

## From The Courtroom To The Whisky A Go Go: Attys Who Rock

By **Rachel Rippetoe**

Law360 (August 30, 2022, 4:48 PM EDT) -- In June, intellectual property partner Cynthia J. Cole ditched her blazer and pearls for a leather jacket and a band T-shirt. She stood onstage at the Chapel, a historic San Francisco venue where many indie and rock 'n' roll artists have played, from Toro y Moi to Elvis Costello.



Cynthia J. Cole, left, and Ava Jones performing with Flight Risk at June's battle of the bands. The band was formed at Cole's former firm, Baker Botts LLP. (Family Violence Appellate Project website)

The bass player next to her, the guitarist to her left and the drummer behind her were all lawyers at Baker Botts LLP, where Cole was working at the time. They led her into the next song, a cover of The Clash's "I Fought the Law." Cole, now a partner with Baker McKenzie, belted into the microphone, "Breakin' rocks in the hot sun/I fought the law, and the law won."

Baker Botts' rock group is called Flight Risk and it is just one of dozens of law firm bands. There's Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's Morgan Lewis & ROCKius, Greenberg Traurig LLP's The Meltones, Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP's Papa Gibson & the Writs of Replevin, Lieff Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein LLP's R-23s, Reed Smith LLP's Usual Suspects, Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP's The Doughboys and many more.

The lawyers — and law firm staff members including administrative assistants and paralegals — take time out of their busy schedules to practice as much as once a week in garages, private music studios and sometimes even their law firm offices to prepare for a series of competitions throughout the year. For West Coast lawyers, there's the Battle of the Bands, or Banding Together to End Domestic Violence, an annual concert series in Oakland, California, that benefits the Family Violence Appellate Project.

An organization called Law Rocks also organizes concert competitions across the world — at Gramercy Theatre in New York City, the Whisky a Go Go in Los Angeles, the 100 Club in London and other venues in cities like Houston, Washington, D.C., Singapore and Dubai. The events raise hundreds of millions in each city for local charities. They also offer lawyers the chance to feel like rock stars for an evening.

"Lawyers want to be performers. We want to be rock 'n' rollers anyway, and we're naturally competitive with each other," Burt Bruton, a Miami-based partner at Greenberg Traurig and a bass player for The Meltones, told Law360. "The Law Rocks people have really hit on a way to leverage lawyers' egos and turn it into money for a good cause. They're brilliant."

### **Making a Band**

Bruton started The Meltones, or a precursor to that band, back in 1980 when he was a summer associate at Greenberg Traurig. He said the summer associates, who had much less responsibility than others in their office, decided to put together a little band to perform at events.

When Bruton officially joined the law firm, he kept the musical group going. The band would perform at firm picnics and events, reworking famous songs into parodies about Greenberg Traurig lawyers, because "of course, lawyers love to hear about themselves," Bruton said. Soon, the group went from local firm retreats to national ones, and eventually Greenberg Traurig integrated a talent show into its annual firm retreat, revealing a wealth of talent.

"There was a deep reservoir of rock 'n' roll wannabes, so gradually, we've recruited musicians from offices all over the country," Bruton said.



Joan Haratani, in the blue shirt, started Morgan Lewis & ROCKius in 2016. The group was originally called The Combinations, celebrating Morgan Lewis' acquisition of Bingham McCutchen in 2014. (Law Rocks)



Joan Haratani was the instigator of her law firm band, Morgan Lewis & ROCKius, or Rockius for short. Haratani told Law360 that she would get emails about Law Rocks events and imagine how cool it would be to perform in a rock band. And then six years ago, she learned how to play the drums, even attending a drumming summer camp in Vermont called KoSA.

"I stayed there in the dorm room with a roommate on those crappy dorm beds for freshmen that only children should be allowed to sleep on," she said. "You look at the group and it's all these young teenage boys, and then there's Joan."

In 2016, she had the early makings of a band. She found a vocalist who was an administrative assistant at the firm, an associate who could play keyboard and guitar, and someone to cover the horns section. They played at Haratani's annual holiday party for Morgan Lewis' litigation group in San Francisco. There, she discovered that Morgan Lewis attorney Marisa Chaves had a wonderful voice.

Soon, Haratani began to craft a more permanent group. She brought on Chaves, kept her associate, Louis T. Nguyen, who had been playing piano since he was 5 and is now of counsel at Morgan Lewis. There was also Nguyen's brother Pete and Morgan Lewis associate Monica Chang to play rhythm guitar, partner Geoff Holtz on tenor sax and partners Doug Crisman and Michael Schlemmer to play trumpet.

Haratani said jokingly that she got so into the band's lineup that she was a strong advocate for the hire of Josh Gurney as a summer associate. Gurney toured for years in a band and can play banjo, guitar, keyboard, drums and bass, she said.

"I'm like, 'We must have this person,'" Haratani said. "Turns out he's also a really good lawyer."

### **Bringing Lawyers Together**

Cole left Baker Botts a month after June's battle of the bands performance, and it's unclear whether she'll continue performing for Flight Risk. But some law firm bands have succeeded in keeping laterals connected with colleagues at their old firms. Also in Baker Botts' band is partner William Gorrod, who splits his time between Flight Risk and another band, The Latent Defects.



The Latent Defects performing at Law Rocks in 2017. The band was formed by several lawyers at Greenberg Traurig LLP. Many of the band members have since joined other law firms, but they continue to perform together. The band won first place at June's Battle of the Bands and the Judges' Choice Award at April's Law Rocks in San Francisco. (Law Rocks)

Gorrod joined The Latent Defects while at Greenberg Traurig as an offshoot of the firm's larger band The Meltones. Since then, he and several other members have moved on to other law firms, but they've continued to play together. This year, The Latent Defects, also called Attractive Nuisance, won first place at the Banding Together Battle of the Bands and the Judges' Choice Award at Law Rocks in San Francisco.

