

Bar chords: Musings of musical lawyers

BY GRANT J. GUILLOT

When I was 13 years old, I began writing songs and learning to play the guitar. I remember one day when my dad, an attorney, took me with him to his office at the State Capitol. We first stopped by the old BeBop Music Shop on Government Street so I could buy some guitar picks and new strings. While my dad tended to legal matters in his office, I sat in the reception area as I re-strung and tuned my guitar. I remember looking up and seeing a group of attorneys walking by, complete with suits and briefcases. As I strummed my six-string, I thought to myself, “That will never be me. I could never do something so boring. There is no way lawyers have any fun.” What I failed to realize was not only were some of those attorneys probably musicians on the side, but there exists a compelling nexus between law and music that is often overlooked and warrants examination.

This quote is attributed to the Greek philosopher Plato: “Music is a moral law. It gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, a charm to sadness, and life to everything. It is the essence of order, and leads to all that is good, just and beautiful.”¹

Plato’s words take on true meaning when a lawyer is able to use musical skills in the course of litigation or as an escape from a notoriously stressful profession. Indeed, included within the membership of the Baton Rouge Bar are several drummers, guitarists, pianists, singers, songwriters and even theatrical performers whose stories demonstrate that the connection between law and music is far more than theoretical.

Alan Berteau, a partner at Kean Miller, says that music gives him a “sense of wholeness and accomplishment.” He also says that while “law is a profession, challenging, exhausting, nerve-wracking, frustrating and sometimes rewarding, music is its own reward, and it always inspires me and resets my perspective and balance.” Regarding the relationship between law and music, “music, as a performance art, draws upon and nurtures some of the histrionic skills that a litigation practice requires – forcefulness, conviction, attention to detail, focus upon the listener, preparation, the importance of rest beforehand,” Alan says. He admits that it is difficult for him to imagine working as a lawyer without being able to look forward to his next gig.

Sonny Chastain, also a partner at Kean Miller, enjoys playing music with his band, the V-Tones, and participating in the St. Aloysius Church Chorale. “Music is a great creative outlet for me, and whether I am playing Broadway tunes on my piano, singing at choir practice or jamming with the V-Tones, I can let go of the stress of the day-to-day legal practice and sing at the top of my



lungs in the music world,” he explains. “Performing music is an opportunity to be creative, have a powerful vocal and instrumental band, see folks smiling, singing dancing – all without worrying about having to notify a client or an insurance carrier, ‘Oops, I missed a note!’”

As for the parallels between music and the practice of law, Sonny says, “Similar to breaking down a Supreme Court ruling, I enjoy analyzing the musical score, listening to other parts and executing the tenor lines with my choir buddies.”

Like Sonny, attorney Jim Standley, who works at the Louisiana Attorney Disciplinary Board, says that music is a great outlet and “a great way to unwind after a stressful day.” Jim adds, “I’d say that conditioning your mind through the creative process of writing and performing music also helps when coming up with original ideas and strategies that we all use in our professional lives. In short, the creativity you use in the practice strengthens that used in composing and performing music and vice-versa.”

According to Steve Judice, a partner at Keogh, Cox & Wilson, “Trial lawyers are natural-born performers. Playing my songs provides an outlet for the performance bug, but in a non-adversarial environment – usually.” Steve also states, “Songwriting allows me a creative outlet that is sometimes cathartic. My favorite form of stress relief is music. I can strum my guitar or sit at the piano for hours without ever once fretting – pun intended – about my day job.”

Attorney Jill Craft, an experienced vocalist and pianist who has performed everywhere from theater stages to coffee houses, notes, “The nerves, adrenalin and thrills associated with performance became addictive.” Jill carried that addiction with her into her legal career, explaining that her “musical and theatrical training were

invaluable” because, to her, “each trial is exactly like staging a theatrical production, complete with props (exhibits), wardrobe and makeup, production managers, villains, heroes, cameo appearances, comic relief, high drama, and all of the nerves, adrenaline and thrills.” When she has trouble sleeping the night before a trial, Jill plays her piano – “sometimes until the wee hours of the morning” – because “the infusion of music releases the stress of litigation and affords you the opportunity to simply let your mind wander.” She concludes, “My musical skills have served to hone my craft as a litigator in ways which continue to unfold,” and, like her musical talents, her litigation skills are “much like an unfinished symphony.”



Jim Standley

L.J. Hymel, a founding partner of Hymel, Davis & Petersen, almost abandoned his musical pastime in high school when he came in second place in the Baton Rouge High School Talent Show. However, he reveals, “I was back in the game when I saw a classmate of mine – Johnny Ramastella – perform at the talent show at the downtown Paramount Theater.” Johnny Ramastella would go on to become rock star Johnny Rivers. As for L.J., he played in rock ‘n’ roll bands all through high school and college, but retired his guitar after he attended law school. He explains, “My guitar was put away to gather dust for about 20 years until a bunch of like-minded lawyers decided to play one gig for the Bench-Bar Conference in 1990 or 1991.” Thus were the beginnings of the Bench Bar Boogie Band, in which L.J. continued to play bass guitar during his tenure as a 19th Judicial District Court judge and his years as a U.S. Attorney. L.J. says, “Playing in that band was my mental therapy that allowed me to totally forget about the stress of the positions I held. Truly, it was only during those gigs that my mind was free of the legal profession and the responsibilities that go with it.” Although his guitar is currently gathering dust, “it is in my closet if I need it to clear my mind, and I do on an as-needed basis,” L.J. concludes.

