

FIRM PROFILE

Hollywood Etc.

Weissmann, Wolff, Bergman, Coleman, Grodin & Evall started in the business of entertainment, then took the rest of the world by storm. **By Liz Valsamis**

As any aspiring star or starlet will tell you, it isn't easy breaking into Hollywood.

But one firm, Weissmann, Wolff, Bergman, Coleman, Grodin & Evall, reversed the process. The firm's lawyers got their start in the entertainment business and then took the rest of the world by storm.

It was 1981, and seven partners and seven associates had dreams of making it big on their own. They had just left entertainment law firm Kaplan, Livingston, Goodwin, Berkowitz & Selvin and set up shop in Beverly Hills.

Since then, the firm has grown into a general business law firm with a full-service entertainment practice.

Weissmann Wolff's client list includes top talent, like actress Diane Lane, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., the executive producer of "West Wing" and "Bourne Identity." But it also includes Lehman Bros. Holdings Inc. and City National Bank.

Straddling the line of entertainment and nonentertainment work was important to the firm's founders. Weissmann Wolff is modeled after Kaplan Livingston, in some respects. For one, like Kaplan Livingston, Weissmann Wolff has a full-service approach to the entertainment industry.

But unlike the firm it descended from, 22-lawyer Weissmann Wolff has pledged to stay small. Part of Kaplan Livingston's downfall was that the firm grew too fast, according to Weissmann Wolff partners. In the 1970s, it surged to 120 lawyers, and when the economy turned, the firm began to disintegrate.

"I've always heard that [Kaplan Livingston] preached that it's the work that counts and there's no substitute for A-plus work product, and we buy into that totally," says managing partner Mitch Evall, who joined Weissmann Wolff in 1984. "Maybe it's kind of old-fashioned, but we're sort of committed to that view."

Today, Weissmann Wolff's lawyers fall into three practice areas: entertainment, litigation and corporate. It's a size and setup that has worked well for the firm over the years, Evall says.

"Even when the firm was formed, it was formed with a commitment to provide the full spectrum of legal services," Evall says.

Several of Hollywood's top talent lawyers hail from Kaplan Livingston. When they left the firm, they went out and built pure entertainment boutiques focusing especially on deals. They include Skip Brittenham of Ziffren, Brittenham, Branca, Fischer, Gilbert-Lurie & Stiffelman and Thomas Hansen of Hansen, Jacobson, Teller, Hoberman, Newman, Warren, Sloane & Richman.

Other attorneys who practiced at the Kaplan entertainment powerhouse stayed focused on entertainment but went after a broader base of clients.

Bill Rintala, a name partner with Rintala, Smoot, Jaenicke & Rees, formed his law firm with two of his Kaplan Livingston partners in October of 1981, just before the dis-



Photo by Hugh Williams

Alan Grodin, left, Mitch Evall, Stan Coleman and Michael Bergman are partners at Weissmann Wolff. The firm, which pledges to stay small, specializes in entertainment law, corporate law and litigation. The firm's client list includes actress Diane Lane, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., the executive producer of "West Wing" and "Bourne Identity," Lehman Bros. Holdings Inc. and City National Bank.

solution of the firm. All three were litigators at Kaplan Livingston and handled work for entertainment clients because of the firm's strong entertainment focus. Once out on their own, like Weissmann Wolff, Rintala Smoot branched into particular areas of law, like entertainment, intellectual property litigation, general business litigation and labor law.

"[Weissmann Wolff's] strength was in the entertainment industry, but they certainly had lawyers whose practice was not limited to the entertainment industry," Rintala says.

One of the firm's founding, according to Evall. Wolff, who retired in 2001, was responsible for the diversification of the firm's corporate practice.

Of the seven partners who founded Weissmann Wolff, three remain with the firm. They are entertainment partners Eric Weissmann and Stan Coleman and litigation partner Michael Bergman.

Coleman and Alan Grodin are two of the firm's senior entertainment partners. Grodin joined the firm 10 years ago from now-defunct Beverly Hills' Cooper, Epstein & Hurewitz.

directors, producers and actors, like Lane, star of "Unfaithful" and "Under the Tuscan Sun."

Coleman says his clients are drawn to the firm because it's small and therefore intimate.

"They know I know their lives intimately, personally and professionally," Coleman says, "and it matters."

Grodin's clients have included Hemdale Films, which produced "Terminator," "Platoon" and "Hoosiers." He represents Doug Liman, who has directed not only "Bourne Identity" but also "Swingers" and "Go." He also represents Thousand Words, which financed and produced "Requiem for a Dream" and recently financed an upcoming Robert Redford film called "The Clearing."

Grodin says that having corporate lawyers to go to for advice on financing matters is a plus, as is having litigators who are experts in areas like rights clearance.

"When we are working on a movie," Grodin says, "we have issues that come up about the screenplay or the movie. There are issues that we go to our litigation department for clearance. We have that all the time. They shot the movie, and Saks Fifth Avenue appeared in the background. 'Can we do it? Do we need a release?'"

