

GUARDING THE LEGACY OF THE KING OF POP

Entertainment lawyer John Branca made his name coining megadeals for such global superstars as the Rolling Stones, Beach Boys, Fleetwood Mac and, most famously, Michael Jackson. Today, Branca, who is a passionate Ferrarista, keeps alive the memory of the King of Pop with the extraordinary spectacle, *THE IMMORTAL* World Tour. We met him in Los Angeles

Words **Stan Sinberg** Photography **Scott Pommier**

These pages -
John Branca with
his latest Ferrari
acquisition,
the 458 Italia



These pages – Branca worked with Michael Jackson throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the two most successful decades of the singer's career. Opposite, a scene from the stage production Michael Jackson, THE IMMORTAL World Tour, staged by Cirque du Soleil



For over three decades, Branca was the King of Pop's entertainment lawyer

John Branca is knackered. The renowned Ziffren Brittenham entertainment lawyer has jetted in just 15 minutes earlier from his umpteenth business trip to Las Vegas, the latest leg of what, this past year, seems like an unending trans-continental sprint that's not only taken him to Vegas 12 times but also Montreal six, with assorted excursions to Vancouver, New York, Ottawa, Venice, London, Detroit, Maranello and more.

At an age (60) and a level of success (epic) where he could be excused, if not expected, to spend more time at his 14,000sq ft Italian villa in the exclusive Beverly Park section of Beverly Hills with wife Linda, sons John Connor, nine, and Dylan Gregory, seven, and car Ferrari, 458 Italia (not necessarily in that order!), Branca is more peripatetic than ever.

And with the exception of Maranello, where he was invited to tour the Ferrari plant, the reason for these trips can be attributed to one factor: the death of Michael Jackson in 2009.

In case Branca's name doesn't ring a bell, let's put it this way: the cable TV channel VH1's long-running show may go *Behind the Music*, but when you go behind that, that's the world in which John Branca operates. Since the 1970s, he's been arguably the most influential music entertainment lawyer in the US, if not the world.

He's represented a record 29 members of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, including The Doors, Rolling Stones, Beach Boys, Fleetwood Mac and ZZ Top. His innovative deal-making has transformed almost every aspect of the industry: Branca's four-album \$50 million mega-deal for Aerosmith was the first of its kind; his work on the Stones' *Steel*



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Wheels tour broke the mould on how multi-city tours were produced; the 2005 deal he constructed between Korn and EMI created a symbiotic relationship between artists and their record labels that became the standard. More recently, he sold the Rodgers and Hammerstein and Leiber and Stoller catalogues for historic valuations.

However, the client he's most closely associated with is Michael Jackson. For over three decades, with a few breaks, he was the King of Pop's entertainment lawyer of choice. Branca was instrumental in the most famous music publishing transaction in history, the sale of The Beatles' catalogue to Michael Jackson and, later, the merger of Jackson's ATV Music with Sony, to create, naturally enough, Sony/ATV. The pair were so close at one point that Jackson, accompanied by Bubbles the Chimp, was Best Man at Branca's first wedding (with Little Richard ministering).

And so it was in the spring of 2009, having not worked together since 2006, that Branca received a call that the Gloved One wanted to speak with him regarding his European comeback tour. After some preliminary talks and brain-storming, Jackson retained Branca again. Before embarking on the

project, the attorney took his family to Cabo San Lucas for some needed "r & r".

While there, a scant eight days after he had reunited with Jackson, Branca received a call that the King of Pop was dead.

In a 2002 will, Branca was named co-executor of Jackson's estate, along with John McClain (of Interscope Records), but when Jackson died, the lawyer didn't know if a more current version had subsequently been drawn up. None had.

When Branca and McClain took over, the estate was some \$400m in debt, and Branca saw his job as threefold: 1) to get the estate out of debt and on sure financial footing, 2) to restore and enhance Jackson's legacy as one of the great entertainers of all time, and 3) to ensure that Jackson's children and loved ones were taken care of. In short order, this manifested in a best-selling concert DVD (*This Is It*), best-selling Ubisoft video dance game, new album releases, and plans for an interactive museum.

But the latest and most ambitious endeavour is Cirque Du Soleil's *Michael Jackson, THE IMMORTAL World Tour* extravaganza, which debuted in October 2011 in Canada before its US premiere in

December 2011 at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas, the opening salvos of a two-year globe-spanning jaunt.

Hence Branca's frequent flying. And his knackered-ness on this particular day. But Branca is nothing if not a trouper, plus he's on the Cenegenics health regimen, the one with the adverts of the guy in his seventies who looks like a comic book Charles Atlas.

So, after the photo shoot, he excuses himself to change outfits, and re-emerges sporting frosted aviator sunglasses, French Connection leather jacket, black *IMMORTAL* T-shirt, yellow and black Ferrari cap and a Ferrari watch, given to him by Linda. In short, he looks cool.

After all, Branca is a rocker at heart. While in his teens he played in a band that opened a couple of times for The Doors at the Hullabaloo Club in LA. And the only reason he started his legal career as an estate planner was because he didn't know about entertainment lawyers until he read about them in a *Time* magazine article about Elton John.

