



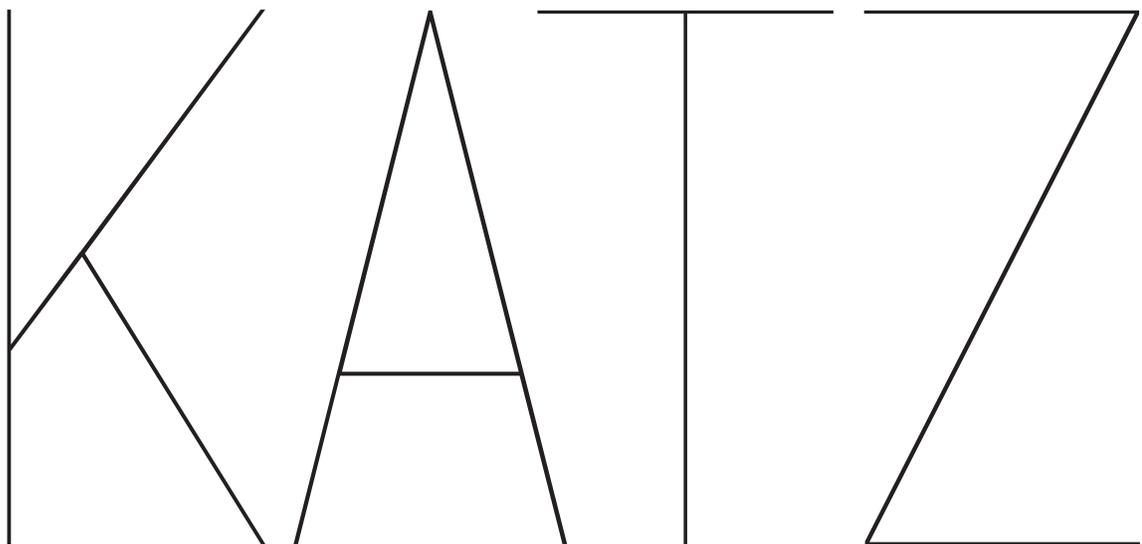
# JOEL

**As a lawyer, Joel Katz has an uncommon distinction,**

one that upends the longstanding stereotypes of his profession: Affable, reflective and an acutely attuned listener, Katz is a sheer pleasure to be around, according to virtually everyone who comes in contact with him.

That includes **Doug Morris**, who has observed the distinguished legal eagle in action at the negotiating table on numerous occasions. “He’s smart and hardworking, but he’s also very warm,” Morris marveled. “It’s different than the normal atmosphere you have with a lawyer; it’s the real thing.”

On another occasion, the great record man described Katz as “one of the most charitable and finest people I have met in this industry.”



## The South's Gentle Giant

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A

nyone who  
has ever  
worked with  
or known  
Joel can't

help but be awestruck by his ability to understand the intricate details of putting a deal together,” says **Sandbox Entertainment** topper **Jason Owen**. “Like a great architect, he misses nothing and can see the things most of us cannot. More than that, though, Joel Katz is a man of immense integrity and kindness, and that is why we are so close both personally and professionally. He is family. He’s one of a kind, a gem in our business and in life generally.”

For much of his career, which spans nearly a half century, Katz—the **Founding Chairman of Global Entertainment and Media Practice** and the **Founding Shareholder of the Atlanta Office of global firm Greenberg Traurig**—

lived and worked in the shadow of his higher-profile counterparts in New York and L.A. such as **Allen Grubman**, **John Branca** and **Don Passman**. But it was just a matter of time before the breadth and scale of Katz’s achievements would thrust him to the very apex of the A-list of entertainment lawyers. “Joel is somebody you can always count on,” Grubman has said.

One of Katz’s clients went so far as to hail him as “the **Michael Jackson** of entertainment law,” and that’s actually not such a stretch. Katz’s work for the **Recording Academy** and the **Country Music Association** has been groundbreaking, and his client list is mind-blowingly diverse, encompassing numerous top execs (including several of those quoted in this piece) and a galaxy of high-profile artists ranging from **Ludacris** to **Julio Iglesias**, as well as a number of prestigious organizations. He and **Jess Rosen**, who’s co-chair of the Atlanta Entertainment & Media Practice (as well as a respected jazz guitarist), make a formidable duo, further strengthening upstart Atlanta’s foothold in the legal world.

“I’m very proud that we’ve been able to build a business that started in Atlanta, not in the mainstream of the entertainment business,” Katz told us. “Which really goes to point out that if you work hard at something and just keep at it, no matter where you’re from; you can be a participant in an industry.”

Perhaps most significantly, Katz is trusted and beloved in equal measure across the close-knit Nashville music community.

