their artist to call them family but something about it works. It puts the manager in a place where they want to do their best because it really matters to them. It is not just about the money at that point—it is meaningful and rewarding in the best way. Elliott explained "I want to make sure that I'm making the best decisions for my best friends."

In addition to being close friends with the members of SOJA, Elliott considers it a great strength that he is a "diehard fan" of the band. While he says it is not absolutely necessary for a manager to be "best friends" with their artist, he believes in order to be successful you absolutely must be a fan of the act you are working with and you must believe in them above all else.

Being a fan of theirs for years and believing in their message has been a major factor in his persistence in building up their career: "If I wasn't a diehard fan of this band, I would have given up after maybe the hundredth phone call of 'Sorry, I'm not feeling it.'" They faced a lot of rejection from labels, promoters, and booking agencies until deciding to build their fan base more directly. SOJA's audience is very specific, but having a base of people to back the band was more valuable to them as a group than having major label attention. They began reaching out to their fans and booking shows that would help them access the people open to their music. Only their most recent album was released with the help of a record label (ATO Records- the

rest were released independently). Elliott considers the agreement with the label to be more of a “partnership” than anything; they simply help market and promote the band in places they have not previously been able to reach, keeping fans the main focus. This label, specifically, is very band friendly which is a relief for SOJA because Elliott’s main concern in entering into a record deal was the chance that the band’s image would be compromised. The band did not want to change in any way. The only goal with the label was creating more avenues for recognition among a larger audience. The label allows Elliott to reach more potential fans through outlets he did not have access to otherwise.

Elliott considers himself to be part of a passionate niche fan base that promotes the band primarily by word of mouth—the fans feel a connection to the music and they want to share it with their friends. It made us consider the artists we would feel that passionate about working with, and reminded us of why we are here in the first place. Elliott feels that a major factor of SOJA’s appeal is their message, and because of that they have built their network of support fan by fan.

Elliott has an incredible amount of respect for SOJA’s lead singer, Jacob Hemphill, and truly believes in his amazing song-writing ability. He even goes as far as to compare his messages and lyrics to Bob Marley. He believes that the friendship and belief in the band’s ability, the passion and the drive he feels with this band, are the very core of what he does. He loves what he does and the fact that he works with what he calls “an amazing band” with “an amazing songwriter” makes it all worth it for him. The songs really hit home for him and they have ever since that day at his High School when he first heard them perform. He knew he had to be a part of their journey. At the time he just did not realize how much of a part he would become. It is all because he believes so fully in them and because their emotional connection is

so strong. Trust, respect, and the fact that Elliott is a die-hard fan are some of the key reasons the band has had the success they have.

The best part of this job for Elliott is that he spends everyday with his best friends and loves every moment of it. He can stand in the middle a sold out crowd of thousands in Rio and take in a 360 view of every person singing along to his bands lyrics. It is that connection with so many that cannot be matched. It is incomparable to anything else and he is very humbled by it.

Despite all the success and the stories of days spent with a princess on a private island, Elliott is still incredibly normal and cannot believe he has gotten to this point. He does not take anything for granted and while conducting this interview we were surprised by it. It may be one of the hidden keys of success that he did not explicitly mention to us. Doing what you love for the right reasons can never lead you in the wrong direction. He describes his success as almost “mystical.” Everything happened because he really wanted it to happen. He worked hard at it and made a lot of gut decisions. He describes a lot of his decision making as coming “from the gut, more specifically, the heart.” We believe this has really worked out for him.

A large amount of advice was given to us throughout our interview with Elliott and one of the most helpful pieces of it is that you cannot just jump into this industry and expect to do well. He explained to us that in order to succeed you must put some effort into learning as much as you can before truly submerging yourself in the music business. Elliott took several music industry courses online ([berkelymusic.com](http://berkelymusic.com)), and it just happened that he spent some time working in almost every position required to run a band. Now, this is a huge advantage for him as an artist manager because he is overseeing every job and has insight on whether or not each one is being done correctly. His advice is to work every small position you can in order to obtain an understanding of the big picture like he has. Not only working the smaller positions but

reading about the industry, taking classes on it, and getting as much information as you can any other way are great ways to capitalize on your industry experience. He says learning about the industry before taking any huge actions will help you find out which area interests you most or if you even want to actually be a part of it.

Each member of the band has different goals and visions for where they want to take their career, but Elliott explained the one thing they can all agree on is that they “want to touch the four corners of the Earth”. His goal is to have the band tour on every continent in the span of their career. Specifically for 2013, he is hoping to have shows booked in Australia, Asia, and Africa. They have already toured extensively in North America, South America, and Europe, and have played in over 15 different countries. They want to be an international group, and are on their way; they recently toured in Brazil and played sold out shows in 5,000-10,000 capacity venues. Their largest US market is in Hawaii, and they also spend a lot of time in the Pacific Islands. His favorite place they have traveled to is Palau, where their princess is actually a fan of the band and took them out on her boat to a few islands. One island was specifically reserved for the band, and when tourists approached they were deflected by royal security to find another beach. Elliott really loves travelling with the group and the excitement that he feels from fans in other countries, and each year they extend their international reach a little farther. The biggest goal for the band is to get their message out. We could easily tell from the shift in his tone of voice that this is really what matters to Elliott. He wants the world to connect with the message of “one love” and “one people”. The band plays in places no other band has ventured to and it is for that reason. They want the world to hear what they have to say in order to make it a better place. His statements really made the two of us reflect on the power of music and how we view its ability.

After our interview with Elliott, we sent him a thank-you email for taking an hour of his time to talk to us. He responded almost immediately with an offer to attend SOJA's Halloween show in Charlottesville the following week, which we enthusiastically accepted. The way he had spoken about SOJA's shows so passionately during the interview made us curious and excited to see them live. We arrived at the nTelos Pavilion about half an hour before doors opened, and he came to meet us at the gate. He was able to chat for a few minutes before the show, but then said he would catch up with us later. We wandered around the venue while it was still empty to watch last minute sound checks and set ups. Although neither of us was terribly familiar with SOJA beforehand, their performance energy made immediate fans out of us. Matisyahu opened the show, who we were also unfamiliar with (but ended up kicking ourselves when we realized we had been missing out). We could see Elliott standing side-stage during the show, and it was very obvious that he feels very much a part of the band.

The show was a lot of fun and introduced us to something we would normally not have listened to before; it also was a reminder that we should be keeping our ears open all the time or we could miss something great. After the show, we caught up with Elliott by the soundboard and talked for a few more minutes. We offered to buy him a drink, but had to settle for a promised rain check as the band was headed overseas to Europe the following day and had to get back home to prepare. Elliott was interested in booking a show at JMU and Missa is in UPB, so they discussed possible openings in the future and agreed to keep in contact. Our conversation ended with a "Let me know if you guys need anything, you have my number—let's keep in touch."