

Dina LaPolt

Beating the Odds

Dina LaPolt defies every preconceived notion attached to her status as one of music's top attorneys. She is bold, funny and prone to unpacking anecdotes with the wide-eyed wonder of a woman who can't believe she's lived to tell them. She is the founder and owner of the hugely successful LaPolt Law, whose clients have included Steven Tyler, Cardi B, 21 Savage, deadmau5 and, for many years, the estate of Tupac Shakur.

Her professional reach has extended to the representation of songwriters on Capitol Hill via her work on the 2018 **Music Modernization Act**, the first major copyright reform for music creators in decades, and her role in obtaining the release of rapper 21 Savage, incarcerated by ICE in early 2019.

For all her achievements, however, LaPolt is the first to admit that her road has been bumpy at best. She's candid about her struggle with substance abuse and the ups and downs she's weathered challenging the straight, male dominance of the industry as an out-and-proud lesbian and vocal advocate for LGBTQ+ rights.

INTERVIEW BY LARRY FLICK



PHOTO: DAVID BECKER/GETTY PHOTO RIGHT: VIVIAN KILLUEA/GETTY

LaPolt dreams on with Steven Tyler. Three lawyers, no waiting: Capitol Music Group CEO Michelle Jubelirer, Loeb & Loeb's Debbie White and LaPolt.

“I’ve been told my whole life, ‘It’s not going to happen.’ It was strike after strike. I’m a woman, strike one. I’m dyslexic, strike two. I’m gay, strike three. I went to an unaccredited law school, strike four. I had no real experience in what I wanted to do, strike five. For years, I didn’t feel seen for what I had to contribute.”

Where did you grow up?

In a very progressive town called New Paltz, New York. When I look back, I’m so grateful and blessed that I grew up there. But as a kid, all I wanted was to get the hell out of there.

My mother was an artist. She was a painter, and she had a ceramic studio in our house for 25 years. My father was in prison reform. He started as a prison guard, and he quickly realized that most people in prison are Black men and that there was nothing helping them when they got out. So he got his master’s degree and spent 40 years setting up educational programs in maximum-security prisons. Between the two of them, I learned about the Civil Rights Movement early in life. I had quite the childhood.

Was there a lot of music around?

Oh, yes! **The Grateful Dead** was a big thing in my town. They were everything! We lived 40 miles from Woodstock, so the culture was a big part of my family. My aunts went to the original **Woodstock** festival, and they brought that music into my life. **Jimi Hendrix** and **Janis Joplin** really grabbed me at the time. I remember hanging out with my aunts and their friends in a flower garden. They all had long hair and painted faces, and they were playing guitar. It resonated deeply with me. I remember saying to myself and anyone who would listen, “I want to do this for the rest of my life.” From there, my parents got me a guitar, and I started taking lessons. I was addicted to music.



Team Dina: (front row) Sarah Scott, Lindsay Arrington, LaPolt, Jessie Winkler; (middle row) Dale Melidosian, Mariah Comer, Kristin Wenning, Cameron Berkowitz; (top) Dominic Chaklos

Did you consider becoming a musician?

I was always in bands, and I actually went to college for music. I got a scholarship to **Concordia College** in Westchester County. It was great, but you had to choose between jazz and classical as your focus. I picked jazz, but it was the wrong decision. It did not resonate with me at all, and I got kicked out of school. During this period, I developed a horrible drug-and-alcohol problem that I didn't realize would plague me for most of my life.

I wound up going back to New Paltz and graduating with a degree in classical music. It was amazing. I learned things like

how [Italian violinist] **Niccolò Paganini** was a rock star of the Romantic era. I learned to connect with music on a deeper level. And all the while I was playing in rock bands.

When did law begin to factor into your musical equation?

During my last year in college, my ex-girlfriend's sister started dating **Eric Carr**, who was then the drummer for **KISS**. Long story short, I started working for Eric as a part-time personal assistant. Among other things, I helped him get ready for the **Monsters of Rock** tour. On one particular day, there was chaos everywhere; it was madness. Suddenly, in walked a tall guy with a bowtie and suspenders, and everyone straightened up. In an instant, it got really proper and respectful. Even **Gene Simmons** behaved differently. I was like, "Who is THAT?" It was **Bill Randolph**, **KISS**' lawyer. I thought, "Wow, I want that; I want that kind of respect."

What was your first step toward getting there?