“To call Joel a lawyer is a massive understatement,” **UMG Nashville** Chairman/CEO **Mike Dungan** tells us. “Yes, he practices law, but he is also a spin doctor, a psychotherapist, a philanthropist and a walking encyclopedia. The best part is, when you ask him how much you owe him, the answer is always the same: ‘I don’t know, somewhere between X and Y.’ That’s part of his charm—and it’s part of the reason why he can get anyone on the phone. An entrepreneur at heart, he simply gets shit done.”

“When it comes to dealmaking, Joel

is the center of the universe,” **BMLG** topper **Scott Borchetta** asserts. “He either knows about the next big deal or he’s making it—and when he’s making it, it’s likely to be the most creative deal possible...and it’s going to cost somebody a lot of money! Joel—don’t bill me for this.”

But Katz doesn’t spend all his time below the Mason-Dixon line; in order to effectively represent his extraordinarily wide-ranging client roster, he makes 35 to 40 trips to New York and L.A. during a typical year. “It’s a tough existence as you get older,” he acknowledged. “But I’ve got it down to a pretty scientific place. I have an airplane, and that makes it a little bit easier. On the plus side, living in Atlanta was a great place to bring up my two daughters. I now have four grandchildren.”

One key element in Katz’s exalted status in entertainment law is his fine-tuned awareness of the needs of artists. “I think that people in the arts are extremely intelligent, but they’re different than people who are in business,” he pointed out in an interview with Atlanta magazine *Du Jour*. “They view problems differently—maybe more subjectively than objectively—and sometimes they need help with the situations they find themselves in. I would say most of my business is counseling; 75% counseling, 25% legal advice.” Indeed, as he sees it, practicing law isn’t just a business; it’s also an art form.

But the root of Katz’s success couldn’t be more fundamental, as far as he’s concerned. “You work hard,” he explained during his keynote interview at **Midem** in 2015. “It’s really simple—you work. There’s no magic to being a lawyer, there’s no magic to being successful, there’s no magic to making money—you have to work; you have to get things done. People don’t pay you to be cute, they pay you to get it done.”

After graduating from New York City’s **Hunter College** with an economics degree in 1966, Queens native Katz arrived in Knoxville and began working toward a law degree at the **University of Tennessee**. In order to help with his college expenses, he got a part-time job in the college library and a fulltime job as a night clerk at a nearby **Holiday Inn**, working from 6pm till 6am, six days a week. That meant he was only getting a couple hours sleep, and



“I STARTED JOEL KATZ OFF.  
I WAS HIS FIRST CLIENT.”

James Brown

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he frequently arrived late for his first class, the study of contracts.

His professor, Joel told an interviewer from UT’s *Tennessee Law* magazine in 2016, “was a very prim and proper military guy, and he had a rule that if you were late three times, you got an automatic F.” After his third tardiness, the prof asked him about the cause of his lateness, and Joel told him about the all-night hotel job. “He said to me, ‘You’re not going to get an F in my class, son. You want to be a lawyer more than anybody else in this damn law school. You’re going to be a great lawyer, so I’m not going to flunk you out.’”

Three years later, sporting a law degree and a full head of hair, Katz headed to Atlanta, simultaneously taking jobs at HUD, then-brand-new Georgia State University and a small law firm before hanging out his own shingle, renting a one-room office and sharing a secretary with three other lawyers. “I opened my office with no clients,” he recalled. “The first week, there were no calls. The second week, no calls except from my wife. The third week, no calls.” On the fourth week, he got a call from the banker of a prominent Georgian, putting his career in motion.

“Strangely enough,” Katz noted, “my first client in my whole career as a lawyer was **James Brown**, who I represented off-and-on for about 40 years until he died. Securing him as a client was a story of insanity and silliness, but he and I became very close friends. He always used to tell people, ‘I started Joel Katz off. I was his first client.’”

Katz’s first job for Brown was negotiating a record deal with **PolyGram** in 1971. “He said he wanted a \$5 million advance against royalties, he wanted a jet plane and he wanted to own the master recordings and the publishing rights,”



**TOAST OF THE TOWN:** With Doug Morris



**HANGIN' OUT IN THE 615:** *With Matt Donahoe, Nashville super-managers Clint Higham and Jason Owen*

Katz explained. “I went through the list with the [PolyGram lawyer], and he looks at me and says, ‘Are you completely out of your mind? This is the stupidest, craziest, most egregious list of things I’ve ever heard in my career.’ I knew at that moment why Mr. Brown—I always called him that, never James—had hired me: because no lawyer who knew anything about this business would ever go in and ask for the things he wanted.”

They negotiated nonetheless and agreed on the terms of a deal. “We got use of a plane and less than \$5 million, but it was in the millions,” Katz told the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. “That was a lot of money back then. James was amazed.”

