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Why Entertainment Attorney John Branca Has Dedicated His Career To 'Fighting For Artists' Rights'

Over 47 years, the lawyer has represented 30 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees — during their lives, and with the likes of the Michael Jackson estate, after their deaths.

BY FRANK DIGIACOMO



John Branca photographed on June 17, 2024 in Los Angeles. Grooming by Colleen Dominique using La Mer at Exclusive Artists.
Christopher Patey

John Branca stopped collecting his clients' RIAA gold and platinum record awards decades ago. Those he has that are not in storage or at his office — approximately 20 — are displayed, along with other music memorabilia, in four rooms of his Italian villa-style home in affluent Beverly Park, a gated community in the Los Angeles hills. The records are etched with some of the most recognizable names and album titles in pop and rock history: the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack, Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*, Santana's *Supernatural*, *The Best of The Doors* and others from Elton John, Nirvana, Backstreet Boys, Usher, Alanis Morissette, Enrique Iglesias and Michael Jackson.

A partner and the head of the music department at L.A. entertainment law firm Ziffren Brittenham, Branca has represented 30 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees over his 47 years as an entertainment lawyer. But he's most closely associated with Jackson, especially since the pop legend's untimely death at

the age of 50 on June 25, 2009, brought on by a heart-stopping mixture of sedatives and the anesthetic propofol.

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Branca, who had represented Jackson on and off since 1980, had rejoined the pop star's team just eight days earlier, six years after Jackson had terminated Branca's services in a letter that offered no explanation for his decision. On July 1, he was appointed co-executor of his estate with former record executive John McClain, based on a 2002 will that Branca produced for the court. Jackson left everything to his children (Prince, Paris and Bigi); his mother, Katherine Jackson; and charity, but his estate was almost \$500 million in debt.

Now 73, Branca was just 29 and working for then-prominent entertainment attorney David Braun when Jackson — who was seeking independence both from his family (including his notorious manager father, Joe Jackson) and as an artist — hired the young attorney. The two grew close: Jackson was best man at Branca's first wedding, which Little Richard officiated, and until their parting, Branca was instrumental in helping Jackson become an artist who, at his apogee, was the Taylor Swift of his time. But Branca sees it differently. "I prefer to say she's the Michael Jackson of this time," he says with a wry smile, sitting in the so-called "tennis house" next to his personal court. "If there was

a Mount Rushmore of pop artists,” he adds, “you’d have Elvis, The Beatles and Michael.”

Fifteen years after Jackson’s death, Branca remains an effective steward of his estate. In addition to adding approximately \$3 billion in net revenue to its coffers through publishing acquisitions and negotiating better terms for Jackson’s catalog including ownership of his master recordings, among others, he has maintained the late artist’s cultural relevance through a number of theatrical productions, documentaries and, next year, a biopic — all of which have kept Jackson’s brand from being defined by T-shirts and coffee mugs while maintaining focus on his art instead of the allegations of sexual abuse that surfaced late in his life and followed him after death.

Branca also remains a fierce defender of Jackson’s crown as the King of Pop. He professes immense admiration for Swift’s accomplishments, including her blockbuster 2023 concert film, *Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour*, but he refutes media reports from earlier this year asserting that its box-office yields had surpassed those of the posthumous 2009 Jackson documentary, *This Is It*, saying inflation wasn’t taken into account. According to Box Office Mojo, *The Eras Tour* grossed \$261.7 million and *This Is It* grossed \$268 million — or, in 2024 dollars, roughly \$267 million for the former and \$390 million for the latter.

Then there’s the May *New York Times* story that compared Swift to Jackson, The Beatles and other artists, pointing out that the 10 solo albums Jackson released between 1972 and 2001 have been RIAA-certified platinum 72 times, with *Thriller* accounting for 34 of them (making it one of the most successful albums of all time). Swift currently has 50 certified platinum albums — although the *Times* article reported that her sales indicate the number will be closer to 90 once her “Taylor’s Version” releases are counted. But Branca says Jackson’s certifications do not account for his popularity overseas. “Two-thirds of Michael’s sales are outside the United States,” he notes — sales that the RIAA does not count when issuing gold and platinum albums. That international appeal has carried over to the streaming era: Jackson’s combined U.S. streams for 2020 through 2022 made up 28% of his combined global streams, according to Luminate. He also points out that multiple streams of a

single song can count as an album, which was not the case when physical sales were the only measurement of a record's success.

Branca is a walking, talking compendium of numbers and reasons that Jackson belongs on that pop Rushmore, and preaches that gospel to his 29,200 followers on [TikTok \(https://www.tiktok.com/@john_branca?lang=en\)](https://www.tiktok.com/@john_branca?lang=en), where he has posted 70 videos — the majority of them about Jackson, among others about Branca's own memorabilia and business philosophies.

