

## Chapter 1

### The Beginning

When I first started in music, I actually had no intention of doing what I ended up doing. Coming from an information technology background, I was an Internet entrepreneur. I'd been running an online recruitment website that I founded, [www.pnet.co.za](http://www.pnet.co.za), which was then South Africa's dominant recruitment portal.

I began experimenting with bands, seeing what could be done. By the time I started Sovereign Entertainment, I knew nothing about music in terms of operation, but I think that was to my advantage. What was it like to be a band in South Africa? I had absolutely no idea. In retrospect, it seems that the key to our success was mutual ignorance about what it would take to achieve what we set out to achieve.

The Parlotones and I began our musical journey in 1998 before we'd even met. The band was busy learning to play their instruments, while I was just entering the challenging world of South African music. The four musicians had met one another at school and university and decided to form a band, but it was only a hobby. What's almost impossible to believe now is that none of them could even play their chosen instruments yet. They learned as they went along, practicing in drummer Neil Pauw's father's garage.

It would be four more years before they officially formed The Parlotones, which still retains all of its founding members: Kahn Morbee on vocals and guitar, Paul Hodgson on guitar, Glen Hodgson on bass and piano, and Neil Pauw on drums. Except for John Boyd, who'd been part of the original five-piece band, the lineup has remained exactly the same through the years. When John Boyd left the band, never to be replaced, his career choice was based on one cruel fact: before the Parlotones, there had never been a successful professional rock band in South Africa that was able to make a living from music for more than two or three years.

My career in music management began with the website Powerzone. I was a huge fan of music, but the Internet was in its infancy. An acquaintance and I discovered that there was nothing in South Africa that supported or promoted the national music scene. The best we could find was a page under the banner "Powerzone," which listed links to various band- and music-related sites.

We contacted the page's webmaster and offered to develop a fully functional music portal if he would run it and keep it updated with content. Working day and night, we developed the new site from scratch. Powerzone had started as a simple web page. We used database management tools to create the brand-new site that we launched in its place. We added a band guide, a venue guide, a gig guide, and daily news of great interest to music fans. There were lists of fan clubs for every band that registered on the system. We fulfilled our part of the bargain: development was complete, but the content was nowhere to be seen. So we decided to buy out the partner who had failed to deliver, and that marked our start in the music business.

In 1998, Barney Simon came on board as a driving force behind the Powerzone project, which grew to more than just a fun music site—it became a platform from which South African musicians could get exposure and launch themselves. Barney Simon is a South African rock radio DJ, the equivalent of John Peel, the great English DJ of BBC Radio 1. While I was growing up, Barney was the only one playing indie rock on 5FM, South Africa's biggest national radio station, which is similar to the UK's Radio 1. His endorsement and involvement gave Powerzone the credibility to succeed as the number-one music destination on the Web in South Africa.

Although I had no musical training, I grew up loving music from a very early age. Working with recordings was the most fun. At age eight I was making mix tapes from seven-inch singles. When I was 13, I learned the BASIC programming language on my first computer just so I could develop a database of all my favorite bands, complete with biographies and discographies. My equipment was a lowly ZX Spectrum, a very early, rudimentary personal computer developed in the U.K. and really meant for playing games. It consisted of a keyboard plus a tape deck that you plugged into your TV.

Listening to Barney all through my teens was exciting. Through 5FM, he introduced my friends and me to bands like The Cure, The Smiths, and The Violent Femmes. He was our hero. Meeting Barney years later was still more exciting. And working with him on a music-related project was simply thrilling. I met Barney through his friend, my temporary partner in Powerzone. Barney was having trouble with his computer, and my temporary partner recommended me as a fix-it guy. I went to Barney's house to have a look at his computer, and we hit it off instantly. It wasn't long before he became my partner in Powerzone.

Powerzone was a ground-breaking website. Users could manage their own pages, which was not common in 1998 without a webmaster. Better still, our site was loaded with social media functionality as well as streaming media and news. It was actually quite similar to what Facebook is today, but designed explicitly for bands and their fans. Powerzone was an essential step in the direction of where we would end up: championing the best South African bands. With its elegant new features, this site had become our very own media platform from which to promote South African music.

What began as my hobby and an escape from the world of recruitment evolved quickly into a passion for music promotion. Over the next three years, I would attend countless shows and every music festival in the country in order to cover them for our new music portal. This project gave me the opportunity to meet just about everyone in the South African music industry, as well as all of the bands. I was a kind of press/online/media guy. And it was remarkable how often I heard band members complaining about how tough it was in their business and how hard it was to establish and maintain their bands.