Steve Levine, a partner at Phelps Dunbar, had an experience somewhat similar to L.J.’s story. Steve attended college



Sonny Chastain

in the Washington, D.C., area and began writing music and playing in an acoustic duo before relocating to Baton Rouge. Steve played several gigs in Baton Rouge, but with his attending graduate and law school, beginning his legal career, and raising a family, “playing music, and for sure writing it, faded away for, literally, decades.” However, upon returning home from a 2004 family vacation to Asheville, N.C., he was bitten by the music bug once

again. Steve says, “There’s no explaining it, but I ran with it and have been lucky enough to run into talented musicians, such as Doc Hearl and Annelies Martinez, who have shared my vision for the material, and to have successfully nagged some good old friends, such as Ben Williams and Jim Odom, to get me pointed in several right directions.” Regarding the relationship between the practice of law and music, Steve comments, “My honest view on that, to me at least, they are entirely separate, apart from occasional (and nicely tolerated) interface with

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my office.” He concludes, “I guess it’s fair to say that the distinction and the resulting spread it creates in one’s life is a healthy, broadening thing.”

Glen Petersen, a founding partner of Hymel, Davis & Petersen, was given something even better than a backstage pass when he attended a Chicago concert last summer. Although he was not able to play his saxophone, he was given the opportunity to sing on stage with his favorite band at the concert, the proceeds of which were dedicated to the American Cancer Society’s fight against breast cancer. “The opportunity to sing and also contribute to a breast cancer campaign was hard to pass up,” Glen says, noting that his bandmates from the Bench Bar Boogie Band were “understandably jealous.”

In conclusion, Glen states, “I still play occasionally with Harmon Drew’s Super Group from up in north Louisiana, but we’re about to get the band back together again here in Baton Rouge – at least I’m pushing!”

Max Kees, an attorney at Kean Miller, says, “As a practicing attorney, I have enjoyed music as a great way to completely get away from the pressures of the practice and a great way for me to see and meet a lot of people.” In fact, Max notes that on several occasions,



Attorney General
Buddy Caldwell

judges have made comments to him from the bench along the lines of, “Mr. Kees, I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you not being behind a set of drums.” Moreover, Judge Frank Foil has for years greeted him and introduced him as, “Max Kees, part-time lawyer, full-time drummer.”

Jeff Koonce, a partner at Phelps Dunbar, remembers, “The first time a client saw me playing a gig, I really was not sure how they would react to seeing their lawyer on stage playing rock and roll, but interestingly, they seem to love seeing me as a real person having good, clean fun.” Regarding the relationship between law and music, Jeff explains, “In law, we deal with issues that affect the livelihood of our clients. In music, it’s all about fun.” He adds, “At the end of a long and busy week, there

is nothing like picking up a guitar, cranking up the amp and letting loose! And it really gets fun when the group you are with sings and dances right along with you.”

Attorney Wendell Woods explains that, although he loves the practice of law, “it is at times a tedious exercise that is not appreciated for the effort one must put forth.” He notes, “Every once in a while you get to escape the practice, go onto stage, and get treated like a rock star. When you are able to see people smiling, having fun

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and actually glad to see you, there is no comparison to the feeling of being appreciated.” Moreover, Wendell finds that while the practice of law provides “a tremendous opportunity to do good and right wrongs in the lives of people, the joy of performing music is so spiritual that it eases and calms the soul while strengthening the singer/performer and listener to go forth and face life’s challenges.”



Alan Berteau



Jill Craft

Finally, Mike Palmintier, a partner at deGravelles, Palmintier, Holthaus and Frugé, who doubles as the lead singer of the Bench Bar Boogie Band, vividly depicts a typical performance with his band as follows:

It's a dusty afternoon on Friday in Baton Rouge and the downtown is finally cooling off after a hot day in early autumn. The parking lot across from Richoux's on Florida is filling up because it's almost five o'clock. Soon, this old dance hall will fill to the door jambs with folks in starched shirts and power ties, designer two-pieces and cool pumps or casual Friday jeans and gaudy T-shirts – the uniforms of the day.

One and all they'll leave the bustle of a hard week's work at the door to enter the cool, dark honkey-tonk atmosphere where the beer-and-bourbon-polished dancefloor shines in the footlights – waiting. On the old presidium sound-stage, the band is setting up, the instruments and mike stands sparkling in the otherwise dark coolness of the bandstand.

As the place fills, I watch from my vantage point behind the microphones, where I am busy helping set up for the gig. Out on the floor I see judges, law professors, prosecutors, defense and plaintiff lawyers

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This is what music and the law is to me. The fellowship of a Friday night.



Jeff Koonce (third from left)

In conclusion, our bar membership includes several talented musicians who use the same analytical and creativity skills both to practice law and play music. Most, if not all, of these attorneys also play music to provide a healthy means of escape for the stresses they encounter in their careers. As for that 13-year-old kid who swore to never become a lawyer, he is now a 30-year-old attorney who enjoys turning out Supreme Court briefs as much as he loves turning up the dial on his amp and rocking out on his electric guitar. Just because I may lose myself in my music and momentarily forget about briefing deadlines and the Code of Civil Procedure, I am not any less of a lawyer because I am also



Wendell Woods

a musician. In fact, I would argue quite the opposite. My sentiments echo the words of Wendell Woods, who says, “What better two things could one do than to practice law and perform music! I’m the luckiest man alive.”

¹ *Wordsworth Dictionary of Musical Quotations*, 1991, page 45, attributed to Plato (428-348 BCE).

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE
BATON ROUGE BAR ASSOCIATION

No. 282, December 2013

the Bar



**A harmonic note:
Lawyers as musicians**