

# Being In A Band Made Me A Better Lawyer

By **Eliad Shapiro** (August 20, 2026)

*In this **Expert Analysis series**, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email [expertanalysis@law360.com](mailto:expertanalysis@law360.com).*

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When I negotiated my first contract nearly 20 years ago, I wasn't a lawyer. I was a songwriter and the lead guitarist in a New York City indie rock band.

The contract was a publishing deal for a song few people had heard, written by a band that few people had heard of. By any commercial measure the deal was tiny. But for four musicians barely 20 years old, it was monumental.

And, to our surprise, that was exactly the way our lawyer treated it. I was self-conscious walking into our first meeting; our lawyer's client roster was impressive and his credentials impeccable. He helped us pro bono, and it is safe to say our deal did not put his kids through college. But none of that mattered.



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He walked me through every clause. He took my questions and answered them with calm reassurance and a healthy dose of real talk. I left his office feeling that my small deal had been, for an hour, as important as the major deals on his desk.

I did not know it then, but that lawyer was teaching me how to practice law. The lesson would only come into focus years later, from the other side of the desk.

I co-founded my band in 2005 and played until 2010. Music is a recreational passion now, but in those years, the band was a small business I built and shared with my bandmates. We cut three albums, toured and opened for acts like The Mooney Suzuki, The Living End and Richard Lloyd of Television (a personal guitar hero of mine).

We licensed our songs to shows and films, including "True Blood," "One Tree Hill," "90210" and "License to Wed." At one point, we were named one of the best emerging rock bands in New York by The Deli — which, I should clarify, is a magazine about music, not pastrami.

We got to play storied New York City venues like the Bowery Ballroom, and our gigs were increasingly attended by people we did not recognize. Then, in 2010, I left the band to enroll at Cornell Law School. Friends assumed I was trading one life for another. But a life is not something you trade in — it comes with you.

Much of what I rely on as a litigator I learned on stage and in poorly ventilated New York City rehearsal rooms with my bandmates. Two lessons in particular have stayed with me.

## **Partnerships take work.**

Nobody warns you that a sustained career in music is really a crash course in entrepreneurship. The music is the product, but the product alone won't sustain you.

You learn to build a brand and promote it. You learn to search for and develop revenue streams and the ecosystem around them — touring, licensing, the humble merch table.

You learn to vet the promoters, managers and vendors who want a piece of what you're building, to track revenue against expenses, and to set goals that feed your growth. Do it right, and you wake up one day and realize you are running a small business — and that you don't run it alone.

From the audience, a band produces art. From the inside, it is a partnership — and partnerships are harder than they look. Four people run the enterprise together, split the money together, share the credit together, and care intensely about every decision: the set list, the sound, which gigs to take, what song makes the album.

Passion is the whole point. After all, nobody joins a band to be indifferent. But passion means strong opinions, and strong opinions mean you learn fast how to listen, persuade and find the version of an idea everyone can get behind. The work has to get done, and someone must keep four equals rowing in the same direction without any authority to make them pick up an oar.

That turned out to be ideal training for partnership of another kind.

Law firms are built on the same premise as a band: talented people, each with a practice of their own, choosing to build something together. There is no traditional corporate chain of command — nor should there be, because autonomy is what lets good lawyers do their best work.

What holds it together instead is trust, persuasion and a genuine respect for what your partners bring to the table. Those are learned skills, and I was lucky to get my first lessons early — working out arrangements, in every sense, with three bandmates whose talent I admired and whose opinions I could not simply overrule.

By the time I arrived at a firm, collaborating with strong-minded equals didn't feel like an obstacle to the work. It felt like the work.

## **Never forget what it feels like to be the client.**

The band also taught me the value of leverage, because we so rarely had any. We negotiated with venues, labels, producers and publishers, and not as the most powerful party in the room. We signed contracts we barely understood and lived with what they said.

By the time I reached law school, I already knew what it felt like to sit across a table from someone with more information and more power, worried about protecting something I had built, but willing to take risks to grow it further. That is the position I was in when I signed my first music publishing deal.

My lawyer, who treated an unknown band's contract as seriously as any deal on his desk, understood something I only fully appreciated once I was the one being looked to for counsel: A client comes to a lawyer because something important to them is on the line. Big

or small, novel or familiar — it makes no difference. They are placing their trust in us, and what they want, beyond the best possible advice, is to feel cared for.

My job is to show them I will run through walls to get their matter right. That does not mean surrendering judgment — part of the job is telling clients what they do not want to hear. But to a client, there is a difference between feeling handled and feeling heard.

Playing music also helps me connect with clients in a more human way. When clients learn I was in a band, I become more than just a litigator; I become a person with a history and a life outside the office. Sometimes, what connects you to a client is the part of you that has nothing to do with the law.

Today, I still play music. When I hit a wall on a brief and the argument will not come together, I put down the pen and pick up the guitar. Twenty minutes later, the problem is still there — but the solution is there, too.

My best work happens when both sides of my brain are operating: the analytical side that builds the argument and the creative side that finds the way in. Music taught me they are the same muscle, worked from two directions.

## **Conclusion**

You do not need to have played in a band to be a good lawyer, but I am a better one for it — better tuned (ba-dum tsh) to the people around me, faster on my feet and more determined to treat each of my clients as if they are my only one. I learned that last part from a music lawyer who gave a young guitarist his full attention. I have been trying to pay it forward ever since.

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