“At the end of the press conference announcing that the record company had just signed James, he said, ‘I want to thank my lawyer from Atlanta, Joel Katz, who is the best lawyer in the entertainment business and just did one of the best contracts that has ever been done in the business.’ Afterward, he gave me an envelope with \$50,000. It was three times more than I had ever made in a year. I’m thinking this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

“Three days after the press conference, I got a call from Austin, Texas, from a guy wanting to know if I was the ‘Godfather

of Soul’s lawyer.’ It was **Willie Nelson**, and he wanted me to represent him. I’m thinking, wow! I went to meet with him and he introduced me in one night to **George Jones**, **Tammy Wynette**, **Waylon Jennings** and **Kris Kristofferson**. Willie said to them, ‘This guy is going to be your lawyer.’”

Katz then met **George Strait** through his manager. “So my roots are pretty deep in Nashville,” he told us. “They’re very deep in pop music too, because we’ve worked with **Jimmy Buffett** for more than 40 years, and had a very interesting run with him.”

Katz put all of his clients on \$2,000-a-month retainers, and his practice grew, as did his bank account. In 1981, 10 years after Brown put him on the map, he started his own firm, **Katz, Smith & Cohen**.

In 1995, Katz became special counsel for the **Country Music Association**, further entrenching him in Nashville. Says CMA CEO **Sarah Trahern**, “Joel is well known as a tireless advocate for his clients—many of them the icons of the format, including Willie Nelson, George Strait and **Tim [McGraw]** and **Faith [Hill]**. But what I admire most is his foresight and imagination. Decades ago, he envisioned securing the future of country music on television by negotiating network contracts that have

not only secured the future of CMA, but took the format to new heights—launching careers and establishing country music as a vital part of the mainstream.”

In 1998, Katz merged his firm with Greenberg Traurig, which was then a Miami-based law firm of about 220 lawyers. As Greenberg Traurig grew, so did its entertainment practice; the firm now has entertainment attorneys scattered around the globe in nine offices. “But this is not a boutique firm; we do everything,” Katz pointed out. “The Atlanta office alone now has almost 100 lawyers.”

From there, his connections increased exponentially, along with his reputation. Since 2003, Katz has served as general counsel for the Recording Academy, with which he’s been closely involved for more than three decades. And in 2011, he negotiated a monumental 10-year deal that would keep the **Grammys** with CBS while providing the Academy with \$20 million-plus in annual licensing fees, to the extreme delight of Academy chief **Neil Portnow**.

“I’ve known Joel for nearly four decades and have worked with him in various ways over the years,” Portnow notes. “Like a fine wine, he only gets better with age. The Recording Academy could not have a better friend, mentor, advisor and



Katz with Scooter Braun; Brad Paisley and Nashville Mayor Megan Barry; Todd Boehly; Brooks and Dunn; colleague Jess Rosen; Recording Academy boss Neil Portnow and Sen. Barbara Boxer; President Jimmy Carter; CBS exec/Grammy VIP Jack Sussman; Republic chief Monte Lipman; another sign of his greatness; CMA topper Sarah Travern; and L.A. Reid.

advocate, and we are forever grateful for his commitment and passion surrounding our work and missions. I'm always fond of expressing what has become an iconic saying: "All roads lead to Joel Katz!"

"I'm very proud of the Grammy television deal with CBS, and the CMA deal with ABC, which is also a 10-year contract," Katz pointed out. "Those deals give both of them enormous stability and the ability to really grow their businesses without having to worry about renegotiating every three or four years. It's difficult to run a nonprofit organization, which is very much dependent on profit-making record and publishing companies, so it's important for the management of those institutions to have the time to develop their visions and make them a reality."

He's also been counsel to the **Michael Jackson Estate** since it began, including the 2016 sale of MJE's 50% stake in **Sony/ATV** to **Sony Corp.** In the Estate's business dealings, he's worked side by side with **John Branca** and **Howard Weitzman** from the **Kinsella Weitzman** firm. "The three of us are like the Three Amigos," Katz quipped. "We're good friends, and we try to do the best we can for the Estate. We take it very seriously, and we really trust each other. And **John McClain**, the co-executor, is a brilliant guy."

Among Katz's accomplishments in 2017 was representing **Tim McGraw** and **Faith Hill** in their signing to **Sony Music**, which comprises two solo albums for each artist plus two recordings with both. The deal brought a truckload of prestige to Sony Music Nashville chief **Randy Goodman**, who notes that "Joel has been a great advisor, mentor and friend to me for more than 20 years."

That same year, Katz was tapped to head the **T.J. Martell Foundation** as Chairman of the Board. Said **Debbie Martell** of the appointment, "Joel was very close to my father for many years as his entertainment attorney and as his friend. He will be an excellent leader and will help continue the important mission of the foundation." Since taking on this role, he's reconstructed the foundation's Board of Trustees and created a new system for managing the entire organization.