'It was like a bell went off in my head,' he says. 'I thought that's what I should be doing.' This affinity for musicians may also explain why he says he'll do 'anything' to make a deal, and also why





years ago he started the Musicians Assistance Program to help musicians struggling with alcohol and addiction problems, and today is the Chairman Emeritus of the organisation it morphed into, MusiCares.

We lower ourselves into the 458 Italia with its Tour de France Blue body and yellow callipers and badge. 'My UCLA colours,' Branca jokes, invoking his alma mater. We sit so low to the ground that I can imagine a sign inside the car like amusement parks post at the entrance to their attractions: "You must be able to scoot this low to ride this vehicle."

Over the past 15 years, Branca's owned a succession of Ferraris - the F355, 360, 575 M, F430, 599 and now the 458. 'Each generation was a quantum leap in terms of design and performance,' he says. 'They're all completely different cars.' He already has his order in for the 458 Spider.

Immediately Branca cranks up the stereo - a souped-up Reus Systems' player consisting of 13 speakers powered by 900 watts and a nine-inch woofer module - at rock concert intensity, to the tune of *California Gurls* by Katy Perry featuring Snoop Dogg. The sound is the closest thing you can come to an iPod directly wired to your brain.

'I don't change the architecture,' Branca stresses. 'That's very important. I like to respect the technology and the design that went into it. You don't want to cut in the car. I don't change the unit that's in the dash. I just upgrade the system with cables, speakers and wires.' It's the same reason that he'll only ride with the car's original tyres.

He scrolls through the song list on his six CD-changer containing Tina Turner, Muddy Waters, and the *IMMORTAL* soundtrack. 'It makes you want to listen to music when it sounds like this,' he smiles. And then... away we go. Branca lives just off a twisty mountain summit road, with the operative words for this ride being "twisty," "mountain," and "summit." 'Hopefully there's nobody on the road,' he says, a nanosecond before gunning the engine, as if to prove that the 458 really can accelerate to 60mph in just over three seconds. As if I wouldn't have just taken his word for it.

I've met Branca professionally several times over the years, and while he often displays an impish quality, it's always masked behind a cloak of

'Ferrari evokes a passion that no other car can emulate. It's a whole other experience'

reserve, the reserve of someone who has to watch his words so as not to unwittingly break a client's confidence. Now, behind the wheel, that reticence disappears. And as we careen around hairpin turns, he's clearly taking pleasure in simultaneously impressing and scaring the Bejeezus out of me. It's by far the most fun I've ever seen him have.

About four miles and eight me-stepping-on-the-imaginary-break pedal's later, we reach our destination: the Beverly Glen Deli. As we pull up to the shopping centre parking lot, Branca pushes a button and gushes, 'A great new thing they put on Ferraris - you push this thing and it raises the front end so you don't scrape it on every driveway. It's like, the best thing ever made.'

The Beverly Glen Marketplace shopping centre is not very large, but the first Sunday of every month the parking lot serves as the gathering place for the Ferrari Owners' Club and other Ferrari lovers, who bring their vehicles down to compare, admire, schmooze and wax eloquent about their beloved models.

Branca also owns a Rolls-Royce Ghost and Bentley Azure, but it's the Ferrari that really gets his juices flowing. 'It evokes a passion that no other car can emulate. It's like joining a club with members that all have this same feeling. You're buying into a winning sports car manufacturer that does it with great style and great soul.'

He says that while other sports cars might have similar specs, they lack that *je ne sais quoi* that gives Ferraris soul. 'They're antiseptic. You get in a Ferrari, it's a whole other experience.'

He feels so strongly about it, that he even penned



These pages - Branca prefers his Ferraris to be blue; here seen with his Ferrari 599 GTB Fiorano. Opposite, left; at the wheel of his 458 Italia. Below; with Michael Jackson. Below, left; the Rolling Stones, another of his most celebrated clients



Wireimages; Zenon Teixeira for Ferrari Opus



a short piece for the *Ferrari Opus* on "Why I Love Ferraris". He wrote, "I am of Italian descent, and any Italian-American who has the opportunity to own a Ferrari should. It is part of our heritage. It is as much Italian as visiting Rome or Venice, admiring Italian architecture and paintings, enjoying Italian fashion, or eating a great Italian meal. My Ferrari feels right at home with my collections of 18th-century Italian angels and Venetian antiques."

In the diner, over a plate of roast chicken and vegetables, Branca looks wistful and says, emphatically, 'Ferrari is a work of art. I feel like sometimes I could just hang my Ferrari in the living room and just look at it.' But then he laments that between flying around so much and the perpetual LA traffic, he doesn't take the Ferrari out as much as he'd like.

'Where do you drive it?' I ask. 'The Beverly Glen

Deli,' he laughs. Then he adds, 'There are a couple of tracks I take it to near here, when I have time.' He also takes a Ferrari around a track in Las Vegas, when he can.

Our lunch conversation drifts between Michael Jackson, Ferraris and the Cirque Du Soleil show, subjects that quickly conflate. For instance, Branca volunteers that 'Motown founder Berry Gordy once declared, "Michael Jackson is the greatest entertainer who ever lived," and I think it's safe to say that Ferrari is the greatest sports car maker that ever existed.'