But regarding the estate's business dealings and litigation, he is a tomb.

When questions veer into that territory, his response is usually a version of "This isn't going to be *another* story about the Jackson estate, is it?" He has a point. In addition to the RIAA awards on his wall, over his career Branca has represented Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Neil Diamond, The Beach Boys and Brian Wilson, Paul McCartney and John Lennon's Northern Songs publishing catalog, the Elvis Presley estate, The Rolling Stones, Earth, Wind & Fire and Motown founder Berry Gordy.

The son of an actress-dancer who appeared in a number of Elvis' films and an athletic commissioner for New York State, Branca grew up in the New York suburb of Mount Vernon and moved to Los Angeles at age 11. In his teens, he played guitar and keyboards in two rock bands, The Other Half and The Pasternak Progress. "I signed a record deal at 16, but I was forced to go to college by my mother," he says.





Christopher Patey

Today, Branca still projects a Beverly Hills version of that youthful rock'n'roll aesthetic. His car collection includes two Rolls-Royces (a white 2023 Cullinan and a blue 2016 Dawn). He sold the Ferrari 458 Spider that he once told *Billboard* he would hang “from the ceiling in my living room if I could” — and he has turned heads at Grammy parties with a beautiful woman in tow. (Married three times, Branca is currently single.)

But that exterior flash conceals “an incredible strategist,” says David Lande, a Ziffren Brittenham partner who also represents music clients. As such, Branca declines to discuss pressing questions regarding the estate, including Katherine Jackson’s appeal of a judge’s 2023 ruling that let the estate move forward with its then-confidential \$625 million sale of 50% of Jackson’s assets to Sony Music. (California’s Second Appellate District Court in Los Angeles has since issued a tentative ruling that sides with the estate.)

He also deflects queries about the role that co-executor McClain plays in estate administration. A former executive at A&M Records and Interscope, and a key figure in Janet Jackson’s success, McClain has A&R’d all posthumous releases of Jackson’s music, but he has otherwise been virtually invisible since Jackson’s will was probated, in part due to health issues. Branca only says: “For all his genius, John shuns the spotlight.”

The Sony assets sale is off-limits as well — but according to three sources familiar with the deal, the estate retained Jackson’s public image and likeness rights, which means that Sony does not get a cut of projects such as the various productions of *MJ: The Musical* and the biopic that is slated to open in April 2025. (Actor Miles Teller will portray Branca.)

Those sources also tell *Billboard* that the estate retains control and management of how the assets Sony acquired can be used moving forward. Branca says only that the sale will not change the business strategy that Jackson mandated when he was alive: “Everything has to be authentic and true to the artist.”

The deal values Jackson's assets at \$1.25 billion — the highest of any artist in history, including the recent \$1 billion to \$1.2 billion valuation assigned to Queen's coveted assets (which Sony is reported to be buying). Unlike the Jackson deal, sources say the Queen sale includes name, image and likeness rights.

The \$3 billion that the estate has earned includes its take from box-office receipts from several Jackson-themed theatrical productions, which Branca says have grossed close to \$2 billion, among them two Cirque du Soleil shows; The Immortal World Tour, which ran from 2011 to 2014 and grossed \$360 million, according to Billboard Boxscore; and *Michael Jackson: One*, which has been playing at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas since 2013. On Broadway, *MJ: The Musical* has grossed over \$202.5 million and attracted almost 1.4 million theatergoers since opening in February 2022, according to The Broadway League. The jukebox musical opened on London's West End in March; will debut in Hamburg, Germany, in November; has toured North America since August 2023; and Branca says a fifth production will debut at the Sydney Opera House next February and tour the world. The U.S. touring version, he adds, "outgrosses the Broadway show."

The recent success of the musical and anticipation of the biopic, *Michael*, which stars Jermaine Jackson's son Jaafar Jackson in the title role, have deflected the spotlight from the disturbing allegations revealed in the 2019 HBO docuseries *Leaving Neverland*, in which two men accused Jackson of sexually abusing them as children. (The case is currently in arbitration; Branca declines to comment on the film or the estate's lawsuit against HBO over it.)

Branca does allude to the documentary when discussing his perspective on the use of artificial intelligence in the music industry. "AI is a tool if it's used properly, and from what I've seen, it will never replace the emotional attachment that a fan has to the real artist," he says. But he also contends, "It's important to have a regulatory environment where artists can control their [intellectual property] and their brand." And that control, he asserts, should extend beyond their lives.