The consummate dealmaker's recent slam dunks include the **Latin Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences'** new 10-year TV contract with **Univision**, valued at more than \$250 million; the negotiation of **Tom Corson's** employment agreement with **Warner Bros. Records**; assisting in the creation and establishing the funding of **Hitco Entertainment**, **L.A. Reid** and **Charles Goldstuck's** new label.

Just as significantly, as the Recording Academy's General Counsel, Katz was involved in establishing the task force assembled in order to improve female advancement, while also assisting in commencing the search for a new CEO and President to succeed **Portnow**.

Katz is renowned for his philanthropic efforts. The law school library at the **University of Tennessee Law School** is named after him. He also endowed the **Joel Katz School** at the **University of Georgia** on the **Kennesaw State** campus, which is devoted to commercial music. He created an annual wine dinner for **T.J. Martell** in Atlanta, which always sells out and generates significant dollars for the foundation. He's helping to build a music university in Gabon in partnership with the **Berklee College of Music**. (He represents Gabon, among other nations.)

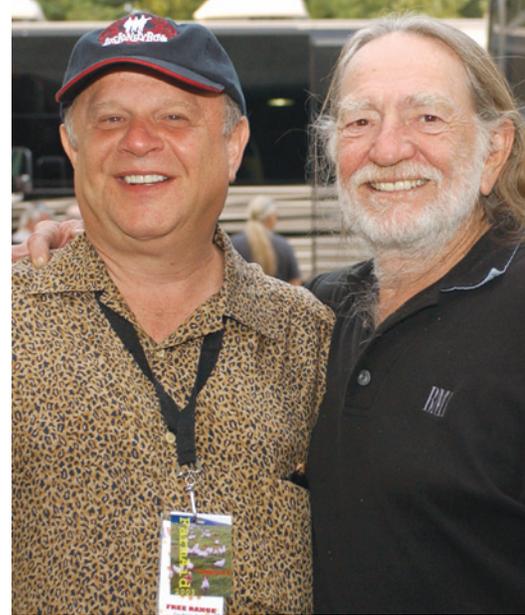
When **Sir Lucian Grainge** presented Katz with the **City of Hope's** 2016 Spirit of Life Award, he praised the honoree as "a man who excels at advocating and protecting his hall-of-fame roster of clients."

"Joel is not only my lawyer; he is my friend," said **Julio Iglesias**. "We immediately had a great connection. Joel is a very honest lawyer. The Spirit of Life means everything, and you deserve to have that."

"You've been my expensive lawyer for over 2,000 years, we've had some good times and we've made some very interesting deals, my friend," **Jimmy Buffett** quipped.

When it was his turn to speak, **Willie Nelson** turned to his friend of nearly a half century and said, "I'm glad the world is finally finding out how great of a guy you are."

But in accepting the award, Katz displayed characteristic humility, deflecting



**COUNTRY GENTLEMEN:** *With Willie Nelson, George Strait and Kenny Chesney*

**"Music truly is medicine, and music truly is hope. For it is music that refreshes the soul."**



**HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL:** Katz at Spirit of Life gala with UMG Nashville boss Mike Dungan, Little Big Town, Neil Portnow, UMG supremo Sir Lucian Grainge, Irving Azoff and Michael W. Smith.

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attention from himself, instead referencing his dual passions for art and helping others in language more befitting a poet than a barrister. “Music truly is medicine, and music truly is hope,” he said from the dais. “For it is music that refreshes the soul.”

“Joel is the master,” says legendary concert promoter **Louis Messina**. “He may go into a meeting representing one person and leave representing everyone else. He’s so great, so smart and lovable, no one can say no to him.”

Katz has repped Messina for four decades. “I met Joel through **Mark Rothbaum**, Willie Nelson’s manager, in the late ’70s,” Messina recalls. “Back then, I did a lot of Willie shows. Even though **Allen Becker** started **Pace Concerts** on a handshake, when we started making some real noise, we felt I should formalize our deal. So we did; it’s also when Joel began representing Pace.”

Messina, then, has first-hand knowledge of Joel’s uncanny ability to go into a negotia-

tion representing one party and coming out of it representing both.

“He has done so much for me,” Messina continues. “He negotiated my Pace deal [Messina and Becker sold their company to **Live Nation** forerunner **SFX** in 1998 for \$130 million]; also my **AEG** deal. If it’s legal, for me, it’s Joel. But probably the best thing about being in business with him has been our friendship. As I said above, he’s the only one who represents everyone in the room—and that’s because of his integrity, concern for his clients and even the people he’s making the deals with. Talk about a mensch. He defines it.”

For this one-of-a-kind attorney, everything ultimately comes down to humanity and civility. “It’s about dealing with people and problem-solving,” Katz has stated. “From the beginning, I believed that relationships are the key to any business, and I still do.” •

