



Friday, November 15, 2002

These lawyers plead guilty to rockin' on

Several WNY attorneys have been playing the local music scene for decades

Business First of Buffalo - by [Annie Deck](#) Business First

With the rising sun as a backdrop, a man in a suit walks along the street, briefcase in one hand, waving with the other. Another man approaches, his arm similarly extended in a gesture of greeting.

They seem to have nothing in common, these two figures. The first is buttoned-up and formal, the second long-haired and scraggly, toting a guitar case.

In fact, the two have a lot in common, beginning with their DNA: They are the same person, Michael Lee Jackson.

That image, the cover art for Animal Planet's second CD, "Dawn," describes Jackson's double life: lawyer by day, rocker by night. Occasionally, the doppelgänger Jacksons cross paths.

"That one kind of said it all," Jackson says of the photo.

For Jackson and other lawyer-musicians, life requires careful choreography between the demands of two divergent passions.

"There have been different times in my life when I've had to prioritize one or the other."

"The truth is, if you want to do one thing seriously, it's hard enough. If you want to do two things seriously, it can be brutally difficult. And there have been times when it was really difficult for me to do law and music."

'Animal' attraction

Jackson, 40, has been playing guitar for about a quarter-century.

Jackson's first "real band," The Employees, played locally as an opening act for bands like Culture Club and INXS in the early 1980s.

"I think it forever ruined me to be able to play on great stages at a young age, because it's pretty tough to get that out of your system," he said.

Jackson earned bachelor's and law degrees from the University at Buffalo, in 1985 and 1989. While working in entertainment law might have seemed like an obvious fit, Jackson was resistant to take that course initially.

"I didn't want to admit that I wasn't going to make it as a musician," he said. "I didn't want to work for musicians, I wanted to be one."

He's since warmed up to the idea of representing musicians. Now of counsel to the law firm of Stenger & Finnerty, Jackson handles intellectual property, transactional law and general business matters.

He formed Animal Planet, "a rock band with a lot of soul," in 1996. The band has earned a loyal following at area clubs and toured the globe extensively in shows for the U.S. Department of Defense and USO.

Over the years, Jackson has juggled his legal career with stints in the bands The Rhythm Method, Radio Art, Urban Sturgeon and The Dollywatchers, plus touring with 10,000 Maniacs.

"If I'm traveling with my band, I have to figure out a way to make it work, which I do," he said. "But it's not always easy."

When he was touring internationally, Jackson often found himself coming home from a gig only to dive into a few hours of research and phone calls to keep his legal career afloat.

"That's what I had to do. Otherwise, it would have come to a screeching halt."

While Jackson is focusing right now on his lawyerly responsibilities, on the horizon are a trip to England to record guitar tracks for an album by Greg Lake of Emerson, Lake and Palmer fame and writing for a new Animal Planet album.

"I keep coming back to wanting to do music because I enjoy it," Jackson said. "It transports me in a way that not much else can."

Sideman

"I gave it about 15 good years of my life as a professional musician," said guitarist and vocalist Willie Schoellkopf, who moved to Los Angeles in the mid-1970s to form the Argyle Street Band with fellow Buffalonians.

Since returning in 1978, Schoellkopf, 52, has played with outfits including Old Salt and Billy McEwen and the Heartbeats.

"It was that experience that made me realize that maybe I should try law school," he said of playing with the Heartbeats. "Nothing against the players in the band. It was just the venues and the time.

"We went on the road and we had what we called our Summer Bummer Tour of 1983. I think at the end of that road trip, everyone decided to go back to school."

Schoellkopf, law clerk to U.S. District Court Judge John Curtin, has been playing of late with three bands: Doug Yeomans and the Low Blue Flame, the Stone Bridge Band and The Average Johnsons. He performs two to three times a month and works occasionally on recording sessions, usually as a backing vocalist.

He says it's crucial for lawyer-musicians to have supportive employers.

"I've been very fortunate to have employers who appreciate the arts and understand that there are people with great talents who don't do (art or music) full-time," Schoellkopf says, "but who still need to get out there and express themselves."

Honorable intentions

Buffalo's roster of lawyer-musicians includes a state Supreme Court justice who plays "guitar in all its forms."

Eugene Fahey, 51, formed the blues-rock band Large Marvin about two years ago, but recently left the band to work with jazz musicians.

"I stopped playing with them because the sound was bothering my ears — a real sign of old age," he said.

"Standing up and being in a position like a judge and playing rock 'n' roll, at first I think it throws everyone for a little bit of a surprise," said Fahey, who doesn't accept payment for his playing.

"But for me it's all about the music — and for anyone who's my age who does this kind of thing. You really do it purely for the enjoyment of the music itself.

"There's nothing like everybody jumping up and down and hollering to an AC/DC song on a Friday night at 10 o'clock," said Fahey. "I hated giving that up."

Large Marvin includes another lawyer, lead vocalist Joe O'Donnell.

"Music's been in my life on and off for a long time," said O'Donnell, 46. His main motivation in performing is getting a chance to exercise his songwriting talents.

"It works for me," O'Donnell said in reference to fitting the band into his life as a lawyer. "The group I'm in with, we really want to play out maybe once or twice a month. It's manageable at this juncture."

Attention-getters

So what is it that appeals to so many lawyers about performing in rock bands?

For many, it's an outlet for talents and energy that would otherwise be stifled. For lawyers who handle litigation, there's a strong link between their roles onstage and in the courtroom.

"You're performing for a jury. You're selling your story, basically," said Scott Salisbury, an associate (and son of a partner) at Lipsitz Green Fahringer Roll Salisbury & Cambria LLP, pending passage of the bar examination. "It's the same thing as selling any type of music."

Salisbury, 38, played with the 50's-60's band Night Eagle for about 10 years until taking time off to study for the bar last year. For him, music can be truly transforming.

"I'm a little laid-back, sometimes shy, when I meet people at first. (But if) you strap a bass on me and give me my wireless, I'm dancing in the crowd," he said.

Lynn Clarke, law clerk to Supreme Court Justice John Michalek, has been singing professionally for more than 20 years. Her musical bread-and-butter is the Thom Diina Band, which performs dance and popular music at private parties, weddings and supper clubs.

"There's a lot of good things that come from it," she says of performing.

"When I started practicing (law) and getting up in court, I think I felt very comfortable being in front of an audience," Clarke said. "As far as I'm concerned, the bigger the audience, the better. And I think that gave me an edge or a leg up."

Not every lawyer who's a musician gets up on stage as a stress release.

"This is just what I like to do with my free time," said William Savino, who's been playing bass guitar with the blues-rock band Jelly Jar for seven years. "And if one more person says, 'Oh, it's a release of your tension,' ...

"No. This is what I like to do. That doesn't mean there's tension being released."

Savino, 51, is chairman of the business litigation and insolvency practice at Damon & Morey LLP. He has played with prominent jazz musicians including Bobby Previte and Jay Beckenstein, but took time off from music in the late '80s and early '90s.

"But then I decided to get more active, because I like playing in front of people," Savino said. "I know that I have the look-at-me syndrome."

Elegy for a harp man

While the Buffalo legal scene is rife with musical talent, it's still feeling the pangs of a recent loss.

"The most popular, arguably the greatest lawyer musician, was Rick Holland," said Savino. Holland, who played harmonica in the blues band Night Train, died in April.

"No recitation of the lawyer musicians would be complete without mentioning him," Savino said, "and we all miss him dearly."

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.