

CAN'T TOUCH THIS

ENTERTAINMENT ATTORNEY JOEL KATZ'S CLIENTELE RANGES FROM WILLIE NELSON TO BIG OOMP—NOT TO MENTION DALLAS AUSTIN AND ORRIN HATCH. *By Chandra R. Thomas*



AS GOSPEL MUSIC BLARES, MEMBERS of the Word of Faith Family Worship Cathedral instinctively rock in their seats. The Praise Team dancers emerge from every direction and move toward the makeshift stage in front of the pulpit. Their costumes sway with every twirl and kick. The performance elicits thunderous applause and arbitrary amens from the churchgoers, decked out in their Sunday best—ornate hats and shiny suits. A quick scan of the sanctuary reveals a congregant who triggers an instant *Sesame Street*-esque “one of these things is not like the others” response. You’d blurt “what the hell?”—if you weren’t in church.

He’s sitting off to the side ferociously clapping, his eyes fixed on one of the performers. That he’s the only white man—not to mention Jewish—in this predominantly black Austell church isn’t the main reason he’s a standout. Nor is it the reason churchgoers and clergy alike flock around him and his wife after the service.

He’s Joel Katz, Atlanta’s top entertainment attorney, arguably one of the top in the field nationally. The dancer—the blonde who captured his attention—is his wife, and this is their church. However incongruous it may seem to others, Katz feels completely at home here.

Katz has made a career out of being at ease around a diverse mix of people. He’s weathered the heterogeneity of the music industry, from R&B to country to hip-hop to pop, building a client base and moving comfortably between genres and artists. This industry insider is not flashy. With a resume like his, he doesn’t have to be. After all, not many attorneys can claim an iconic music legend like Godfather of Soul James Brown as their first client *ever*.

To many outside the entertainment industry, though, Katz didn’t become a

household name until last year, when he brokered the deal—with the help of Republican Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, a Katz client and (who knew?) prolific songwriter—to get Atlanta überproducer Dallas Austin out of a possible Dubai drug sentence.

Austin, en route to supermodel Naomi Campbell's elaborate three-day birthday bash at the posh Burj Al Arab hotel, was detained last May at the Dubai airport when a luggage search turned up a baggie containing cocaine. Austin said he was guilty "by mistake" of drug possession and was put behind bars. Two months later, Katz and Senator Hatch flew to Dubai on his behalf, and in two days the producer was freed. "He went well beyond the call of duty for me," Austin says of the "humbling" ordeal that he will share in a book titled *Trapport*, due for release early next year. "This wasn't about 'Dallas Austin, client' to him, this was about him caring about me, my family, my mom. He was defending my character through his character. He came and got me on the plane himself. It was just a big relief just to see his face. When we got on the plane he had red, white, and blue napkins everywhere. He told me 'This is your Independence Day.'" Four days later, Austin—a Grammy Award winner who has worked with everyone from Madonna to Pink and wrote our city's

tourist-campaign theme song, "The ATL"—was perched next to Katz at Word of Faith's morning services. How's that for a photo op?

Springing Austin from a Muslim prison thousands of miles away seems an unlikely feat for any entertainment attorney—even a good one. However, anyone familiar with Katz's credentials wouldn't be surprised; in the eyes of industry insiders, he catapulted to legendary status long before Austin's dubious indiscretions snagged tabloid headlines and revealed a softer side of the notoriously conservative Hatch, who has penned such love ballads as "The Locket" and religious reveries as "Give Me Hope, Give Me Faith."

Hatch and Austin demonstrate the range of Katz's client roster, which has included B.B. King, Collective Soul, George Strait, Jimmy Buffett, Jermaine Jackson, Josh Groban, Christina Aguilera, Bow Wow, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, Sheryl Crow, Alan Jackson, L.A. Reid, and Brooks & Dunn. Among his corporate clientele are some of the most recognized brands in the world: The Coca-Cola Company, AOL-Time Warner, Sony, and MTV.

