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# Occidental

M A G A Z I N E

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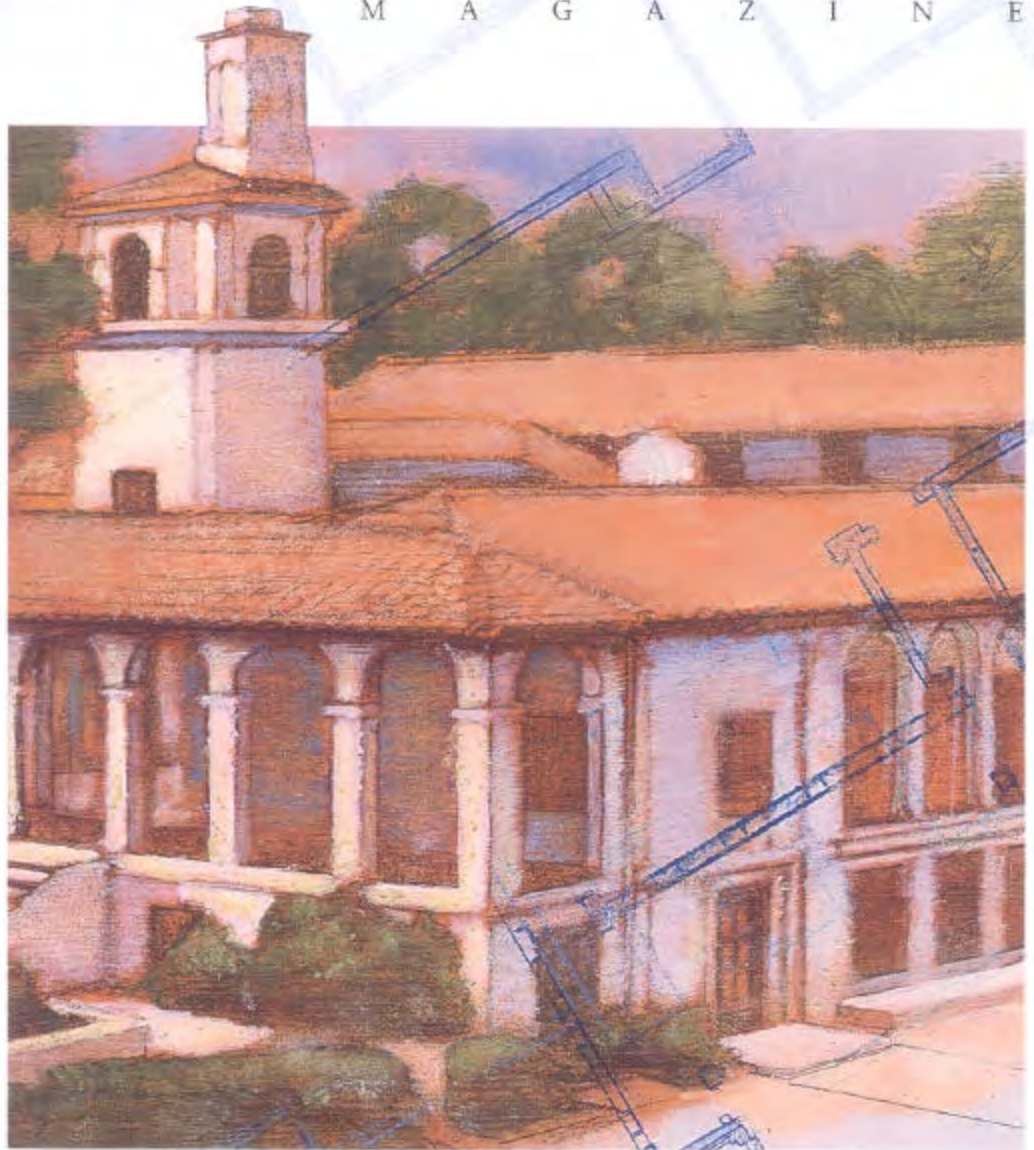
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## COMPASS FOR A NEW CENTURY

Oxy launches an unprecedented \$65 million campaign



# L.A. LAW

**In the staccato world of rock 'n' roll, entertainment lawyer John Branca '72 has orchestrated megadeals for the likes of Michael Jackson, the Rolling Stones and Elton John.**

**B Y D E B R A H O T A L I N G**

Looking relaxed, almost unassuming in a pair of jeans and a polo shirt, John Branca '72 leans back in one of the wicker chairs that lends a disarmingly folksy air to his Century City office. It has been, he admits, an interesting year.

The client list of this name partner in the preeminent entertainment law firm Ziffren, Brittenham & Branca reads like a *Who's Who* of the music industry: Michael Jackson, Elton John, Aerosmith, the Rolling Stones, the Beach Boys, ZZ Top and Prince as well as a host of alternative and rap artists.

