From Writing Off Leather Pants to Copyright Disputes: New Database Chronicles Legal Side of Music Industry

O BLACK LEATHER PANTS qualify as a tax deduction for rock stars?

Fans, musicians, journalists, researchers, and anyone else interested in music can see how the courts have dealt with this question and nearly any other legal issue involving the music industry at *The Discography: Legal Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, accessible through the website: thediscography.org.

Musician and alumnus Loren Wells, JD ’10, created the site, which is supported by the law school’s Center for Empirical Research in the Law (CERL). The website’s database—the most elaborate of its kind—covers 2,400 court opinions spanning nearly 200 years of the music industry. The opinions, ranging from copyrights and contracts to taxes and torts, are fully summarized and searchable by variables such as artist, location, timeframe, and issue.

“You can see nearly all of U.S. law through these cases. While the cases are educational, they’re also immensely entertaining,” Wells says. “*The Discography* is for anyone who wants a balanced perspective of the music industry and an appreciation for the people who make it happen.”

Wells, himself, started in the music industry in Central Illinois and then Chicago with small rock shows before moving on to playing the House of Blues and record label showcases. He strayed from the stage to attend law school, and shortly after graduation, entered into the partnership with CERL for the *The Discography* project.

“Washington University turned out to be the perfect place for a project like this,” says Wells. “St. Louis is where Scott Joplin, Chuck Berry, Miles Davis, and Ike and Tina Turner, among others, started their careers, and the city’s rich history provided early inspiration for my endeavor.”

As a first-year law student reading cases that formed the foundations of modern law, Wells says he began to understand the importance of history in relation to both law and music. It was the overlap between the two that provided the spark for the database project.

Charles McManis, the Thomas and Karole Green Professor of Law, and others in the law school community encouraged Wells to approach CERL about helping him transform his project from an Excel spreadsheet into a robust database.

“My law professors took an interest in what I was doing with the project and encouraged me to do bigger and better things with it than I’d ever imagined,” Wells recalls. “The support I got from faculty, staff, and my fellow students is unquantifiable. Without them, this might still be just an odd little file on my desktop.”

In addition to the database, thediscography.org also features a blog that highlights interesting cases,
artwork by Wells, and a news section on current legal events in the music industry. CERL provides the technical platform to deliver Wells’ database to anyone who would like to access it.

“We took an uncut gem and presented it in a defined form,” says Andrew Martin, CERL director; professor of law; and chair of and professor in the Department of Political Science in Arts & Sciences. “The Discography is exciting because it’s an extraordinary collection of information that did not previously exist.

“The value of the database is immense,” Martin adds. “Through the lens of music cases, we’re able to understand a great deal of American law.”

CERL’s research technologist Troy DeArmitt says Wells put a lot of energy and knowledge into constructing this body of information. “It would be criminal if this information was not accessible to the world,” DeArmitt observes.

Although he says his future is not completely set, Wells has returned to Chicago to begin his professional and legal career. “I took a big risk putting off the ‘real world’ so I could spend six months on an academic database of this sort, but the response has been wonderful,” he says. “Right now, I’m just happy to make an individual contribution and provide the legal and musical worlds with something of value.”

Visit thediscography.org for more information or e-mail loren@thediscography.org.