Katz has served as special counsel to the Country Music Association since 1995 and as the chairman emeritus of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (the organization

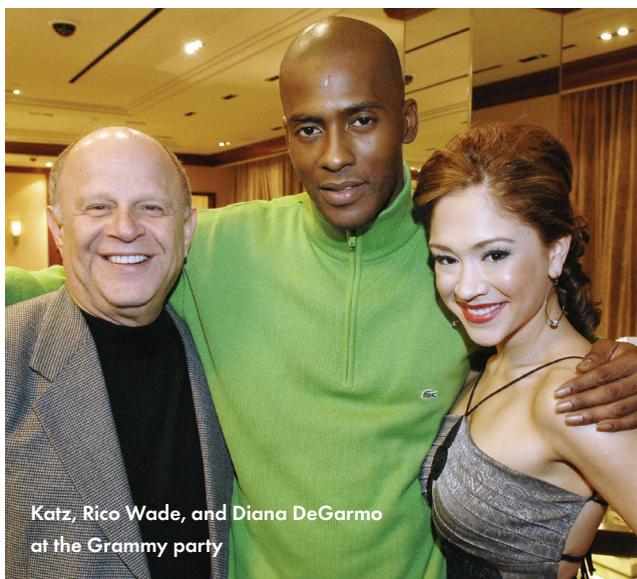
that produces the Grammy Awards) since 2002. He is also the first—and only—attorney to be inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. In 1998, after many years at the helm of Katz, Smith & Cohen, the Atlanta-based firm he built up to become one of the largest entertainment law firms in the country, he began working his magic for global entertainment practice Greenberg Traurig, serving as managing shareholder for the firm's Atlanta office and chairing its national entertainment division.

"He just has a passion for making people successful," says Country Music Association COO Tammy Genovese. "He has such vision and thinks outside the box a lot. He's always helped me see the bigger picture. And he does everything with such integrity." Katz, Genovese says, was the brains and brawn behind some of the CMA's biggest deals, including the relocation of its annual awards show to New York City in 2005 and the push to attract a younger audience by broadcasting the show on ABC after years on CBS.

There's nothing rock-star about Katz, who comes across as a hybrid of your favorite uncle and Clive Davis, but he lives a jet-setter's life, traveling about 35 weeks a year via private plane. He's hobnobbed with Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and the Crown Prince of Bahrain, not to mention King of Pop Michael Jackson. Katz talks about visiting the world's best-



With Ryan Cameron and Ludacris at the party for Georgia Grammy nominees



Katz, Rico Wade, and Diana DeGarmo at the Grammy party

RICK DIAMOND/WIREIMAGE.COM

known entertainer in the same way one would chat about running into a neighbor at Kroger. “Michael is very quiet, dignified, and friendly,” Katz says.

Whether he’s soaking up a spirited sermon at his church or recounting his meeting with musical great Prince, Katz comes off humble. But after spending time with him in a variety of settings, one learns that the attorney’s presence humbles the most outlandish stars. “When you’re sitting down with Joel Katz, you’ve got to have your stuff together,” insists Corey Roberson, aka Big Oomp, CEO of the Atlanta-based record company responsible for the outrageously popular rap hit “Walk It Out.”

Case in point: During a recent photo shoot in his Buckhead office, Katz playfully summoned Big Oomp by phone to “get your ass over here!” Oomp sped from his westside studio to the office. Once there, Oomp, an ebony-hued, husky man with cornrows and a massive diamond stud in his left ear, shed his street persona, sitting ramrod on the edge of a chair and responding with a modest “yes, sir” to anything Katz asked.

THE VIBE IS OSCARS GLAM MEETS ATL GLITZ. The celebrities approaching Tiffany & Co. at Phipps Plaza swagger across the provisional red carpet, pause under the glaring spotlights, and strike poses for the sprightly mob of photographers, reporters, and television cameramen.

Inside, the soothing sound of a jazz trio emanates across the showroom. The members of Christian rock band Third Day linger in one corner; jazz guitarist Earl Klugh is in another. There’s diminutive rapper T.I. standing inconspicuously next to the makeshift bar. Kristian Bush of country duo Sugarland is just a few feet away, and V-103 radio personality Ryan Cameron studies one of many silver trays of hors d’oeuvres while his wife, Kysha, ogles the shimmering jewelry cases.