Although many of his clients regularly make the headlines, it is his deal-making efforts on behalf of Michael Jackson with which Branca is most often identified in the public eye.

But when it comes to discussing his clients' personal lives, Branca is intractable. He will not talk. This absolute refusal to dish dirt on his clients, coupled with his reputation for brokering big deals, is precisely what makes him the most sought-after entertainment attorney in the country.

Indeed, entertainment and music have always been a part of Branca's life. Born in Bronxville, N.Y., and raised in Mt. Vernon, Branca moved to Los Angeles to live with his dancer/actress mother when he was 10. He says he bought his first Elvis Presley album when he was 7 and remembers sending away to England for Rolling Stones records that were unavailable in the U.S.

Branca says music was his life—a passion that meant good times but bad grades. In high school, his band played the Los Angeles music circuit, including opening for the Doors at the Whiskey. "As soon as I got involved with my band, my grades started to drop," he says.

Gradually, however, academics won out. After two years at L.A. City College and a few summers at UCLA and Fordham University, where he managed to achieve a straight-A average in physics and history, Branca discovered that the intense energy he put toward his music could also be channeled into his academic studies.

In 1970, when Branca transferred to Oxy to study political science and philosophy, he finally gave up music altogether.

"I was very immersed in the music scene in L.A. and all my friends were musicians," he recalls. "In order to really be successful [in school] I gave music up entirely. I didn't even listen to music for a period of time. It was painful. I don't mean painful in a bad sense but I'm one of those kind of people who tend to be all or nothing. In order to dedicate myself to academics, I had to give up music."

After briefly entertaining the idea of becoming a college professor—"I saw myself teaching philosophy and writing books"—Branca graduated from Oxy in 1972, and immediately began his studies at UCLA's law school.

"I enjoyed my time at Occidental. It was an excellent education," says Branca, a member of the College's board of trustees.

Branca helped to attract Jackson in 1979 as a tax lawyer with the now defunct Hardee, Barovick, Konecky & Braun. When the singer's career skyrocketed in the early 1980s—Jackson's 1982 megaplatinum album "Thriller" continues to be the best-selling album of all time—Branca's own career as an entertainment attorney was launched. Branca not only provided legal counsel to Jackson, but also assisted in the management of the singer's career—responsibilities that some-

times accounted for 40 percent of Branca's time.

The relationship was close. Branca reportedly accompanied Jackson on visits to Disneyland and shopping excursions to Hong Kong. But there must have been moments, late at night, when Branca wondered about the cost of putting so many of his career eggs in one basket.

The answer came in 1990. Reportedly at the urging of entertainment mogul David Geffen—who allegedly believed Branca held too much power with the superstar—a tearful Jackson fired Branca, bringing on board litigator Bert Fields, whose Ivy League image contrasted sharply with Branca's studiously low-key style.

Branca admits that being fired left him shaken for a brief time. "In this business, if you're viewed as vulnerable, or you've lost your power base, the vultures start circling." Branca would later observe in *California Business Law*. After the initial shock wore off, however, Branca found he had a unique opportunity: the chance to prove himself as being something more than just "Michael Jackson's attorney."

Over the next three years, Branca managed to secure for his clients some of the largest recording deals in the industry's history, including representing Aerosmith in a four-album, \$30 million recording contract with Sony Music, the Rolling Stones in a three-album, \$40 million recording agreement with Virgin Records, Elton John in a \$39 million music publishing deal with Warner/Chappell and ZZ Top in a five-album, \$30 million agreement with BMG.

During the past three years Branca has worked hard to develop joint ventures between recording and entertainment conglomerates as well as to do music work for an expanding coterie of both up-and-coming and established recording artists.

"The last three years have been the most productive of my career," he says. "I had to prove myself. I used to be known as Michael's lawyer—that was my identity. Now I've established an identity in my own right."

Late last year, in an ironic turn of events, the 43-year-old attorney was invited to resume a prominent place on the Jackson team—a return that, according to one insider, Jackson himself refers to as "the second coming."

Since resuming his deal-making duties on behalf of Jackson, Branca has brokered what is considered within the music industry as the biggest music publishing deal in history, worth an estimated \$100 million. Under this agreement, Jackson's vast publishing holdings—including most of the Lennon/McCartney catalog as well as songs by Elvis Presley, Little Richard and others—will be administered by EMI Music.

"John is definitely the premier attorney in the music industry, but what sets him apart from the others is his appreciation of music," says David Adelson, vice president and managing editor for *Hits* magazine, a prominent music industry trade publication. "John listens to music. Really listens to it. And artists recognize and appreciate his knowledge about and passion for music."

Branca's stellar career seems at moments to surprise even him. "The biggest idols of my childhood were Elvis Presley, the Doors, the Beach Boys and the Rolling Stones," he says. "And I have represented all of them." ■

**'I had to prove myself . . . now I've established an identity in my own right.'**