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A Unique Blend of Music and the Law

By Michael D. White

Two Valley attorneys, Marc Sallus and Barry Goldberg, have melded a lifelong love of music with their highly successful careers in the law. Active in two of the most successful 'legal' music groups in the country, they share some thoughts on their two passions and how each has impacted the other.

CHECK OUT A DICTIONARY AND YOU’LL SEE music simply defined as “a contrived or natural sound that is pleasant to the ear.”

Some two thousand-plus years ago, the Greek philosopher Plato took that unadorned, rather rudimentary, definition to a much higher level when he drew a parallel between the law and music. That contrived or natural sound, he wrote, “is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything.”

Everything, it would seem, including the law itself.

“I’ve always found it interesting that there seems to be a large number of musicians that are lawyers,” says Woodland Hills’ personal injury attorney and trombonist Barry Goldberg, who plays with both the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic Orchestra and its swing and jazz revival group, the Big Band of Barristers.

The L.A. Lawyers Philharmonic made its debut in January 2009 and describes itself as “an orchestra where prosecutors, defense attorneys, civil trial lawyers, entertainment lawyers, corporation lawyers, real estate lawyers, personal injury lawyers, probate lawyers, judges and law students meet in harmony.”

Several major cities around the country boast “legal” music groups, but Los Angeles is widely considered to be home to one of the best. In 2012, the L.A. Big Band participated in and won the national competition at the Art Institute in Chicago.



Big Band of Barristers Barry Goldberg (center row, second from left) and Marc Sallus (center row, third from left)

The Philharmonic recently presented a concert at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles, with future local concerts planned for the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts and several other venues. The Big Band has taken its repertoire of Count Basie, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, and Benny Goodman swing and jazz to such locales as the Shrine Auditorium, the Los Angeles Biltmore, the Beverly Wilshire, and, a few

years ago, the Marriott in Woodland Hills for the SFVBA’s Installation Gala.

The entire experience, says SFVBA treasurer-elect Goldberg, has actually made him a happier, if not better lawyer. Unlike what often transpires in the courtroom, making music with other attorneys “is cooperative, by its very nature. When you play in a musical group, you have to take direction and you have to be part of a section or a team. You have to work together. It’s non-adversarial.”

Goldberg recalls his introduction to music being an irresistible urge to march around the house to the song “76 Trombones” at the age of five or six. Responding accordingly, his father marched him down to the local music store where



Barry Goldberg on the slide trombone at Taft High School in Woodland Hills, 1975

he was told that his arms were too short to play the trombone and that it might be better if he concentrated on the trumpet or the flute.

“Nothing came of that,” he says. “Then out of the blue when I was about 12 years old, my dad bought me a trombone and I took to it right away. I was in several music groups in junior high, took lessons and that was my instrument. It was great because there wasn’t that much competition. All the great players were playing the saxophone and trumpet, so I got to play lead throughout high school.”

From Taft High School in Woodland Hills, Goldberg entered UCLA where he was the only freshman in the UCLA jazz band “with a bunch of guys who are basically professional level players now.” Life in the form of raising a family and law school led to a “retirement” from music that spanned about three decades before he found the time to pick up the original trombone that his dad had bought him and start playing again.

Learning, to his surprise, that there are groups for every level of musician in Southern California, Goldberg wound up playing with a group of “retired, silver-haired people” called the Seniors of Note, and then with several other bands while taking lessons from an instructor who encouraged him to get involved with other musically-inclined attorneys.



Katella High School's Marc Sallus (top row, far left)

"I sent out a couple of emails and said I'd like to play with you guys and one responded saying that they'd just started up a big band group and wanted to know if I played any big band music," says Goldberg. An enthusiastic affirmative eventually led to current spots as lead trombonist with the Big Band and principle trombonist with the Lawyers' Philharmonic.

Joining Goldberg in the trombone section of both groups is trust and estate litigator Marc Sallus, a partner at SFVBA President's Circle member, Oldman, Sallus, Gold, Birnberg & Coleman in Encino.

Raised in Orange County in a family "that has a lot of musicians, who only do other jobs so they can make a living," his earliest memories are of "watching people perform and listening to music all the time," with the piano, singing, and brass instruments playing a major role in his life from the age of six.

It's difficult for Sallus, who plays piano, trumpet, and baritone horn, as well as the trombone, to select an all-time favorite instrument. He preferred the trumpet when he played in the award-winning band at Katella High School in the early '70s, and, he recalls, "I could play it very, very well, but now I really enjoy playing the trombone. Things change with age."

Claremont Men's College, where Sallus was an undergraduate, lacked a Music Department and Sallus lacked the time to play as much as he would have liked to. "I played in a musical group and they paid me money, which was nice. And I created a pep band for the football team. There were about five or ten of us and we handed out about a hundred kazoos so we could make noise."

Be it with either a kazoos or a trombone, with music, you learn practice, balance, performance, and control, which is critical "both as a lawyer and musician because you have to have a modicum of control over what you are going to do."

If you don't, says Sallus, "the performance or the job you're going to do as a lawyer is not going to be as precise as it needs to be; the same with music where the notes work for a reason...you're supposed to follow them. Even in jazz, the chords are written for a reason. Just like the law."

Sallus, like fellow trombonist Goldberg, is surprised at how many attorneys have a musical alter-ego. "I was amazed...some have music degrees, graduate music degrees. We have a great flute player; she's from Colombia and can also sing fantastic opera."

The attorneys involved with the Philharmonic and the Big Band "are top lawyers and judges," says Goldberg. "In the Big Band the piano player is the presiding justice of the Court of Appeals and our lead saxophone player is one of the most well-known entertainment lawyers in the world."

With the music and the law so delicately interwoven, there's a question that begs to be answered: How does one affect the other?

Both men play different versions of the trombone: While Sallus feels more comfortable with the valve trombone, Goldberg favors the classic slide type, so it's understandable if they have slightly different takes on the question.

"I'm a better lawyer because I'm a musician," says Sallus.

Playing music, he says, "takes me away from other problems or issues and helps me be more creative. I go into court and worry about some legal problem and then go to the Big Band or orchestra and I'm transported to and transformed in an entirely different world where I'm not thinking about that problem. With the music, I'm doing something more creative"—a process, he says that allows him recalibrate and "reexamine problems and a different insight."

"I'm a lawyer who plays music," says Goldberg, who keeps a mouthpiece on his desk as a paperweight. "Think of it this way—while other people are doing whatever hobby they do after work, I get to play the greatest music ever written on earth. It's great." 



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