And: 'Would Michael have loved Ferraris? Well, Michael's art and work was always about excellence and the pursuit of perfection, and that's embodied in Ferraris.' Not only that, but it turns out that in the 1980s, when Jackson did a series of three commercials for Pepsi, he actually drove a Ferrari in one of them.



More synchronicity: Branca lets drop that 20-odd years ago, he and Michael attended the first-ever Cirque show in Santa Monica, where it was held under a tent. 'Michael loved it,' Branca says. An infatuation that continued over the years.

That affection was a major part of the decision to do a Jackson Cirque show. Branca's been involved in every phase of the show's conception and development, which is why he visits Montreal, home to Cirque Du Soleil's headquarters, and Vegas so frequently. He's been there to review rehearsals, dress rehearsals, run-throughs without costumes, run-throughs with costumes, run-throughs without lights, run-throughs with lights, run-throughs with lights but no costumes, run-throughs with lights with costu... you get the idea.

The 105-minute hi-tech show that will typically play in arenas of 8,000-14,000 capacity, had a budget of \$40m, a cast of 65, a total crew of 220, and is nothing if not a grand spectacle, with exploding pyrotechnics, mammoth smoke blasts, large video screens, world-class acrobats, contortionists, Chinese gymnasts, giant puppets, a

dancing white glove and black shoes with white socks (like the one Jackson wore), an electrifying electric cellist and, of course, a trove of world-class dancers re-creating and re-interpreting Jackson's most iconic moves backed by many long-time Jackson band members and a state-of-the-art sound system.

Michael Jackson, *THE IMMORTAL World Tour* is scheduled to hit 65 cities and, as of mid-December 2011, had already generated more than \$100m in ticket sales, with eight months left on the North America tour. Branca's already involved in the next Vegas-based Jackson/Cirque collaboration, this time a permanent show set to open in May 2013 in Mandalay Bay's 2,000-seat Lion King Theater. And, as you might suspect, Branca's a repository of great Michael Jackson stories, including this one, that changed everything: after the *Thriller* album had been out for 18 months, Jackson told Branca he wanted to make a video of the title song. Music videos were still in their infancy, with an average budget back then of about \$50,000. Jackson told Branca he wanted to budget \$1m.



These pages - Branca's impressive client list includes the boxer Mike Tyson (opposite, top), the Reverend Jesse Jackson (opposite, below) and Steve Tyler, lead singer of Aerosmith (below). Left; another image taken from Michael Jackson, *THE IMMORTAL World Tour*

As of December 2011, IMMORTAL had already generated \$100m in sales

Branca was aghast, but Jackson issued an edict: 'Make it happen.' Branca approached cable TV outfit Showtime about financing a *Making of Thriller* film - the first ever "making of" video. With that in place, the big-budget video was made, but before its release elders at Jackson's Jehovah's Witnesses church informed him that the video, filled with zombies and werewolf transformations, promoted demonology and told him not to release it.

Michael then ordered Branca to destroy it. Branca thought 'This is nuts', and racked his brain to figure out how he could avoid scrapping the

million dollar video. Recalling that Jackson was a big Bela Lugosi fan, he concocted a story that Lugosi was very religious (Branca had no idea whether this was true) and had put a disclaimer at the beginning of *Dracula* stating that the flick in no way endorsed vampirism.

Jackson was summarily impressed, which is why, if you own a copy of the *Thriller* video, you'll see a similarly worded disclaimer placed at the beginning. And thus, Jackson was catapulted into superstardom, MTV featured its first black performer, and the course of music history was changed.

As consuming as running Jackson's estate is, Branca naturally has his fingers in more than one pie. At the time this article was going to press, he was also putting the finishing touches on a deal that would put his long-time client and good friend Carlos Santana (Branca arranged for Santana to receive an honorary degree from Occidental College a few years back, making him the first member of his family to obtain a degree) into a residency arrangement at Mandalay Bay's House of Blues, with Santana performing three-week stints several times a year. His energy is insatiable.

'The prospect of having a permanent Michael Jackson show in the Lion King Theater, and Carlos in a residency performing 100 feet away is like a dream come true,' Branca says

Lunch done, we pile back into the Ferrari. John's promised he's going to give me a thrill or two on the return trip. He doesn't disappoint. As we race around yet another heart-stopping blind, hairpin curve, to Ike and Tina Turner's *Nutbush City Limits*, and John sees my knuckles digging deep into the seat, he turns to me, grinning. 'I'm not even pushing it yet.' (For the record, he swears he doesn't go over the speed limit.)

And then, for no reason whatsoever, he adds, nonchalantly, 'And I'm not that good a driver.' 'Don't tell me that now! Tell me that when we're back at your house!' I holler back.

When we pull up to the gates of his house, I involuntarily utter 'Thank God!' but just like kids getting off those amusement park rides, I immediately want another go. There are still jolts of adrenaline coursing through my body, but John abruptly announces that he's going to take a nap. He is, after all, knackered.



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