Right before I got my bachelor's degree, **KISS** decided to relocate to L.A. I had been doing all of this stuff for Eric, so I decided to finish school and move. I got my friend Ted, who was gay like me, and we drove across the country in my 1987 Mustang.

While we were driving, I heard that Eric had gotten sick. He got progressively worse pretty quickly. I'll never forget being at the Grand Canyon and hearing that he had been admitted

to the hospital. By the time we got to California, the band had put out a press statement that he was leaving the band. The space of time between getting that news and Eric dying [of heart cancer] was nine months. It was crazy.

It was a dark time. There I am in California with no job, no job prospects and no money. I did what I needed to do. I had all kinds of jobs. I taught guitar to kids. I sold magazines to poor people for astronomical amounts of money per month. It was on one of those calls that I met a hot girl who became my girlfriend, and we moved in together. Not long after, I found myself in another bad work situation that left

me feeling like I needed a lawyer. When I said, “Maybe I’ll just go to law school,” my girlfriend laughed at me. Like any good alcoholic with resentment issues, I went on an unstoppable mission to become a lawyer.

Along the way, I started a lipstick-lesbian band called **Irresistible Impulse**. It was the harmonies of **The Indigo Girls** with the rock of **Joan Jett**. We played a lot while I was in law school. During that period, **BMI** held a conference at **San Francisco University**, and we were booked to play. I went through the booklet to find our name, and I saw all of the panels listed. One of them was on negotiating record deals. It had three music lawyers. I went and I was stunned—I had that same feeling I had when I saw **Bill Randolph** with **KISS**. In an instant, I wasn’t worrying about my band anymore. I’d had an epiphany; I knew where I was going, and I was hell-bent on getting there.

Who was your first client?

Wild Orchid, which was the girls from **Kids Incorporated** [and pre-Fergie **Stacy Ferguson**]. They were young and crazy, and we had amazing chemistry. I still do work for **Stefanie Ridel**.

Can you characterize your approach with your clients?

I tell them I’m going to tell them the truth at all times. I say, “I’m going to give you the information, and that is not always going to be information that you like.” One of the things I’ve seen over 25 years is that there are people who won’t give the artists bad news. They’re afraid of confrontation; they don’t want to get yelled at. But you can’t be afraid of that—or anything. I learned that from **Afeni Shakur** when she hired me to work on the **Tupac** estate.

Everything came together when I met **Afeni**. We spent a lot of time at the courthouse together because **Tupac** died without

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LaPol with (front row) Evan Lamberg, Amanda Marks, John Frankenheimer, Sylvia Rhone, Clarence Avant, Kathy Nelson, Neil Portnow, Bruce Resnikoff; (back row) Larry Vallon, Jason Morey, Gary Stiffelman, David Zedeck, Zach Horowitz, Jason Peterson and Don Passman at City of Hope Spirit of Life Kickoff Breakfast honoring Rhone



UTA's Jbeau Lewis, Maverick's Dan Dymtrow, LaPol, Primary Wave's Natalia Nastaskin and AEG's Jason Bernstein at SXSW

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a will; everything had to be approved by the court. I was newly sober at the time. We talked about it, and she told me about being 13 years sober from crack cocaine. She offered so much wisdom from her life, so much validation of mine. The deeper we went in our connection, the more motivated I became to keep moving forward and make a difference.

How did you get involved in the rights of songwriters?

I co-founded a group called Songwriters of North America [SONA] as a result of digging deep into agreements and seeing how songwriters were paid. In rap music, for example, there are so many writers, and there are a lot of samples. By the time you get your percentage, it can be, like, 5 or 8%. Then what you’re getting is a mechanical royalty, and *that’s* divided up.

Performance royalties in the U.S. are governed under consent decrees for ASCAP and BMI. It’s all regulated, just like mechanical

royalties; songwriter income is all regulated by the government.

In 2014, when the Justice Department announced that it was going to review the ASCAP and BMI consent decrees, I thought it was a great opportunity to make things more equitable; I saw an opportunity to fix things in the consent decrees for performance royalties to help songwriters.

Unfortunately, instead of positive change, what came down was a 100% licensing mandate that made it *worse* for songwriters. I said, “We’ve got to sue.” We argued that these terrible, 70-year-old consent decrees robbed songwriters of their property; they are in violation of the U.S. Constitution, an unlawful seizure of property. From there, I was in the world of songwriter advocacy. I’ve been knee-deep in it ever since.

How did your work with SONA evolve into your involvement with the Music Modernization Act of 2018?

