

Profile: Midwest Music Law Pioneer— Ken Abdo

BY THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Kenneth J. Abdo was born in 1956 in Minneapolis—and he is still there. The rock and roller in Ken Abdo brought the music to his groundbreaking, Midwest, music-law practice, instead of leaving his hometown, and high school sweetheart-wife, to chase it to the more traditionally entertainment-fused cities of Los Angeles or New York.

Today, Abdo is a Shareholder and Vice President of Lommen, Abdo, Cole, King & Stageberg, P.A., the Midwest's largest entertainment law firm. He is also an accomplished practitioner, teacher, author, and speaker on all aspects of music and entertainment law. At its inception, a music and entertainment practice such as Abdo's was unheard of in the Midwest. But that did not stop him from building it.

While his career encompasses music and entertainment law, the former is the core of his practice, and indeed his life, as described more fully below. In addition, Abdo currently chairs the Grammy® Foundation Entertainment Law Initiative (the "ELI"), which, among other things, hosts a writing contest for law students on the topics facing the music industry today. Abdo's practice includes negotiating national and international deals for his established and emerging-talent clientele that he discovers and works with in the Midwest, on both coasts, and overseas.

The law firm that Abdo joined immediately after graduating from law school in 1982 was founded by his father in 1936, and also joined by his brother in 1971. Through a merger, Abdo and his brother are still partners in a modern incarna-

tion of that same firm. At first, the younger Abdo did everything handed to him; criminal defense, family law, small real estate transactions. Concurrently, he developed the firm's music business as soon as he joined, even though at the time, most of the big talent was represented in New York or Los Angeles. Based on his personal experience as a musician and disc jockey, he started out by representing radio disc jockeys and television personalities in employment agreements.

Twenty-five years later, Abdo does not have a resume to show when asked—he never needed one. He keeps a list of his accomplishments, but has had the same employer throughout his career because he successfully created the practice he dreamed of, right at home. Today, he is a transactional lawyer for musicians, rock musicians, and singer/songwriters. His clientele has grown to include Jonny Lang, Michelle Branch, Garrison Keillor, Anna Nalick, Johnny Rivers, Jim Brickman, Booker T. Jones, Mavis Staples, and Sugarland writer/performer, Kristen Hall, among others. He has negotiated deals on behalf of them and other clients with all of the major labels.

In one particularly special deal, Abdo helped secure publishing and recording contracts with a major publisher and label respectively for Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars. The band's 2006 album, *Living Like a Refugee*, is made up of a fusion of the music the band created at refugee camps in South Africa, as well as some that it produced in humble studios also in South Africa. Although they only recently emerged from refugee status themselves, members of the band are already giving back through their collaborative efforts with Amnesty International, the United Nations ninemillion.org campaign, and the ONE campaign. Their true-life refugee story captured the attention and hearts of many. In addition, their music has garnered praise from the likes of Keith Richards, Sir Paul McCartney, Ice Cube, and Angelina Jolie. It was featured in the Leonardo DiCaprio movie *Blood Diamond*, and it caught the attention of Aerosmith, enough for the legendary band to invite the Allstars to open for them on the road.

In addition to music, Abdo has also worked with improbable success on TV projects. For example, he pitched Hollywood on the compelling story of a woman he went to high school with, whose personal upbringing involved issues of adoption, foster care, the search for biological parents, and interracial relationships. Indeed, his efforts resulted in the Emmy Award-winning television movie, *Deep in My Heart*, featuring Anne Bancroft. This part of Abdo's practice, together with independent film, is primarily handled by his law partner, Dan Satorius.

Abdo's true passion, however, is music. And, it started early.

By age nine, Abdo learned to play drums, piano, and guitar by mimicking simple blues songs like "Hound Dog" and "Twist and Shout." The second-to-youngest in a family of seven, he had access to more than a few record collections. Nonetheless, he bought the album *Meet the Beatles* upon its 1964 release when he was only eight years old—recognizing good new talent even then.

Abdo's first official band, the Pythons, formed when he was in the sixth grade. He was its drummer and singer. The Pythons morphed into the Cast Iron Mist, which had further reincarnations. Its three core members stayed together until he finished law school in 1982. Meanwhile, Abdo was also half of a Donny and Marie-esque duet with his sister, in which the two performed innocent songs featuring sweet sibling harmonies.

The Cast Iron Mist's long run started with the band playing heavy rock covers, such as Hendrix, mostly in junior high and high schools. In its later years, band members would form identities and change genres for specific events so that they could get more gigs—even then Abdo was



both a musician and a businessman. The group's high school years found it transforming into a 50s cover band called Remember When, which performed fun, period-songs. Remember When, [pictured above, Abdo in center], was Abdo's personal favorite band because it consisted of the best musicians playing relatively easy songs while having a blast.

