

In this issue...

Building Dedicated

Janet Renó helps celebrate the completion of the Campus Enhancement Project.

page 4

Giving Back

Alumni and law firms are leading the way with their financial gifts.

page 9

Books for the Beach

Check out this summer reading list of faculty favorites.

page 16

Appointments Abroad

Two William Mitchell professors receive prominent overseas appointments.

pages 25 and 27

L.A. Law, Midwest Lawyer

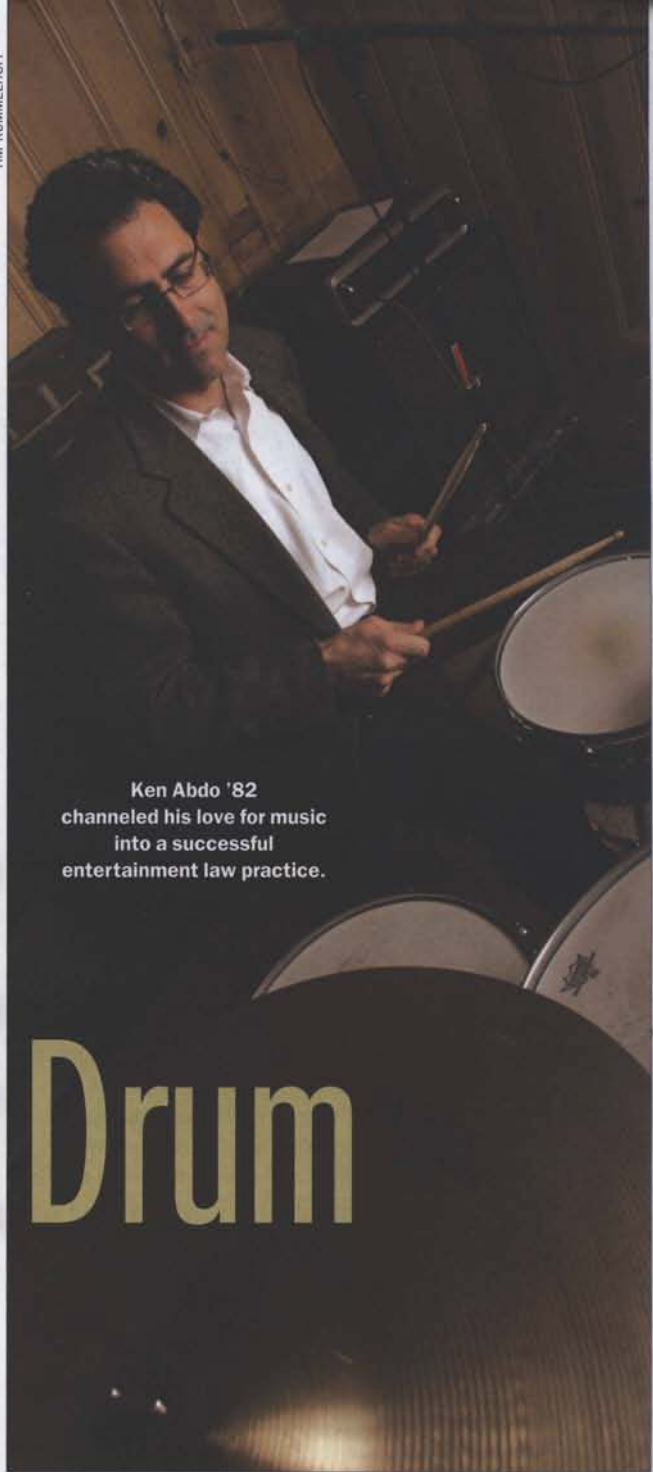
A lifelong musician and rock music fan, Ken Abdo '82 has made a career out of something he loves.

As an entertainment lawyer based in Minneapolis, Abdo represents nationally known performers and is the first-ever Midwestern-based chair of the American Bar Association entertainment law forum.

See page 12.



TIM RUMMELHOFF



Ken Abdo '82 channeled his love for music into a successful entertainment law practice.

The Beat of a Different Drum

Ken Abdo '82 has made a name for himself among entertainment lawyers nationwide, and he's done it on his own terms.

By Andy Steiner

ATTORNEY KEN ABDO '82 lives *for* rock music but he lives *in* Minneapolis. Sure, there are plenty of committed music fans (and lots of musicians) who call the Twin Cities their home, but few nationally respected entertainment attorneys base their practices in the state.

Abdo, a senior partner in the Minneapolis firm of Abdo, Abdo, Broady & Satorius, has spent the last two decades working to change that reality. A life-long musician and rock music lover, he has put his legal training to work for many of the state's—and the nation's—most influential acts. Along the way he's had to convince everyone from family members

to recording artists to booking agents that he has what it takes to build a successful national entertainment practice.