Before the Modernization Act, there was the **Songwriters Equity Act**, which was authored by Rep. **Doug Collins** [R-Ga.]. Then there was the **Fair Pay Act**, which was authored by Rep. **Jerry Nadler** [D-N.Y.]. These were the two bills we were trying to get passed in Congress—but they weren't passing. They weren't even getting any momentum.

The chairman of the judiciary at the time was Congressman **Bob Goodlatte**, a Republican out of Virginia. I was testifying, and we were getting into it with some of the broadcasters and DSPs, like **Spotify**. Everybody was fighting. Things were just starting to fall apart.

In September 2017, I was at a conference in Washington, D.C., speaking on a panel. Out of nowhere, I got a call saying Collins was ready to throw in the towel, that he didn't want to be involved anymore. I freaked. I got in a car and raced to his office. I walked in, and I saw the Congressman, his chief of staff and the legislative director in charge of copyright in his office. They were despondent. I pleaded with them to try one more thing: Get everyone to come in and make something happen. We broke up the list; I called the businesspeople from Spotify and **Apple** and **Amazon**. I said, "Your policy people are fucking everything up, and songwriters are going to start dragging you through the mud." In two hours, we hammered things out right there in that conference room.

I gather some of that persistence came from your parents. How much do you think their lessons informed your work on behalf of 21 Savage?

First and foremost, they taught me about fairness. With 21 Savage, his team came to me because he was getting very successful. They said, "He needs you. We have some secrets." One of the secrets was that he was undocumented. He

came to the U.S., to Atlanta, from London when he was six years old. The visa ran out, and he just grew up here. **Trump** had recently become President, and the Republicans were rolling out all these terrible immigration bills.

I remember sitting down with 21 Savage and thinking, "What a fabulous person." He is a man of few words, measured and smart. He told me about going to high school, where all of his friends had part-time jobs and got their driver's licenses. He couldn't do those things because he lived in secret and in fear. I immediately started working on getting him a green card, using my political connections. And then my biggest fear was realized: I got a call from someone at the White House saying, "ICE is looking at your client." I called him and his managers to get him to California, which is a

sanctuary state. But it was **Super Bowl Weekend**—this was in 2019, Super Bowl LIII—and he had a performance at the **Mercedes-Benz Stadium** in Atlanta. Right after the show, he was taken by ICE to a detention center.

It was also **Grammy** weekend, which was a godsend because I was hosting a fundraiser for Nadler—I had all my friends and contacts from Congress there, including Rep. **Zoe Lofgren**, who's a Democrat from California. She's the chair of the Immigration Citizenship Subgroup. She wrote a letter on behalf of 21 Savage, and he was released. You can't make this stuff up.

You now preside over your own firm, and you have a richly varied team. What does an ideal candidate for your team look like?

Most law firms look at people's resumes scanning for the Ivy League education and the 4.0 grade average. I don't look for any of that. As a matter of fact, that turns me off. I look for the person who went to six different high schools, three colleges, then worked full-time while going to law school. That's the person I hire—the person of hard knocks.

I've been told my whole life, "It's not going to happen." It was strike after strike. I'm a woman, strike one. I'm dyslexic, strike two. I'm gay, strike three. I went to an unaccredited law school, strike four. I had no real experience in what I wanted to do, strike five. For years, I didn't feel seen for what I had to contribute. Afeni Shakur saw me. She told me I had emotional intelligence and said that was more important than any perceived deficits. It has guided me well.

Can you say specifically how your emotional intelligence has benefited you?

It underlines my ability to help people, which I plan to continue doing. I'm so blessed; I have nine full-time lawyers here and my managing partner, **Sarah**

Scott. That gives me a lot of time to give back and pay it forward; it allows me to work on my nonprofit stuff. I'm on the Executive Leadership Committee of the **Black Music Action Coalition**. I'm on the boards of **SONA**, **City of Hope's Music, Film and Entertainment Group** and **We Are Rise, Inc.**, which is a nonprofit established in South L.A. to empower young girls of color ages 7 to 12. When I was teaching at **UCLA** and through **Urban Fitness 911**, I brought kids from Compton to take my class. I gave them scholarships and provided transportation. Some of those kids have graduated from college and are on a great path.

The bottom line is this: I beat the odds—I proved wrong everyone who said I'd never succeed. I've done it. Everything that happens now is a bonus. And when you have a bonus, you must share and do what you can to make the world better. ■

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