

“A Recording Artist’s Best Friend”

How Millwood’s Bob Donnelly—now a celebrated artists’ rights attorney—earned such words of praise from the likes of Ronnie Spector and other music superstars.

BY MICHAEL KOHN



If jazz great Dianne Reeves, rock stars Sting and Aerosmith, the composer of Celtic sensation Riverdance and Hasidic reggae phenomenon Matisyahu ever come to Millwood, New York for a barbecue, they would no doubt be treated to the story of how small-mouth bass came to occupy Bob Donnelly’s fish pond. Despite representing some of the biggest names in the music business, attorney Bob Donnelly values the simple, yet most important things in life—his family, his home and his heritage. On the heels of a dinner at New York’s Canal Room honoring his 30 years of service as a music lawyer, *Inside Chappaqua* was curious to learn more about a local attorney who is renown in the industry as one of its staunchest advocates of artists’ rights.

Perhaps more than any other influence, Bob Donnelly’s career has been shaped by his upbringing in a blue-collar Irish family in Manhattan’s Stuyvesant Town. Although he never showed promise as a musician him-

self, Bob was a huge music fan from an early age. He chuckled as he recalled the main reason he was invited to all the high schools parties—he had all the records! Noting that there weren’t many role models for working-class youth, Bob described a visit to his high school by lawyer and politician Paul O’Dwyer as a “seminal moment” in his life. In his Irish brogue, O’Dwyer, who made a career as a civil rights attorney and later as City Council President, impressed Bob as he spoke about his love of law and how one could use it to change people’s lives. Evidently, Bob took those words to heart.

When Bob went off to college, he didn’t seem destined to have a career in the music industry. He attended Providence College on a track scholarship and earned a master’s degree in counseling psychology at Columbia University. Following law school at St. John’s University, he landed a job with a Wall Street law firm. It wasn’t long, however, before his career path changed. During a case against the William Morris talent agency, Bob met two agents who changed the course of his life. Impressed by his skills as an attorney, music managers Steve Leber and David Krebs invited him to join their fledgling company as in-house counsel. His decision required a “leap of faith” because they were offering him a position at only one-eighth his salary. It was a good call. While at Leber-Krebs, Bob helped launch one of their first artists, Aerosmith, for eventual rock and roll fame.

According to Bob, his career would not have been possible without the enduring and selfless support of his best friend and wife, Marie, with whom he has been happily married for 29 years. Bob and Marie met while working together on the campaign of Chappaqua’s former assemblyman, Ed Meyer, when he ran for Congress in 1976. Following a 15 year career as assistant to Roy Bostock, who was CEO of the major advertising agency of D’Arcy, Masius, Benton & Bowles, Marie retired to spend more time with the couple’s grandchildren.

After years in private practice working on some of the biggest legal cases facing the music industry, you could understand if Bob wanted to take it easy, yet he shows no signs of slowing down. Sure, he has made plenty of time for his three children, Chris, Cindy and Alexis, and his six grandchildren, but he emphatically told me that he makes sure to see the artists he represents at least once a year. In fact, he is always in demand to assess new artists and often travels to New York City to listen to “up and coming” bands at music clubs. What’s his opinion about choosing a profession in which he is immersed in music day and night? “It doesn’t get any better than that.”

Admittedly, I was impressed by the 38 gold and platinum albums which adorn Bob's den and office at his home in Millwood. As we spoke, however, I learned that Bob didn't hang those awards as a testament to his accomplishments or as a means to simply stroke his ego. Rather, the gleam in his eye as he spoke about his career revealed an innocent amazement that he even had the opportunity to contribute in such a significant way to music in America. The impression I got was more like—pinch me, I must be dreaming. More than once he exclaimed, "I am the luckiest of all in my law school class."

Bob's legacy and contributions to the music industry can best be illustrated by some of his legal cases. With the assistance of then New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, Bob was able to secure a \$55 million dollar settlement from record companies in unpaid royalties to artists. He was also part of the team which won a multi-million dollar settlement in unpaid royalties for Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, Ronnie Spector, and the two remaining members of the Ronettes, who scored a huge hit with "Be My Baby," later featured in the hit movie "Dirty Dancing."