'I've always heard that [Kaplan Livingston] preached that it's the work that counts and there's no substitute for A-plus work product, and we buy into that totally. Maybe it's kind of old-fashioned, but we're sort of committed to that view.'

Mitch Evall, managing partner

From the beginning, Weissmann Wolff's founders stood out for their mix of litigation and transactional entertainment practices.

Retired name partner and corporate lawyer Dan Wolff was a corporate and securities lawyer who practiced in and outside of the entertainment area since Day

Coleman calls his practice eclectic, like that of the other entertainment lawyers at the firm. His clients include Scholastic Inc., publisher of the Harry Potter series, and Infogrammes, one of the largest video game makers. The entertainment transactional lawyer mostly represents writers,

John Schulman, one of the founding partners and a former Kaplan Livingston partner, left the firm for the in-house department of Warner Bros in 1984.

Schulman was an original name partner. Its name then was Weissmann, Wolff, Bergman, Coleman & Schulman.

Schulman, now executive vice president and general counsel for Warner Bros, relies on Weissmann Wolff for real estate and litigation work.

"They're good lawyers," Schulman says. "Mitch Evall and Mike Bergman are good lawyers."

Schulman was responsible for introducing Evall to the firm in 1984. At the time, Evall had been working at Pacht, Ross, Warne, Bernhard & Sears, where he'd practiced since graduating from Columbia University's School of Law in 1980.

"I knew John Schulman's younger brother," Evall says. "We were good friends from law school. I called John and told him all the firms I had offers from, and I asked him which one he thought I should go to, and he said, 'Don't go to any of them. Go to the firm I just left.'"

For the last three years, Evall, a real estate attorney, has served as managing partner of the firm. Evall recently handled a large real estate deal for the Burbank-based entertainment giant. The deal, which closed in September, involved a 450,000 square foot building that Warner Bros. leased across the street from its studios in Burbank. The deal was reported to have been worth north of \$200 million.

Evall says his practice is representative of what the firm is all about.

"I'm a real estate lawyer," Evall says. "A chunk of what I do relates to the entertainment industry, but I'm not an entertainment lawyer."

Evall points out that the firm is unique in that it handles entertainment, litigation and corporate work. He says that other small firms usually choose a practice area on which to focus.

"There are certainly boutiques who do work purely in the entertainment area," Evall says. "We do so much that has nothing to do with the entertainment industry, but we have such a strong presence across the board in the industry. We don't know many other firms like that."

Hansen has known the lawyers at Weissmann Wolff since he and the name partners worked at Kaplan Livingston.

Hansen praises Weissmann Wolff for building its other practice areas.

"The advantage that they have is that they're a full-service firm, with litigation, corporate, tax and transactional entertainment," Hansen says.

Litigation partners Michael Bergman and Anjani Mandavia have been representing D.C. Comics, a division of Time Warner Inc., in litigation brought by musicians and brothers Johnny and Edgar Winter. The brothers claimed that they had been portrayed disparagingly in an adult comic book, which violated their right of publicity.

In June, the state Supreme Court ruled against their right-of-publicity claim, saying that they had not been wronged. *Winter v. DC Comics*, 134 Cal.Rptr.2d 634 (Cal. 2003).

The Supreme Court sent the case back to the 2nd District Court of Appeal for a ruling on the remaining issue of whether promotion and marketing of the comic book independently violated the right of publicity. The 2nd District ruled in D.C. Comics' favor in November 2003.

On March 8, Mandavia was back at Superior Court in Los Angeles filing a motion to collect \$420,000 in attorney fees. The marathon case cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to litigate, but defending the First Amendment was worth it to the firm and its clients, Bergman says. The court has not issued a ruling.

"I think that probably the most impor-

tant support we got were from the people at Warner Bros and D.C. Comics, who of course are very interested in anything that might impact First Amendment rights," Bergman says.

But Weissmann Wolff recently did some careful expanding, Evall adds.

In January, the firm hired Peter Dekom as of-counsel to its entertainment group. Dekom was a name partner of Bloom,

Dekom, who maintained a solo practice in Santa Monica while on sabbatical, came on board with clients that include comedian Keenen Ivory Wayans, television writer Paul Haggis and Hamburg, Germany's Nova Entertainment GmbH.

Last month, the firm picked up real estate partner Marc Benezra. Benezra joined the firm as a partner from Stephan, Oringer, Richmahn & Theodora, where he worked for 3½ years. He also brings in-house experience to the firm after having served as vice president and general counsel to the Stanford Ranch Co., Los Angeles businessman Eli Broad's personal holding company.

"We've been very measured in our growth," Evall says. "We try really hard to stay small, and you just — it sounds kind of syrupy — you just try to do a good job."

'[Clients] know I know their lives intimately, personally and professionally, and it matters.'

Stan Coleman, entertainment partner

Evall says the firm's intimate feel is intentional.

"We've made a decision that we want to stay small," Evall says

The firm regularly gets merger offers from much larger firms, which it turns down.

Dekom, Hergott & Cook before leaving the firm in 1995 to focus on writing his recently published book, "Not on My Watch: Hollywood vs. the Future." The book, published by New Millenium Press in September, deals with the film industry's response to technology.