"Libel laws only extend to a living artist. Once they pass away, anybody can say anything, and in my opinion, that's reckless and not fair," he says. "There

should be legislation that protects an artist's reputation and brand for a period after their death — whether it's 10 years or 20 years. You can still say things that are truthful, but you can't make stuff up."

It's an idea that would have a profound effect on journalism and media, and Branca has taken steps to make it reality. "We've talked to the legislature in Vermont, which is very progressive, about a pilot program for protection of the deceased," he says. "It's been put in front of certain legislators who are interested in it, but it's embryonic at this point."

Over the course of his career, Branca says he's proudest of "fighting for artists' rights," a mission that extends far beyond his work for the Jackson estate. "I got the Bee Gees the ownership of their recordings from [Australian music impresario Robert] Stigwood. I got Don Henley back the ownership of his Eagles songs," he says. For The Rolling Stones' *Steel Wheels* tour, "I negotiated the touring structure in which there was a single national tour promoter who guaranteed not only ticket sales, merchandising and all other rights in one bundle" — a then-game-changing deal that is now standard practice for major artists — "and brought them and their catalog to Richard Branson to establish Virgin Records." He extracted Carlos Santana from his Island Records contract and reunited him with Clive Davis, which resulted in the smash success of *Supernatural* and, for John Fogerty, obtained artist royalties for the first time on his Creedence Clearwater Revival recordings.

Branca attributes this conviction to growing up in the late '60s "during the anti-Vietnam, anti-establishment era." That said, righteousness runs in his family. His uncle, Ralph Branca, was a three-time MLB All-Star who played for the Brooklyn Dodgers in the '40s and '50s. To sports fans, he is the pitcher who gave up the "Shot Heard Round the World" — New York Giant Bobby Thomson's walk-off home run that won the National League pennant for his team in 1951. But Ralph also ranks as a hero in the history of civil rights as the white team member who befriended MLB's first Black player, Jackie Robinson.

"Ralph embraced Jackie," says Della Britton, president/CEO of the Jackie Robinson Foundation. On opening day of the 1947 season, when Robinson made his MLB debut, Ralph lined up next to him when other players refused.

“John’s father [John R. Branca; the son is John G.] said to Ralph, ‘Are you crazy?’ ” Britton explains. “At the time, Jackie was receiving death threats, and Ralph’s brother was worried that someone would take a shot at him, and if they missed, hit Ralph.” Ralph’s reply? Britton says: “ ‘I would have died a hero.’ ”

In the tennis house, where his uncle’s Dodgers uniform hangs framed on the wall, Branca wipes away tears as he talks about his uncle and his father, who was a high school pitcher. “He threw two no-hitters and was the New York State player of the year, but he got drafted in World War II,” he says. “I read Ralph’s autobiography, and he said that the [MLB] clubs overlooked my father because he was 5 foot 10 or 11 inches and he didn’t throw 95 [mph] like Ralph. But he said, ‘Today, Johnny would be looked at like Greg Maddux: control, control, control.’ ”

Like his late uncle, Branca serves on the board of the Jackie Robinson Foundation. Dylan, the youngest of his three children, is a pitcher on New York University’s baseball team, and Branca funded an indoor practice facility in downtown Manhattan so that the players did not have to take the ferry to Staten Island. He also funded the Branca Family Field at the University of California, Los Angeles’ Jackie Robinson Stadium. (Branca got his law degree at UCLA and is a donor and board member of various schools there.)

His most recent philanthropic effort is tied to music. In June, he announced a \$5 million gift to establish the John Branca Institute of Music at his undergraduate alma mater, L.A.’s Occidental College. His contribution will support the expansion of the college’s music program — one of *Billboard*’s top music business schools for the past several years.

The gift came with Branca’s caveat that the institute must “focus on contemporary music. I said, ‘Go back as far as you need to go back, but you must include the rock era — you know, Muddy Waters and Elvis through to what’s going on today,’ ” he says. “They’re going to do a class on the creation of a song and how it’s marketed. They’re going to come at it from a more liberal arts perspective, so somebody majoring in economics or philosophy can benefit and get a real knowledge of the music business. They may teach a class

on Taylor Swift. They may teach a class on Michael Jackson, which would be pretty cool.”

And while he may not want to be known solely for his work with Jackson, Branca isn’t looking to put the man in the rearview mirror. Asked if he would have considered selling 100% of the estate’s assets to Sony, he shakes his head. “No,” he says. “I feel it’s important to pass Michael’s legacy on to his kids. So owning his name and likeness; always having 50% of the catalog and management control; the personal property: the warehouses, his Rolls-Royces, his chess set — everything goes to the kids. That’s how it should be.”

Additional reporting by Ed Christman.

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