In an exclusive to *Inside Chappaqua*, Ronnie Spector spoke glowingly of Bob. His nice guy persona aside, she described a dogged, take no prisoner protector of artists' rights. "As nice as Bob is," noted Spector, "if you try to cheat me or take advantage of me, Bob will make you wish you did not try. He will not tolerate people trying to take advantage of artists." (For additional comments

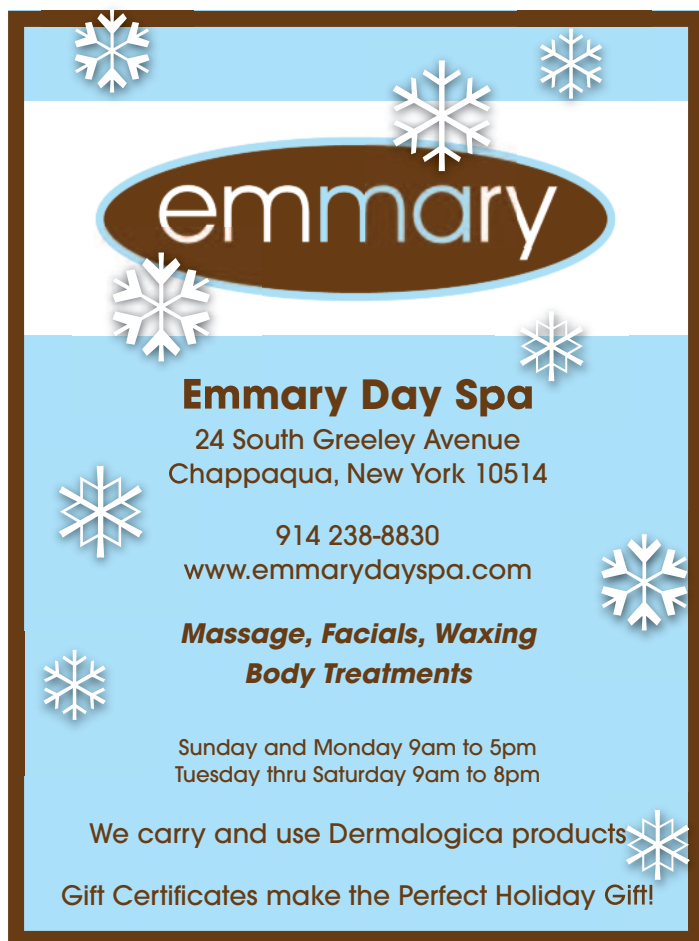
from Spector and other legendary figures from the music world, see Sidebar on page TK: "Grateful to Bob")

In just one example of the kind of activism to which Spector alludes, Bob sued white music promoters who engaged in a pattern of racism by shutting off black promoters from promoting their own music acts once the performers had attained financial success. Bob clearly, never forgot the inspirational message he heard in high school from Paul O'Dwyer.

He also never forgot his own Irish roots. Bob spoke with great passion about a successful case he brought against Green Linnett Records which failed to pay royalties to Irish acts such Solas, Eileen Ivers and Cherish the Ladies. He laughed about the resolution of that case, which was won with the help of a publicity stunt he orchestrated. Borrowing a huge inflatable rat used in picket lines by the American Federation of Music, the musicians demonstrated with it outside Green Linnett's corporate offices in Danbury, Connecticut. With coverage by the Danbury Times and NPR, Green Linnett settled soon thereafter. Who said the law couldn't be a little fun too? Recently, Bob was named by Irish America Magazine to its inaugural list of the 100 most prominent lawyers in the United States of Irish-American descent. And, the only entertainment lawyer on the list!

One client Bob particularly admires is Grammy Award-winning jazz vocalist Dianne Reeves (he strongly recommends that you catch her show sometime). He told me how she was engaged to record two songs for the movie about Edward R. Murrow, "Good Night, and Good Luck,"

