

MUSIC

'I was a bass player before I was a lawyer': How Law Rocks raised \$4 million for charity



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Devon Engel is a lawyer.

But he's also what he likes to think of as a "hobbyist" musician.

"I've played bass my whole life," he says. "But I'm a lawyer by day, so I don't do music professionally. I just do it for fun."

Which is exactly how he got involved in Law Rocks.

The nonprofit organization stages Battles of the Bands between lawyers in 24 cities around the world, from L.A. to Paris to Sydney, Australia, raising money for local charities.

Law Rocks was launched in 2009 when a man named Nick Child, hoping to challenge the public perception of lawyers, presented a single show at the 100 Club in London.

Three years later, Ted Scott brought the concept to the States with a Law Rocks event at the Whisky a Go Go in Hollywood.

Through the years, the nonprofit has raised more than \$4 million for local charities.

How Law Rocks came to Phoenix's Crescent Ballroom

Engel brought Law Rocks to Phoenix for an inaugural event at Crescent Ballroom in early 2020, raising funds for Alice Cooper's Solid Rock Teen Center.

The Battle returns to Crescent on Thursday, Dec. 9, with proceeds earmarked once again for Cooper's Solid Rock, which opened a second teen center this summer in Mesa.

"The Law Rocks M.O. is they pick a really cool venue," Engel says, "so that the lawyers who are hobbyist musicians are all like, 'Boy, I've always wanted to play on *that* stage. I've seen great shows there.'"

The opportunity to let their inner rock star out to play a prestige venue is what motivates these lawyers to drum up the kind of cash it takes to enter.

Omi Crawford is the non-profit's senior director.

"It's incredible how many lawyers are also talented musicians," she says.

"It's always been one of the things that has blown me away. Some of these bands are just so good and you're like, 'Wow, they also are an attorney.' That's kind of a cool thing."

The appeal to the lawyers who agree to play is obvious to Crawford.

"Some have said, 'I chose to go down what seemed the more responsible path, but my heart is in music,'" she says. "So this is a chance for them to get to live that dream."

The other cool thing, Crawford says, is that the firms come out to cheer them on.

"And they're like, 'Oh, my goodness,'" she says. "I've seen people be so surprised that their colleagues have this kind of secret skill or persona."

Why they donate proceeds to Alice Cooper's Solid Rock Teen Centers

Law Rocks shows are structured differently in different cities. In many cases, the individual bands select a local charity for the money they raise.

"It's kind of in our slogan," Crawford says. "Rock globally, give locally."

Cooper's Solid Rock Teen Centers also hit another key part of the Law Rocks mission, to promote music education for underserved youth. They've raised funds for local chapters of Little Kids Rock, Blue Bear Music in San Francisco and Willie Mae Rock Camp in Brooklyn, to name a few.

Engel got involved in Law Rocks when he put a band together for a Battle of the Bands at the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C., near where General Dynamics, his employer, has its headquarters and Engel often travels from his home in Scottsdale.

"I was able to get enough lawyers to put a band together," Engel says.

"But honestly, we weren't that great."

The next year, he got motivated, sending out for reinforcements — a lawyer who plays in his cover band here in the Valley, Retro-Active, and members of Several Dudes, a band he played in while attending college in Atlanta in the '80s.

They're all lawyers, too.

"Suddenly, we had a real band that was good," he says.

What made the first Law Rocks show in Phoenix a 'smashing success'

After three years of competing in the D.C. Law Rocks battle, raising more than \$20,000 each year, Engel volunteered to get one started here in Phoenix.

"For a first event in a new city, it was a smashing success," Engel says.

"I think we raised about 30 grand. So we didn't knock it out of the park on the fundraising. But as far as just getting an event up and running? It was a ton of fun."

Alice Cooper's Solid Rock Teen Center did a lot to help him get it off the ground, from reaching out to judges to finding volunteers to handle video and photography, keeping the event expenses down.

That first year's judges were Dave Ellefson, formerly of Megadeth; Neal Smith, a founding member of the Alice Cooper group; Zeke Roeser, a Law Rocks regular whose dad is Buck Dharma of Blue Oyster Cult; and the late great Lawrence Zobia of Pistoleros.

Roeser returns to this year's judging panel, joined by Ken Mary of Flotsam and Jetsam and Josh Kennedy of the Black Moods.

Solid Rock has also helped with the promotion. Cooper himself has hyped the battles on KSLX-FM (100.7), where he hosts his own radio show.

Eight days out from the event in Phoenix, Engel says the lawyers have already raised \$43,000.

'You'd be surprised at how much talent there is from a bunch of lawyers'

For Engel, who's now on the nonprofit's board of directors, half the fun of Law Rocks is seeing how people react to his fellow attorneys kicking out the jams.

"You'd be surprised at how much talent there is from a bunch of lawyers," he says.

"I've played in five events. And the thing that I hear most consistently from people when they come for the first time is 'Oh my God. I thought I was sort of just coming to do my friend a favor.'"

Both of Engel's bands are competing in the Phoenix Law Rocks competition.

"I'm the general counsel of a \$5 billion company," he says. "So it's a stressful freaking job. And music is an unbelievably great stress reliever."

It's also just a lot of fun.

"This is just the perfect organization for me," Engel says. "That's why I joined the board. Everyone who knows me always thinks of me as that lawyer guy who plays bass. So getting to combine the two? That's just great."

Two years ago in D.C., Engel and his bandmates hired a dancer to join them on stage in a Godzilla costume as they dusted off a cover of Blue Oyster Cult's "Godzilla," a song they chose because they knew Buck Dharma's son was on the judges' panel.

"We decided we would pander to the judge," he recalls, with a laugh.

Roeser captured "Godzilla" on his phone and sent it to his dad.

"A couple days later," Engel says, I get a call from Zeke. He said, 'I sent my dad a cellphone video I took of you playing 'Godzilla.' And he thought you killed it. He might be giving you

a call because they're on their way to Phoenix."

Hello, 'cowbell consultant': How Blue Oyster Cult got involved

Blue Oyster Cult were playing the Van Buren on a Sunday and coming in Saturday, looking for something to do. When Dharma called, Engel invited him out to see his cover band at Wasted Grain in Scottsdale.

"You can imagine the people at this bar in Scottsdale," Engel says. "All of the sudden, Buck Dharma's onstage playing 'Godzilla.'"

They've had dinner several times since then and Dharma even made a guest appearance on a new recording by Several Dudes.

"He sent us a smoking guitar solo for the outro of this song," Engel says. "He also serves as our cowbell consultant."

No, really.

"One of the early versions I sent him of the tune for comment," Engel says, "he sent me a message saying 'I was gonna tell you more cowbell, but this song does *not* need more cowbell.'"

Dharma also introduced him to the other guys in BOC as "my friend Devon," saying, "He's a lawyer, but he's a hell of a bass player."

That's really all a "hobbyist" musician ever needs to hear.

"I was a bass player way before I was a lawyer," Engel says.

"I started playing bass in 5th grade. And I've kept it alive because it really does provide a wonderful outlet. Honestly, there are two things in the world that when I'm doing them, I'm not worried about anything else. Music's one. You can guess what the other one is."

Law Rocks Phoenix

When: 7 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 9.

Where: Crescent Ballroom, 308 N. Second Ave., Phoenix.

Admission: \$30-\$95.

Details: 602-716-2222, lawrocks.org.

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