It’s a VIP party for Georgia’s 2007 Grammy nominees. Joel Katz, dressed in a modest mock turtleneck, black slacks, loafers, and an impeccable tweed blazer that nicely offsets his thinning more-salt-

than-pepper hair, manages to upstage some of the celebs milling around—even the ones draped in gaudy bling.

Rapper Chris “Ludacris” Bridges glimpses Katz and abbreviates his conversation midsentence, abandoning his macho rapper bravado to smile and greet Katz. They small-talk a bit, then, as Katz turns to leave, Ludacris discreetly beckons to a nearby photographer to snap their picture. They lean in like old friends, Katz smiling and Luda reverting to his stoic rapper expression for the shot. “Thanks Mr. Katz,” he gushes.

By this point the attorney can barely squeeze his way through the throng without shaking a hand or being pulled in for an overzealous hug.

“You look gorgeous,” he coos as his colleague, Michele Rhea Caplinger, steps up in a fitted black cocktail dress accented by luminous Tiffany pearls. Caplinger, senior executive director of the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences (NARAS), takes to the stage and introduces the industry bigs who have turned out for the ritzy affair. From the sidelines Katz confides that he can’t wait to get home (a gigantic mansion on six acres in Buckhead, not far from Governor Perdue’s residence). He’s especially anxious to get home to his wife, Kane. “She is wonderful,” he beams. “I knew by our second date I would marry her. She’s so sweet and caring. In fact, her daddy told me he named her Kane when she was born because she was sweet like sugar cane!” His nostalgia is brusquely interrupted by the call of duty. It’s his turn to speak, and his appearance draws happy applause. He skillfully works in a few well-timed one-liners (“there’s so much talent—and so much jewelry—in this room”) before introducing the next speaker.

True to his word, Katz craftily ducks out through a rear exit, just as Pac-Man would glide through one of those handy trap doors and pop up on the other side of the video game screen. Mrs. Katz will be happy. Her husband is home for the night and he’s bearing one of those signature blue boxes.

A NATIVE OF QUEENS, NEW YORK, KATZ IS THE

oldest of four, with two sisters and a brother. His mother managed the home front and his father was a lawyer, but Katz did not grow up privileged, he says; he describes his childhood as “loving” but “normal,” emphasizing that his parents instilled in him and his siblings the value of hard work. He worked his way through Hunter College juggling odd jobs, including one as a men’s clothing store clerk and another as an assistant to a silkscreen printer.

After graduating in 1966, he began applying to law schools and was accepted to many. Two main factors ultimately led him to the University of Tennessee College of Law: the scholarship money and the fact that the school’s then-dean, Harold C. Warner, urged him to head south because he needed “some northern students down here.”

Soon after, Katz, who had never been farther south than D.C., arrived in Knoxville with an Army duffel bag, less than \$150 in his pocket, and an unyielding passion to learn all he could about law. He continued to work while in school, his favorite “gig” being a clerk at the Holiday Inn. “I didn’t get much sleep, but I loved working there and seeing all of the different people checking in.”

Following his 1969 graduation, Katz accepted a job as an attorney for the Atlanta office of Housing and Urban Development. Then came a stint as a law clerk for a now-defunct midsized firm and a part-time position teaching law at Georgia State University.

In 1971, with no clients to speak of, he decided to venture into business for himself. He rented a tiny downtown Atlanta office and shared a secretary with three other fledgling attorneys.

For two weeks, no clients showed up. Katz’s luck turned around when he got a call from one of his former GSU students. The onetime student, now a banker, had a friend who needed legal help, and he wanted Katz to step in. That friend of a friend turned out to be James Brown.

Within a week Katz had flown to New York City and successfully negotiated with Polydor Records to get Brown the

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use of a private jet and a reported million-dollar contract. Katz made \$50,000 on that first deal (chump change in comparison to what he makes now), but more importantly, he learned the power of publicity as he stood next to the iconic superstar at a press conference.