These days, Abdo's experience does most of the talking for him. Artists he has most recently represented include such nationally respected performers as blues guitarist Jonny Lang, humorist Garrison Keillor, vocal harmonists The Blenders, and rockers Keri Noble and Michelle Branch. In his position as the first-ever Midwestern-based chair of the American Bar Association's Forum on the Entertainment and Sports Industries, he's living proof that not all entertainment lawyers have to move to the East or West Coasts to make a name for themselves.

Though he spends a healthy percentage of his time flying back and forth across the country, Abdo insists that Minnesota is his home. "I have deep roots in this city," he says. "I married my high school girlfriend. I live in my parents' old house. I have four kids who go to school here. I'm not going anywhere."

The sheer strength of Abdo's personality, combined with his commitment to nurturing the careers of up-and-coming artists, is part of the reason he's been able to win the respect of his peers. His determination to build a successful career on his own terms has gained him a degree of notoriety in his field.

"To see a prominent entertainment lawyer coming from the Midwest is unusual to say the least," says Jay Cooper, former ABA entertainment forum chair, entertainment guru, and shareholder at Greenberg Traurig in Santa Monica, Calif. "Outside of Ken, I don't remember anybody of any substance in the industry coming out of Minneapolis or St. Paul. He's changing the landscape."

Ed Pierson, general counsel for Warner/Chappell Music, says there are times when he envies Abdo's decision to stick close to home. Like Abdo, he began his career in his hometown of Denver, far away from the coastal entertainment centers, but a few decades ago he pulled up stakes and moved to Los Angeles.

"Over the years I think Ken's been tempted by the idea of getting an office out here, but I think he's going to stay put," Pierson says. "I know that he's living a better life in Minneapolis than he would out

©STEVE JENNINGS



Keri Noble and Jonny Lang are two performers Abdo represents. Says Noble, "Ken's the kind of guy who likes to do work from the grassroots up. He likes to be at the roundtable meetings; he likes to be part of the development of an artist."

here. There's a quality of life in Minnesota that keeps both entertainers and their lawyers there. For years now, Ken has been showing the rest of us how it can be done."

It's A Family Affair

Gaining the respect of the country's entertainment industry took a healthy investment of time, money, and moral support. Abdo, who made "very, very little income" representing entertainers during the early years of building his practice, was fortunate to have the backing of his late father, John, and his older brother Robert.

After earning his law degree from William Mitchell, Abdo went to work at the firm his father founded in 1936 and his brother joined in 1970. The sixth of seven siblings, Abdo had spent much of his late teens and early 20s playing in bands and operating Special Sounds, a mobile disc jockey service, so it came as a surprise to just about everyone when he announced his plans to go to law school.

"Nobody in my family thought I'd grow up and get a serious job," Abdo says, laughing. "But I had toured with bands, and I had recorded, and I saw how difficult it was to make a living as a musician. I knew I wanted to make a living, and I knew from my child-

hood that lawyers could do that. I appreciated the security that my brother and father had created for themselves and their families.”

During his first years at the firm, Abdo, always the eager younger sibling, picked up just about any sort of work that his father and brother passed his way. “I was fortunate to be trained in old-school practice,” he says. “I handled divorce work, criminal defense work, employment matters. In my spare time, I was able to bring in a fair amount of work for the firm by doing what nobody else wanted to do.”

While Abdo appreciated gaining a well-rounded legal education, what he really wanted to do was represent musicians and other entertainers. He started out reviewing contracts for radio DJs, and when word got around about the services he could provide, more clients came forward.

“At the beginning, I did a lot of divorces for musicians, wills for musicians, DWIs,” Abdo recalls. “I

‘To see a prominent entertainment lawyer coming from the Midwest is unusual to say the least.’

worked with DJs who were offered employment contracts.” But this wasn’t the kind of entertainment law Abdo dreamed about doing. “I still wasn’t satisfied,” he admits. “I really love music, and I wanted to be part of the ground-level development of content. I find that kind of work the most exciting. To this day I will still represent developing musicians who are talented and young and wish to develop their careers.”

Abdo began to give serious thought to taking on more entertainment clients, researching what it would take to build his practice. When he announced his intention to devote more time to developing an entertainment specialty, both Abdo’s father and brother were receptive. “There wasn’t resistance,” Abdo recalls, even though “my dad was *not* a rock ‘n’ roll guy. He was not a musician. He was a lawyer’s lawyer. My brother and my dad were well aware of my passion for music and entertainment law, so they let me go with it.”

For Abdo, “going with it” meant breaking into the music scene, both locally and nationally, introducing himself to the artists who inspired him, and building their confidence in his experience, enthusiasm, and good intentions.

“I started marketing myself as soon as I was confident that I had the skills and contacts needed to really be of assistance to my clients, to really help their careers take off,” Abdo says. “I started going out to bars, going to L.A. and New York. I needed to get out there, to be where the action is.”