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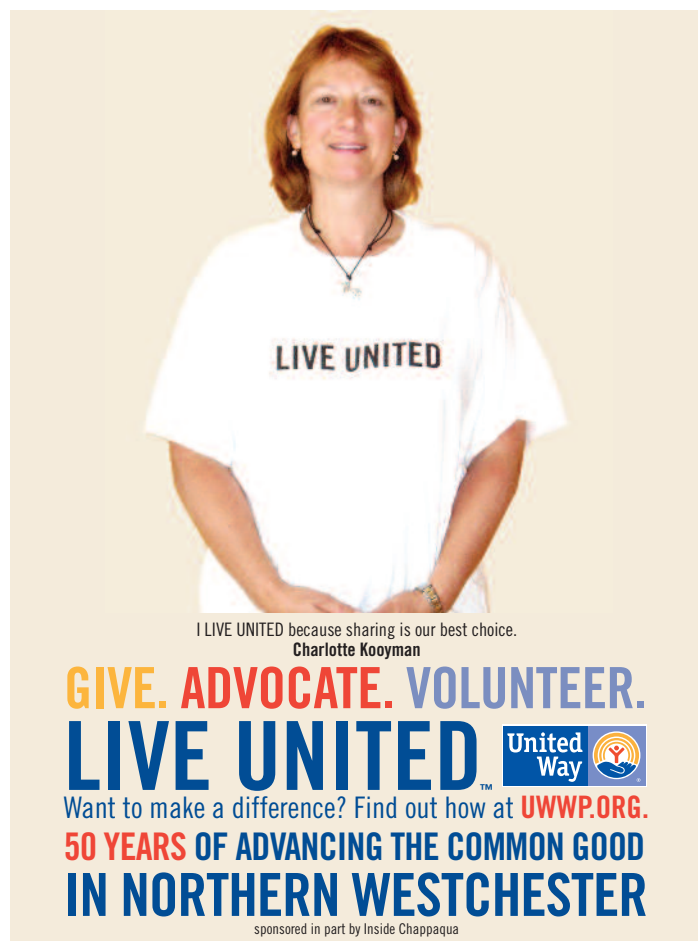
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directed and written by George Clooney. They liked her so much that she was asked to record all the songs for the movie, but didn't want to pay her additional royalties, a condition to which Bob could not let her agree. After fruitless negotiations with the producer, Bob received a telephone call. At first, Bob thought it was one of his friends playing a practical joke on him because the caller announced himself as George Clooney. He played along until Clooney mentioned a detail about which his friend could not have known. As it turned out, Clooney was a fan of Reeves too. She got the additional royalties. In the words of Dianne Reeves herself: "Bob has been my lawyer and friend for years. He is a warrior on the legal battlefield and the most gracious of gentlemen when off."

It was fascinating listening to Bob talk about the inside workings of the music industry and the various issues confronting today's musicians, especially the transformational impact made by the Internet. Still, as a long time jazz fan, I was most interested to ask him about one of his clients, jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman, who in 1959, recorded one of jazz music's most influential albums, "The Shape of Jazz to Come." My query must have hit the right note because Bob jumped out of his seat to find a compilation of Coleman's music he stored in his massive CD collection. Bob had a hand in that too. He helped Coleman obtain better royalties for the compendium put out by Atlantic Records based on the fact that Coleman's old contract with the company covered only vinyl records, but not CD's!

As I listened to Bob talk about Ornette Coleman, it was easy to understand just how much Bob cares for his clients and how much he values his role in the music industry. So, it was no wonder that over 275 people showed up at the Canal Room to celebrate Bob's 30 years in the industry. He called it "an amazing night" which ended in an all-star jam session. He proudly showed me his gift—a Fender guitar signed by all the musicians in attendance.

Interviewing Bob Donnelly made me think—Wow! Here is a guy who has made a reputation and a living in the music business as one of the premier advocates of artists' rights. It made me wonder how much richer the music scene in America would be if everyone thought like Bob.

MICHAEL KOHN is an attorney, author and a contributing editor for IC who moonlights as a karaoke deejay because he loves to sing.

Grateful to Bob...



"Bob has been my attorney for the last couple of decades, and he is a big reason why I am still doing what I love to do, making music. Bob is a friend first, a therapist second—and anyone in Rock & Roll for over 40 years needs a therapist—and third, he is my attorney. He sometimes gets more excited than I do about my career. When I was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, he was freaking! I could not help but feel great 'cause of Bob's enthusiasm. He took what I had been through in my career—how I was cheated and blackballed—very personally. He is always there for me as an artist, but he cares deeply about the person behind the music, and that's why I love Bob. Bob Donnelly is a recording artist's best friend. I love you Bob."

Rock and Roll Hall of Famer Ronnie Spector

"It's been a pleasure to know and work with Bob Donnelly so closely in the last few years. His passion and love for the music and musicians he works with is genuine and full of great energy. I feel a strong confidence and trust with Bob that you need to succeed in this business. Last year marked my 30th year as an international touring musician so we share this milestone together. Congratulations, Bob!!!! Now, on to the next 30."

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