Between The Latent Defects and Flight Risk, which performed in person for the first time this year at both events, Gorrod is a pro at performing. At one event, his bands played back to back and he was on stage for a full hourlong set.

"You get to kind of be like a rock star for the day," he said.

Juggling the two bands takes significant practice time, but Gorrod said it is worth it to make something fun with his colleagues.

"It's fun because it makes you practice, and you're making friends with people at the firm in a kind of close nonwork way that you wouldn't have otherwise," he said.

He said that initially, Latent Defects/Attractive Nuisance practiced in a rehearsal space where "real bands who are trying to make it in San Francisco" also rented rooms.

"You walk in and they're smoking cigarettes outside," he said. "And they're like, 'Where are you guys playing this weekend?'"

For Baker Botts' Flight Risk, many rehearsals take place in the firm's Palo Alto, California, office, Gorrod said. After everyone goes home in the evenings, they set up in the larger shared space where the firm holds office events.

Cranking up an amp in the same place he works on tax law is a unique experience, Gorrod said.

Haratani said that Rockius tried to perform in the office one evening, but got complaints from others in the building. The band now practices in trumpet player Schlemmer's basement, she said, often with members' children running around as instruments blare. They try not to let life get in the way of practicing at least 10 times before the competition, she said.

"We each have our own individual reasons to keep doing it," she said. "It's so fun to make music together. And we are in a profession that can be isolating."

Being in a band strangely mirrors the practice of law, according to Haratani, who is a litigator. Musicians have to practice on their own to get good, just like lawyers have to sit at home alone and write a brief, but then they come together with a team and collaborate.

"It just makes you feel so unified. It makes you feel in harmony with the universe," she said. "It's an amazing feeling. And you get so close to your band members because you're in there together, sweating together and making music together and making people dance and making people happy."

For The Meltones, unity is an even greater challenge. The group has grown about 10 members based in different U.S. cities, and even has a trombone player from Amsterdam. The musicians will often have to record themselves remotely and combine MP3s to hear how they would all sound together.

Unlike Rockius, Latent Defects and Flight Risk, the band usually only rehearses in person together once before big performance. The firm flies members of the band to New York, Miami and Los Angeles to perform in Law Rocks competitions, and even to Las Vegas to perform at the annual shareholders meeting.

It's a great way to unite several parts of such a large firm, Stephen Rabinowitz, a New York-based Greenberg Traurig partner and guitarist for The Meltones, told Law360.

"It really has given us an opportunity to do something that has incorporated the whole platform, vertically and horizontally," he said. "It's really been a lot of fun for us."

### **Hitting the Stage**

After six years, Haratani's band hit a milestone: Rockius won the Judges' Choice Award at Battle of the Bands in June.

"The judges are all professional musicians," she said. "And it's one thing for the audience to love you. That's great, don't get me wrong. But when we got the Judges' Choice Award over all these fantastic bands for Battle of the Bands in June, I thought I was going to cry. The fact that I got COVID from the performance I cared not, because getting that title was so huge."

Law firm bands aren't quite up to par with professional acts, according to Gorrod.

"You know, it's lawyers," he said. But he added that the mashups and covers that the musicians perform can be wacky, fun and "surprisingly good."



Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's band Morgan Lewis & ROCKius performing at this year's Battle of the Bands, Banding Together to Stop Domestic Violence in Oakland, California, in June. The band won the Judges' Choice Award this year. (Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP)

Rockius ended its set at the Oakland Battle of the Bands with a performance of Sly and the Family Stone's "Everyday People." You could hardly see Haratani on the crowded stage, but you could hear the hiss of her snare, keeping time as the singers harmonized. It was the best they'd ever played, she said.

"I just became a part of the process," Haratani said. "I just chilled and, like, flowed with the music. And it was so fun. You don't know what that feels like until you do it."

The Meltones are looking forward to the Law Rocks show in New York in October, the first in-person Law Rocks performance at Gramercy Theatre since the pandemic started. They're also debuting at Law Rocks Miami this year.

The band — likely the longest-standing law firm rock band, going on 40 years — is known for its dedication to bringing merch to the shows, and its competitive spirit.

"We've gotten really competitive about the charity thing," guitarist Rabinowitz said. "We don't ever want to be No. 2 in fundraising. The leadership of the firm and the partners get super amped up about making sure that we raise more money than any other law firm involved."

Rabinowitz said he has surprised himself with the kind of musical triumphs the band has been able to pull off throughout the years.

"We're often doing little medleys and mashing up songs and not doing straight-out arrangements of things," he said. "It's kind of like we make them our own. To have that work and have the audience appreciate what we're doing, I think that's that's pretty cool."

Flight Risk performed an eclectic medley in the middle of its set during April's Law Rocks show in San Francisco. Gorrod kicked it off, singing a rendition of Warren Zevon's "Lawyers, Guns and Money," and then the band transitioned into rocked-up version of the hip hop song "Low" by Flo Rida before finally leading into "Another One Bites the Dust" by Queen.

"In conjunction with the job that we have, which we have the privilege to be in this noble profession, there's really fun and creative ways that you can make beautiful things together," Haratani said.

--Editing by Alanna Weissman and Jill Coffey.

*Update: This story has been updated to include additional band members of Morgan Lewis & ROCKius.*