As it turned out, building a bicoastal reputation took time, but for Abdo, one big break came in the form of a teenage blues guitarist from Fargo, N.D., named Jonny Lang. When Lang and his family signed Abdo as their attorney, it cemented his reputation as a player on the national scene.

“At first it was difficult for me to get national work because I was in Minnesota, but I’ve made it work for me by developing a reputation and building contacts,” Abdo says. “Now that I’m established, people know my work and know I can deliver for them. Once you’re in, you’re in.”

Abdo’s brother Robert says he always believed in his brother’s ability to make it in the tough world of entertainment law. His father did, too. They supported his endeavor because they knew it would pay off one day. And it has.

“I love my brother, and I wanted him to be happy and successful at what he did,” Robert Abdo says. “From an economic point of view, his work is now paying off, but it’s not easy building one of these practices, and it took him years to get established. You have to be very talented—which I think he is. You also have to be very patient. If anyone could do it, Ken could. He is unique and very brilliant.”

A Song In His Heart

Abdo can’t remember a time in his life when he wasn’t interested in music. When he was a kid, he formed a singing act with his younger sister called, simply, Ken and Ann.

“We had a great sound,” he explains. “We sang perfect sibling harmonies.” He played several musical instruments, and by the time he was 10, he’d been bitten by the rock ‘n’ roll bug. For years, he thought he’d be a professional musician when he grew up, but deep in his heart he knew he didn’t have what it takes to devote his life to his art. A real rock ‘n’ roller, he says, would starve before he’d sell his guitar. By the time he’d finished college, Abdo realized he wouldn’t pick art over food. He wanted music *in* his life, but he didn’t want it to *be* his life.

“At some point, I discovered that I didn’t have the vocation to be a musician, but I had the vocation to be a lawyer. You are a musician because you *have* to be, not just because you *want* to be. I felt like my calling was to be a lawyer.”

Even during his law school years, Abdo found a way to make music. He played drums in Mitch Williams and the Judicial Overtones, the college “house band” for the annual talent show and other events. “It was a great way to get to know other students,” he recalls. He still has several good friends from the band, including fellow grads John Gibbs ’82 and Irving Colacci ’82.

Abdo’s four children aren’t immune from the rock ‘n’ roll bug, either. When his sons were still young, he performed with them in a band, first named



A few years ago Abdo and his sons, from left, Jake, 18, and Matthew, 17, formed the band The Abdomen. Abdo bowed out of the band, which now includes his daughter Mari, 15, when Jake got his driver's license and Mari took up the drums.

Pop Gun, and later The Abdomen. The group, which now includes his daughter, once won the Best Teen Artist award from the Minnesota Music Academy. Abdo is one proud papa.

"My kids are better musicians than I was at that age," he jokes. "I'm cramming music down their throats with the hopes that they rebel and become surgeons." He used to perform with his kids, but, "As soon as my oldest got his driver's license and my daughter started to play drums, I bowed out."

For My Next Act...

As Abdo's national reputation continues to grow, as he signs one big name after another, he shows no interest in slowing down. During an average month, he still spends several days on the road, attending concerts, hanging out at bars and meeting with clients. While the time away is fun, it's also networking, Abdo explains, and for an entertainment lawyer, networking is work.

"Talent comes from everywhere," he says. "You just have to be out there in play to discover it."

Pierson, of Warner/Chappell Music, says that Abdo may be able to work a room with the best of them, but he's a schmoozer with a heart. He says he understands why so many artists want to work with him. "He has great sensitivity," Pierson says. "He has a great sense of humor. He's one of the greatest people I know. He's great to be around. The whole thing means more to him than just business, and that comes

through when you get to know him. There's a reason why Jonny Lang wants to go fishing with Ken Abdo."

Singer Keri Noble recently moved to Minneapolis from Detroit. When she signed a recording deal with Manhattan/EMI, she hired Abdo to help negotiate it. "I have a record deal now," she says. "All of a sudden, everything becomes a lot more complicated than just show up and play. I have a lot of contracts to sign. I have a lot of things going on. Ken helps me with that."

Since the pair started working together, Abdo introduced Noble to Lang, and she won the plum assignment of being the opening act for his latest tour. It's the kind of exposure a young artist like Noble lives for, and when the deal was struck, Abdo was almost as happy as she was.

"Ken's the kind of guy who likes to do work from the grassroots up," Noble says. "He likes to be at the roundtable meetings; he likes to be part of the development of an artist."

"Ken is a great guy because he's honest. He'll tell you what he thinks if you ask him. He only works with artists that he believes in, and that comes across when you're working with him. It feels great. Not many people can say that about working with their lawyers." ■

'The whole thing

means more to him than just business, and that comes through when you get to know him. There's a reason why Jonny Lang wants to go fishing with Ken Abdo.'