From Sneaking Backstage to Running the Room — A Blueprint for the Independent Artist



You see a spaceship land and spend over an hour staring in awe at a barely-believable being from a distant planet. It's bound to have an impact, right?

For Jonathan Azu, that moment wasn't science fiction. It was real life.

In 1997, Azu was a college student at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, with a shattered athletic career and no sense of direction. Then he saw **George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic** lower their legendary Mothership from the lighting rig. The experience was a revelation.

"It blew my mind," Azu recalls. "They had the Mothership dropping from the lighting rig, and I'm thinking to myself, 'This is what I want to do with my life!' I don't know how I'm explaining it to my parents; they're probably going to think I want to be an astronaut, but I want to be in this business."

Your Mothership Moment is Waiting

Jonathan Azu saw a spaceship land, and he decided to build his career around that feeling. Your own Mothership moment could be just around the corner — but it won't find you while you wait.

Your action plan:

1. **Join ISSA today** *(if you haven't already)*— for free — and start building your network.
2. **Take one bold step** this week: reach out to a venue, submit your music, or start that project you've been putting off.
3. **Attend the ISSA Awards Show & Summit** - There's no better place to network and learn.
4. **Remember Azu's story** every time you face a setback. Perseverance isn't just about waiting — it's about taking action, again and again.

The Mothership has landed. **What will you do next?**

Perseverance Through Setbacks

Jonathan Azu's journey is far from a straight line to the top. He started with a career-ending injury, faced countless rejections, and had to forge a path where none existed. That's the reality for every independent artist. **The music industry is a marathon, not a sprint, and resilience is your greatest asset.**

Azu's approach reflects a broader truth. As one artist put it, "I was surrounded by chaos and uncertainty… but those experiences taught me resilience. I learned to fight for what I wanted."

Others have echoed this. Le John, a 22-year-old independent artist, is building a career with "no manager, no major label, and no industry machine to prop him up. Just songs…" Similarly, Casey Lowery was told by **seven major record labels** he couldn't make it without their help. He defied them, retained creative control, and is now on the path to chart success.

These stories — Azu's included — share a common thread: **Success comes to those who persist, adapt, and believe in their own vision, even when the industry tells them no.**

How You Can Start Your Journey — With ISSA

Jonathan Azu's story proves that you don't need a major label deal or a massive budget to change your life. You just need **vision, perseverance, and the right community.**

That's where the **International Singer Songwriters Association (ISSA)** comes in. We're here to help you build your own full-circle moment.

ISSA is your launchpad:

- **Global Connections:** ISSA is a worldwide family of thousands of independent artists who support one another every day. Our private member directory is designed for collaboration and exposure.
- **Real Recognition:** Get access to our annual awards show, monthly featured artist opportunities, media exposure, and even Grammy recommendation eligibility.
- **Career-Building Resources:** Pitch for sync placements, get your music played on hundreds of approved radio stations, and use our free promotion, support, and management tools.
- **No Barriers:** ISSA will always be a **FREE** platform for singer-songwriters and musicians worldwide. There is never a fee to join.

"Independent Doesn't Mean Alone." That's our mantra.

Instead of just dreaming, **he took action**. He snuck backstage, tracked down the show's producer, and got their phone number. A year later, as a sophomore, he produced his first concert — a George Clinton show at his own school.

That one, bold act of initiative set off a chain reaction that would redefine his life. It's a lesson for every independent artist reading this: **Your biggest break often starts with one fearless move.**

Full Circle: From a College Contract to an Industry Giant

That boldness paid off again in his junior year. Azu produced a Dave Matthews concert, and the contract was signed by none other than **Coran Capshaw** — the legendary founder of Red Light Management and the mastermind behind the Dave Matthews Band's meteoric rise.

Azu kept that contract. Years later, after climbing the corporate ladder at CBS Radio, Superfly (co-creators of Bonnaroo), and eventually becoming an executive at Red Light Management itself, he looked back and saw a full-circle moment. He had gone from a college promoter needing Capshaw's signature to a trusted leader working within his organization.

For an independent artist, this is a powerful reminder: **The relationships you build today — even the seemingly small ones — can become the foundations of your future.**

The "Secret" to Longevity: Own the Room

Jonathan Azu's career is a testament to perseverance, but his mindset reveals the real secret to "making it" as an independent artist. Today, he is the founder and CEO of Culture Collective, an artist management company representing Grammy-winners like **Leon Thomas, Jon Batiste, and Michelle Williams**. He's also been named a *Billboard* 40 Under 40 honoree and a Pollstar Impact 50 honoree.

But his success isn't just about the trophies. It's about his philosophy. When asked what a manager does today, Azu says, "You're really just sitting at the table with the artist." More importantly, he emphasizes the power of presence. As a person of color, he knew it wasn't enough just to be in the room — "I had to help open the door wider for others."

His mission with Culture Collective isn't just to build a successful company, "but to serve as an example of what diversification in ownership can look like in music."

That's a crucial lesson for indie artists: **Don't just wait for a seat at the table. Build your own table.**