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LESLIE JOSÉ ZIGEL

“Inventing meaning while letting loose is the essence and promise of Jazz.” – Robert Christgau

Music journalist Robert Christgau, said “inventing meaning while letting loose is the essence and promise of Jazz.” So follows the career of Leslie José Zigel, partner and chair of the Entertainment, Media and Technology Practice at Greenspoon Marder. From rock & roll roadie to advisor to the super stars, Leslie’s career matches the rhythm of Jazz music: creating meaning while experiencing every brilliance of the entertainment industry. Music is what ultimately drew Leslie to both his chosen profession as well as his passion project—jamming. Born to classical and opera enthusiast doctors, he fell in love with classic rock and jazz and started playing percussion, piano and saxophone at a very young age.

In college – Leslie attended the Kool Jazz Festival at the Kennedy Center with the likes of Miles Davis, Benny Goodman, and Elvin Jones among others. It was here he felt called to the business side of music, when he got to see the festival’s producer, George Wein, jam with legendary Jazz musicians. Like most in the industry, Leslie’s career began humbly: an internship at the Pittsburgh Jazz Festival (also produced by George Wein) fetching coffee, picking up artists and crew at the airport and hauling equipment. He shadowed that festival’s line producer, John Schreiber, closely, even on the 10K-a-day runs that John was prone

to take. Leslie quickly gained John’s confidence. Within eight months, John offered him a job as his assistant in New York where Leslie got his dream gig working for George Wein’s organization.

Leslie started at the bottom answering phones, drafting letters and the like but soon graduated to the road as a production assistant. In the summer of 1987, Leslie was the European tour manager for Branford Marsalis. This experience served as the modulation – the smooth transition – from an amateur to a practiced industry specialist. And moreover, like George Wein, he was fortunate to





have Branford invite him to the stage on his 24th birthday in Sardinia, Italy to jam with the band (featuring Kenny Kirkland and Lewis Nash) for the encore. He went on to lead teams in virtually every aspect of event production, including running the country's largest outdoor Hispanic concert series – the Miller Maquina Musical, American Express Gold Card events and Platinum Card By Invitation Only, gaining tremendous experience in marketing and logistics. It was the music though, that drove his career cadence.

“I believe music is amazingly curative. To play a part in working with musicians, bringing their music to a stage and watching the expressions on a fan's face...that's what really moves me,” Leslie said.

With an enviable foundation, Leslie's next move was to the University of Miami School of Law, where he set a goal to become the top entertainment attorney in the Latin Music world. His Argentinian roots and bi-lingual background aided his promotion to General Counsel of BMG's Latin division, before becoming Vice President of Legal and Business Affairs for Latin America overseeing all publishing and record deals and big picture legal issues for the region.

Queue the drum solo and enter the dotcom revolution. Disruptive and exciting, Leslie had a front row seat for innovation in the industry, and oversaw the transfer of BMG's Latin assets to digital format for the launch of iTunes. His entrepreneurial spirit was awakened, and Leslie branched into multiple endeavors in the tech and entertainment industry, eventually starting his own law firm.

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“Being an entertainment lawyer allows me to combine my love of music with my affinity for business,” said Leslie. “I view life through the paradigm of Jazz. There is a set of constructs and rules, but you have a tremendous amount of flexibility within it. Law is the same way; there is structure but also freedom.”

Artists across the globe gravitate towards that philosophy, including Pitbull, Carlos Vives, Ana Gabriel, Mario, and The Wailers, to name a few. Among his business clients are LMP Motors, Endemol Shine Latino, Fuel Venture Capital, and more. Leslie draws upon his vast experience as a musician, producer, and business executive to provide legal advice that considers the many unique aspects of the industry. “One client told me I act more like a musician than a lawyer, and that to me is a tremendous compliment,” Leslie mused. “I’m a bass player so for me it’s all about collaboration. I can’t be rigid – as a musician or attorney – and I always try to look at things from a different perspective to harmonize the issue at hand – whether a business deal or navigating chord changes and jams.”



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Leslie’s success has enabled him to give back to his community in meaningful ways through music education. He passionately serves on the Board of Directors for Young Musicians Unite (YMU), a non-profit that offers a platform for young musicians in the inner city communities of Miami to unite and reinforce the importance of music education. It reaches 2,500 students across 25 schools and provides in excess of 267,000 hours of music education each year.

Leslie recounts amazing moments through his career like sharing space with the greats (like Berry Gordy) at the International Song Writer’s Hall of Fame and witnessing brilliant performances across the globe, but his favorite memories involve sharing the stage with many of his musical idols. In addition to Branford, he’s jammed with the likes of Carlos Vives, Aston Barrett Jr., Stanley Jordan, Victor Wooten, Nestor Torres, George Wein and – perhaps most significantly – he’s transferred his love of music to his sons. Leslie jams with them regularly, covering the Grateful Dead, Phish, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Stevie Wonder, all with the improvisational spirit of Jazz.

Few people have a true 360 degree perspective of the music industry. Leslie Zigel, though, has invented meaning while cutting loose, and models the “essence and promise” of Jazz in his parallel career. “Music is equally art and activity,” he said, “and I’m honored and humbled to be part of the industry’s continued evolution.”