During his college years, Ken also performed in an acoustic folk rock trio in coffee shops and weddings. As such, the trio covered folk songs from the 50s-70s, including songs by the likes of Bob Dylan, Loggins & Messina, and The Kingston Trio. Even during Abdo's law school years, the band lived on as the Matters of Fact—a nod to Abdo's legal studies.

Ken's live performing subsided when he graduated from law school in 1982 to make way for his law practice and new family—but only for a while. Around 1995, Abdo's practice was flourishing and his two sons were eight and nine years old. He taught them to play four-chord classics like "Stand by Me" and "Heaven's Door" on his own drums, guitar, and keyboard, which of course he still had in the basement. The kids picked them up immediately, and a basement band was reborn. By 1999, the elder Abdo was officially the drummer of yet another band—The Abdomen. The presence of the kids made The Abdomen a novelty group—but one that actually played in clubs, with permits for the minors.

Meanwhile, Abdo's youngest daughter read a lot of books and soaked up the loud music as she hung out at the basement rehearsals. He would later find out that she played the drums when the boys were not around—copying her dad, so she knew the singing parts too. One short year after she spoke up about it, at age 15, she had fully transitioned into her father's drummer-role. She even accepted the band's name, though not really an Abdo-"man," because, as she says, "every body has an abdomen."

The Abdomen's subsequent success is not entirely due to their dad's management expertise. In fact, The Abdomen rock. The band has released two EPs and two albums, all which are distributed locally at Best Buy, by independent record stores, iTunes, and Amazon. Since kicking their dad out of the band, they have toured the greater Midwest and beyond, including Southern California. The Abdomen received Minnesota Music Academy's "Best Teen Band" award, were selected to attend the first ever Grammy® Camp in California, and recently were asked by fellow sibling kid rockers, Hanson, to be their direct opening act at a sold-out show at the famed Minneapolis club, First Avenue.

Notwithstanding his attraction to and success in music, Abdo decided after high school that he did not have the vocation to be a full time musician. As much as he felt a part of the music industry, he became more and more drawn to the business side of things.

In addition to his practice, Abdo has given back to the music law industry as much as he has enjoyed it. He is the current Chair of the ELI for which he has served in various capacities since its inception 10 years ago. The ELI works in conjunction with the Recording Academy® to promote music law education and awareness at the student through professional levels. The ELI has also been associated with the ABA since its inception thanks to Joel Katz, ELI's architect and then-Chair of the ABA Forum on the Entertainment and Sport's Industries, who enlisted Abdo's assistance as the then-Editor-in-Chief of the Forum's journal, *Entertainment & Sports Lawyer*.

Entertainment & Sports Lawyer was the inaugural venue for the publication of the winner of the ELI's main event—an annual writing contest during Grammy® week in which law students across the country compete to write the most compelling article on current legal issues facing the music industry. While the centerpiece of the ELI is writing, there are other components as well. For example, it also hosts panels and lectures across the country at music law conferences such as South by Southwest, and the College Music Journal Conference.

In addition to serving as current Chair of the ELI, Abdo also serves on the Governing Committee of the ABA Forum on the Entertainment & Sports Industries, as both a former Editor-in-Chief and former Chair—the first Midwesterner in either role.

In addition to his volunteerism with the ELI and ABA, Abdo was appointed adjunct professor of entertainment and sports law at his alma mater, William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, where he taught for 11 years. He has authored many published articles, and he is a contributing author to the leading entertainment textbook titled *Law and Business of the Entertainment Industries* (The Biederman Book). He has given over 100 lectures, including those sponsored by the American Bar Association, the Recording Academy®, and numerous

law schools, bar associations, music, legal, and other conferences.

Ken practices with veteran music and entertainment law partners Satorius, Bob Donnelly, Paul Bezilla, Tim Matson, and a host of other lawyers in his Minneapolis office. His firm also has a new entertainment office in New York City, a general practice office in Hudson, Wisconsin, and may see yet another expansion to the West Coast. However, the mother-ship will

remain in the Midwest, where Abdo remains committed to the continued growth of the firm's representation of music, independent film, TV, media, and entertainment technologies.

Abdo enjoys a seamless connection between work, family and his pastime. He is not a soccer dad, nor does his family call for one. Instead, traveling with his kids and watching them perform is at the same time his job, his hobby, and a way to spend quality, family

time. While he is on the road a lot in his own right, Abdo is often able to take his kids along with him because, as musicians themselves, they are interested in what their dad is doing.

Indeed, Abdo has "successfully merged his avocation with his vocation." He says, "I don't think I can change that as it is what I am and what I do." Nonetheless, he is still known for the occasional jam session with friends or on stage.