Two days later, Katz received a phone call from a man with a thick Texas drawl. He had read about the contract Katz negotiated for Brown, and the then-unknown artist wanted Katz to do the same for him. Katz flew to Austin to meet at the Ramada Inn with the man who would become his second client: Willie Nelson.

"IF AL SHARPTON CALLS, PUT HIM THROUGH," Katz yells casually as his longtime assistant, Lisa Sanders, gently closes the door to his swank but cozy Buckhead office. The room is more miniature museum than workspace. Rows of framed gold and platinum records line every inch of the walls, bearing such names as George Strait, Rascal Flatts, STYX, Mase, TLC, OutKast, and Boyz II Men.

Framed photos of his wife, Kane; two grown daughters, Leslie Helaine Lestz, a doctor, and Jeni Michelle Paul, a businesswoman; and grandchildren Joseph, Ezra, and Tzila compete with the kitschy artifacts and bizarre bric-a-brac: a small shrine to his alma mater, a guitar signed by country crooner Alan Jackson, a teddy bear dressed in a T-shirt with the words "legal genius" plastered on the front, and three decorative pens festooned with replica heads of the Three Stooges. The James Brown statue perched next to his computer desktop is a personal gift from the soul man himself. It lip-syncs the chorus to "I Feel Good" when you press a button.

There's a long, glossy conference table and a plasma TV in one corner, a cozy sitting area with cushy brown leather chairs in the other. The bar, stocked with everything from Remy Martin to Jack Daniel's, bears a sign that reads, "Please do not disturb." The contents of the black wooden storage case above the bar are a small-scale embodiment of Katz's contradistinctive clientele: a row

of black Grammy mugs with the famous phonograph emblazoned in gold, a cluster of Jimmy Buffett “Margaritaville” glasses, and black-and-white Greenberg Traurig mugs.

In an industry where both attorneys and artists often focus their efforts on one genre, Katz’s ability to represent and relate to an eclectic mix of artists seems to be his forte. “He crosses genres,” says Caplinger, of NARAS. “We’re in the same building, and I’ll run into Big Oomp on the elevator, and I’ll think he’s coming to see me, and he’ll say, ‘No, I’m going to see Joel Katz.’”

His colleagues agree Katz has a knack for connecting with all kinds of people. “His clients range from Kenny Chesney to Coca-Cola, and it’s that diversity that makes him invaluable to clients,” says Genovese of the CMA. “He has such an extensive network, and he’s so involved. These people aren’t with him for one or two years; they stick with

him. I think that speaks volumes about him and his work.”

Joseph Johnson, curator of music for the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in Macon, agrees. He says Katz was instrumental in drumming up support for the museum ever since it opened in 1996. “Joel has been there playing a role in hip-hop, soul, country, and rock and roll for the last 40 years. He’s eclectic, and I think it’s wonderful because it fosters all types of music in Georgia.”

As for James Brown, Katz tears up when he speaks of his longtime client’s death last Christmas morning. “I spoke to [Brown’s manager] Mr. Bobbit about 11 p.m. on Christmas Eve, and he told me [Brown] was in Emory with pneumonia. By 3 o’clock in the morning I received an e-mail notifying me of his untimely death. It was hard to believe he was gone.” Katz attended Brown’s public and private funeral services.

Although the loss has been tough,

Katz finds solace in the fond memories he shared with the man he called “Mr. Brown” publicly and “James” behind closed doors. “James was a very unique person. When you were around him, you knew you were in the presence of a very gifted and talented star,” says Katz. “He was a superstar, probably the best performer there ever was. Many imitated him, but he was the one who invented it all. He wrote so many songs. Don’t get me wrong, he had a wild side, but he also had a real goodness in him.”

Since Brown’s death, Katz has continued to handle much of his client’s legal affairs as they relate to the music business, but the soap opera-esque battle that has erupted over Brown’s burial and the distribution of his estate does not fall under his purview. “Mr. Brown certainly did not trust the opinion of very many people, but Joel Katz was a man he respected and trusted even if they did not always agree,” says “Super Frank”

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Copsidas, Brown's agent and president of Intrigue Music. "Joel knew how to explain things to Mr. Brown in a way that just worked. They connected. Mr. Brown always liked the underdog, and he would always say, 'I made Joel Katz.'"