Our breakthrough moment occurred in 2001 at the Splashy Fen festival in the Natal Midlands, where a brand-new band inspired me to try my hand at management. The band was called Perez, whose name was kind of a Latin version of The Smiths, Perez being a very

common name in Latin America. Watching Perez perform their very first gig, I said to myself, this is the right band to test-drive what can be done with an altogether different strategy: coming from a *business perspective* as opposed to a music-industry perspective.

What caught my eye about Perez was that they had two lead vocalists. This was the real X Factor that I'd been looking for. Perez sounded like nothing else in South Africa; most South African bands back then were copies of the Rap Rock movement, such as Rage Against the Machine and Limp Biscuit. But when Perez walked into the room, you knew that a band had arrived. Because I used to judge the local Battle of the Bands, attending as many as five shows a week, I was certain that this was the most original band I'd seen since entering the music world.

These were experienced musicians coming from other bands, so they knew what they were doing. The next logical step was to get them a record deal. But even though I knew all the majors at the top echelons through Powerzone, I hit a brick wall: the deals were just not there. Nothing was happening. So I tried to find them an agency, with no better results: there were no agencies to speak of in the country. In those days, it was impossible even to get distribution. There were no indie distributors, and the major labels had no interest in new local acts or an indie band.

Eventually, Universal gave us a shot. It all worked out, but it was a tough climb. Shortly after signing Perez to a management deal, I discovered that breaking a band in South Africa called for skillful management. I had committed to this band, and it was time to take action. In order to deliver on my promise of creating a successful career for my first signing, I would have to start my own label: a record company plus a booking agency for my band.

After launching Powerzone Productions on the back of our music portal, I soon realized that we'd need several different entities under one roof. The 360 business model that we initiated was heavily frowned upon at the time—a big no-no. That entailed one company managing the artist's entire career: label, management, agency, and publishing. People saw this approach as possibly unfair to artists by not getting them the best deals from every side. But we saw it as ensuring that there would be no weak links in the artist's career. Today, everybody's perspective is that 360 is the way to go.

I renamed our new company Sovereign Entertainment because “sovereign” means “supreme and independent.” And off we went!

Doing all those things demanded a large capital outlay, but we were prepared to make the sacrifice. This was the Internet Age and money was flying around. Easy come, easy go! We took our chances; we did an experiment, really. It almost sounds like a reality TV show. Perez was from Durban. So, I signed them, and then I found them a house in Johannesburg. I moved them up, and I paid their salaries every month.

Looking back on that experience, it was like an experiment and a half. And that's how you start a business. I learned later that what we'd done was overkill because it makes the bands go a bit crazy... but more on that later.

Anyone who remembers those days knows that Perez was the fastest “zero-to-hero” band ever. Was this due to luck or some other reason? Time would tell. Unfortunately, that story didn’t have a happy ending, as the band was short-lived. Nevertheless, within eighteen months, the band had achieved phenomenal success. Perez helped us lay the foundation for the future and establish our approach toward breaking South African artists. The results we accomplished made my new company the most sought-after deal in the country.

### **Introducing The Parlotones**

As happens in life, one thing led to another. By 2002, the success of Perez had earned me daily phone calls from the very persistent Kahn Morbee, The Parlotones’ lead singer. The band’s name is a take on Parlophone Records of EMI Music UK, where all of the band’s favorite groups had signed at that time.

We’d been on a parallel trajectory: while I was learning the music business, The Parlotones were learning to perform. By 2002, they were more than competent and had just recorded their first four-track demo. Like Perez, they were distinctive: they were the only British Alternative-influenced band in South Africa.

Kahn Morbee was trying to get signed by my company, Sovereign Entertainment. With that in mind, he wanted to send me his demo and get onto one of my shows. What made our company sought-after was that we invested real money in our bands and launched above-the-line marketing campaigns. Since this was unprecedented in South Africa, word spread rapidly among all South African bands.

Because I was already managing three acts, I wasn’t really interested in new recruits, but the least I could do was return a call to someone committed to leaving me messages every single day. Kahn and I had a good chat and agreed that he would drop off their freshly-recorded EP called “Superstars.” My objective was not to sign the band, but to give them an opportunity to open for Perez and show us what they could do.

Fortuitously for all parties, Kahn sent his EP to my house instead of my office, and my wife Tracey listened to it before I even knew we had received it. I arrived home that afternoon to exuberant praises of “You have got to sign this band!” This was the first time that Tracey had ever been this excited about an artist, so I could not wait to hear the EP for myself. Perhaps oversold by her enthusiasm, I thought the recording was pretty good and most definitely good enough to secure the support slot with Perez... but not quite sure if good enough to sign...

Looking back at this juncture, let me reveal to you that managing bands is not the world’s greatest job. It might sound glamorous, but a band is composed of four diverse personalities who seldom agree. What’s harmonious onstage is rarely so backstage. On top of that, the members feel that they already know how to do everything. While negotiating with all of those egos, I often wondered why bands needed managers when they already professed to know how to manage themselves.

Show day arrived, and The Parlotones went up to open for Perez. Watching and listening, there was definitely something about them that made me want to know more. The song that stood out for me, the song that I was waiting to hear, was called “Stare at the Sun,” which of course they did not perform on that decisive night. That is because bands are always brilliant in the department of leaving out the most important songs of their sets. In my experience, bands always think that their latest songs are their best songs. Then they start to neglect the very songs that earned them their fan base. It’s a common behavior, but musicians who understand that this tendency is a mistake keep playing their signature songs and thereby make their fans happy. Imagine a Rolling Stones concert with no “Satisfaction!”

That night, I quickly rectified the omission by requesting that the band play “Stare at the Sun” just as they were saying good night. They played brilliantly, and the audience went wild. It was done: a new band was signed! We were on our way.

### **On the Road**

Opening for Perez opened new doors for The Parlotones. We were making plans for our first summer tour, and nobody had time to sit and “stare at the sun!” This would be our first monumental challenge because all of the band members had full-time occupations: Kahn was a customer service representative for an Internet service provider; Paul was in business with his father; Glen was studying to become a teacher; and Neil was a workshop manager for a luxury car brand. This meant that their entire year’s vacation time would have to be sacrificed for their first tour of the South African coastline.

But I didn’t have to do any convincing. The band’s work ethic has always been outstanding. They lived to play, and any chance they had, they would jump at the opportunity. Many times they would play shows as many as six hours away from home, then get on the road and make it back home just in time to go to work the next morning. They were marathoners, not sprinters!

In December 2002, we all jumped into the van and headed for Durban, where The Parlotones would kick off their 2002 Summer Tour as the main support band for Perez. Our first tour stop was a standout tourist attraction—Wave House Durban, site of D-Rex, the world’s biggest manmade stationary wave, and home to the world’s highest indoor climbing rock. We were booked at the Wave House Events Arena, a topnotch showcase for the most talented performers in South Africa.

We arrived late in the afternoon, and bass player Glen Hodgson must have been impressed by all that surfing, snowboarding, skating, and wakeboarding. In high spirits, he decided to stage-dive into the crowd at sound check. There were two problems with this idea: first, there was no crowd except for drummer Neil Pauw; and second, Neil didn’t catch Glen, but instead got out of his way. Glen was rushed off to the local clinic, where he was told that he had broken his arm, but a shot would keep the pain away for a few hours. Well, Glen was not going to let a broken arm stand in the way of his first major show! Bravely, he played that show with a

broken arm. By the end of the night, the drugs had worn off and he went to the hospital to get a plaster cast. That was the beginning and the end of The Parlotones' first summer tour.

This also turned out to be Perez's last tour because the band imploded as egos hit an all-time high. My first real lesson in the music business had arrived as I saw hundreds of thousands of South African rand that had been pumped into the band disappear along with the musicians. The loss of a few hundred thousand rand wouldn't seem like much to an American label, but that amount could have bought a six-bedroom house on an acre of land in South Africa.

Even though the lesson was costly, we had tasted success, and I was determined to make it my life's mission to build a band that South Africans could be proud of and that could represent us on a global scale, as INXS did for Australia or U2 for Ireland.

With Perez gone, I had three bands in their infancy, so it was time to get some more. The Parlotones, Jimmy 12 Inch, and Marlowe were all eager and ready to do what it takes. We added The Finkelsteins and Prime Circle to the fold. The next decade of South African music would be ruled by these bands, but things looked very different back then.

With the Internet bubble having burst and my passion for music in full force, I sold my interest in Pnet and put all my efforts into the South African music scene. Because Powerzone was the premier destination for anything music-related in South Africa, we decided to launch the Powerzone Roadshow, a vehicle that would take all my bands around South Africa, showcasing them... to whom? Oh, of course, *to the thousands who were just dying to come and see a bunch of unknown bands*. But South Africa had nothing in place that resembled a touring circuit. Taking my bands on the road was a perilous initiation into navigating an industry that did not even exist. We had no idea what we were in for!