If R&B legend Brown made Katz, the attorney has in turn made dozens of Georgia stars. Rico Wade, a member of the Dungeon Family, an Atlanta hip-hop/R&B/soul musical collective that includes OutKast and Goodie Mob, says of Katz: "He's been very important for music, especially black music, because he helped us artists get to the money." Adds Wade, also of the hip-hop production company Organized Noise, a creative force behind such hits as TLC's "Waterfalls" and En Vogue's "Don't Let Go": "He makes sure you're getting that 15 points or 18 points. Just in sitting down with Katz and doing business with him, you know that you've arrived."

Big Oomp describes Katz more suc-

cinctly: "He's a cool cat, the top dog, the Michael Jackson of entertainment law."

When he's not continent-hopping as "Joel Katz, Esquire" or "running [his] brains out on the treadmill," Katz likes to play golf and enjoys downtime with his family. "I have more than 2,000 movies, and I have an enormous CD collection," he says, noting that jazz, rock and roll, and country are his favorite types of music; he doesn't listen to much hip-hop, unless, of course, it's by one of his clients.

"I'm a pretty regular guy. I like to spend nights at home with my wife," he says. "We like to eat out. We like Kyma, Blue Ridge Grill, and Bone's [steakhouse]—even though I don't eat a lot of meat."

Still, this "regular guy" doesn't lament the fact that the law library at the University of Tennessee is dedicated in his name. Or that he is the first Atlanta-based lawyer to be elected chairman of the sports and entertainment section of the American Bar Association. Or

that *Forbes* previously has ranked him among the highest-paid entertainment lawyers in the country.



RICK DIAMOND/WIREIMAGE.COM

And then there are the more unusual distinctions, like the fact that in 2004, he took part in an entertainment briefing in Savannah as part of the G-8 Summit; that he's on the advisory board for America's Junior Miss program; and that he's on the board of directors for Natrol, a nutrition company that manufactures and markets nutritional supplements and herbal teas.

He doesn't even mention Evergreen Copyrights, the Nashville-based, full-service global music publishing company he launched in January 2006 with David Schulhof and Richard Perna. The company purchased the entire MC Hammer catalog for \$2.7 million from the trustees of the MC Hammer bankruptcy estate. That's right, Katz and his colleagues own the rights to "U Can't Touch This" and, unfortunately, "Pumps & A Bump," too. In fact, the \$1.2 billion private equity fund that is part of the global investment bank

Lehman Brothers Inc. now owns more than 40,000 copyrights, including works by Tim McGraw and Orrin Hatch.

However, any time questions linger too long on his celebrity, Katz finds a way to draw the conversation back to relationships—like the one he shares with Austin, whom he's known since Austin was 16.

"I've had the opportunity to practically grow up in his house," says Austin, now 35. "He's almost like a father to me. He's a friend and more than an attorney to me by a long shot. He's the ultimate connector. He's very trustworthy. He'll be upfront with me and tell me, 'Dallas, don't do this deal. This deal doesn't make sense.' It's hard to find an attorney who is trustworthy like that."

Austin, who, like Katz, has also been inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame, credits his longtime mentor with building up Atlanta's music scene.

"We [artists] are the creative people just trying to suck up all the creativity, but he's been there to structure the deals and make sure we get our piece of the pie. Like a building, he's been the foundation, the framework, for the music industry in Atlanta. It took all of us staying in Atlanta. We built up Atlanta's music industry together."

Though flattered by his many accolades, Katz sticks to his emphasis on relationships. "It's about dealing with people and problem-solving," he says. "From the beginning I believed that relationships are the key to any business, and I still do." It's those relationships, he asserts, that have helped him do what many said could never be done in the South. "They told me I could not build up an entertainment firm in Atlanta," he says, pausing, a hint of satisfaction creeping into his voice. "So we built up one of the biggest entertainment practices in the world." ❖