

MINNESOTA LAWYER



Adam Ballinger, a guitar-playing Minneapolis lawyer, gave up his night job in rock 'n' roll for a succession of day jobs leading up to his present-day employment as a partner in the Minneapolis office of Ballard Spahr. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

By: Doug Hovelson July 5, 2018 0

Bob Seger immortalized the rock 'n' roll rambler lifestyle in the hit song "Turn the Page Again."

Road-working rock warriors probably have that song fixed indelibly in their memories, if not on perma-play on their mobile devices. Seger and his Silver Bullet Band rode the song to fame back in the analogist era of the early 1970s, when rockers vied to get their pictures on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine — and had no recourse to other fame-making tools such as Instagram and Facebook.

But the real rockers of the day toured the country, or at least their corner of the country, by one type of wheeled automotive vehicle or another. Big stars like Seger traveled in deluxe style on large touring buses fitted out to the band's specifications. A more affordable option presented itself to the likes of Dr. Tomkat, a late 1990s touring band out of North Dakota.

"We bought a luxury conversion van, fitted it out and had it so we could hook up a trailer to it," says Adam Ballinger, a guitar-playing Minneapolis lawyer who was once a feature performer for Dr. Tomkat. The trailer contained the band's hard goods, which included a complete sound system. "We had all of our own equipment," says Ballinger, who ultimately gave up his night job in rock 'n' roll for a succession of day jobs leading up to his present-day employment as a partner in the Minneapolis office of Ballard Spahr. He specializes in litigation, bankruptcy and capital recovery law, and serves as the hiring attorney for the Minneapolis office.

"I always tell my kids [ages 4, 6 and 9, for the record], 'being a rock star is a state of mind,'" says Ballinger, who retired officially as a rock 'n' roll professional at the tender age of 23. He had, by then, played in about 600 musical shows, mostly in college bars in towns scattered across the Upper Midwest and eastern Great Plains states. "We were a cover band," he says. Cover bands cover other bands' hit songs, giving them a good approximation. Imitation not only flatters flattery, it also pleases the party-hearty collegians seeking weekend relief from the rigors of academia.

"Hear it on Top 40 radio on Monday, perform it on Friday — that's the kind of band we were," says Ballinger.

Given that Ballinger just turned 40, we intuit that his prime-time rocker days took place some 18 to 19 years ago — just in advance of the frothy turn of the century. Grunge still had its fans, having survived the mortifying death of Kurt Cobain. Radiohead still topped the charts.

Ballinger grew up on the grungy, alt-rock sound, loved it, covered it, but underneath it all he had an abiding love for the blues, induced by early adolescence encounters with the tunes of power blues maestro Stevie Ray Vaughan. He aspired to play the Stevie Ray way.

Between high school and his Tom Kat days, Ballinger put in a lot of time learning to play the guitar — on a guitar that his father bought for him as a high school graduation present. The family musical strain runs through the masculine branch, apparently. My dad plays acoustic guitar, he says. My grandfather played the harmonica. I have a younger sister. She is not musically inclined."

Ballinger marked time until the day came when he could run off to rock 'n' roll nirvana with the band.

"I practiced for two to three hours a day," he remembers. Time well spent, as it turned out. He joined up with the band just as soon as he turned 21, legal age for a practicing member of a bar band.

The band played 300 nights a year.

"We had an agent" to keep them booked, says Ballinger. What they didn't have was a hit record. "We had a demo done in studio, for promotional purposes," he says. But they didn't need to do the record thing — just living the rock 'n' roll life for a couple of years was reward enough for him. "I had the time of my life," he says.

When the music stopped, at least for Dr. Tomkat, another offer did come along. An agent for a Disney-related touring band in Florida contacted him to see if he'd like to play in the band. Sensing that life as an itinerant musician with a flair for covering other musicians' music might not be the most fulfilling of career choices in the long run, Ballinger declined the Sunshine State offer. He went home, to Verona, North Dakota, a small town in southeastern North Dakota, an hour or so outside of Wahpeton.

"My life would have been far different today if I had pursued that course of action in Florida," he notes. "I would not have married my wife, or lived the same life, for sure."

One of the band members, the drummer, did continue on the musical course, and now plays professionally all over the world, Ballinger says. As for him, he adapted well to life off the road, taking a job at age 23 managing a large grain shipping facility owned by James Valley Grain in Oakes, North Dakota. "I was probably the youngest manager in the industry," he says.

After two years of steering North Dakota farmers' grain into the national and global markets, Ballinger jumped ship to pursue college studies at North Dakota State University. He majored in math and economics, doing well enough to earn himself an offer for an economics master's scholarship, with the possibility of pursuing a Ph.D. The idea of sitting in his college office somewhere writing research-based economic treatises seemed stultifying to the ex-rocker. Law, on the other hand, combined the best of two interesting worlds: intellectually bracing work and a late-modern version of hand-to-hand combat.

A chance encounter with a state Democratic Party leader in a North Dakota diner led to his running political campaigns in the state for a couple of years too. Now married (to his high school sweetheart, or at least to his favorite female classmate), Ballinger and his wife were delegates at a state Democratic Party convention. Over breakfast one morning in a coffee shop a few blocks away from the convention center, Ballinger launched vociferously into a partisan rant on some political topic of the day. Listening in, unobserved by Ballinger, was the party's candidate for state attorney general. The candidate immediately took Ballinger aside to ask if he would be interested in running his campaign. Ballinger took on the challenge and found himself in charge of several more campaigns over the next couple of years.

Only after working such a variety of jobs did he zero in on the law as a career. People can come to law after working in other professions without losing a beat, he says. "I'm living proof," he says. He joined the Minneapolis firm of Lindquist & Vennum following his graduation from the University of Minnesota Law School.

His schooling in the law really came about when he was assigned to work on the Tom Petters bankruptcy case in 2008. Federal prosecutors convicted Petters, a high-profile Minnesota businessman, of running a gigantic Ponzi scheme that fleeced investors out of \$3.65 billion. The scheme came to light only after the collapse of the financial markets in 2008. Petters held the record for the largest known Ponzi scheme in American history for a few months, until evidence of Bernie Madoff's massive scheme bilking Wall Street investors of tens of billions of dollars broke in December 2008.

Ballinger's work to help recover misappropriated funds for investors included his spending two days interviewing Petters in his jail cell at the Sherburne County Jail in Elk River, Minnesota. He spent much of the next 10 years of his career working on the Petters bankruptcy. "When I started working the case, I had zero kids," he notes. "When I finished, I had three kids."

The case commenced more than 250 individual lawsuits, he notes — and the court has sought to recover more than \$1 billion for investors, with hundreds of millions recovered to date.

His musical interests may not be as paramount as they were when he was fresh out of high school, but that doesn't mean he's pushed them out of mind. "I still play the guitar and piano two to three times a week," he says.

He also recently joined up with a new band, the Ballard Spahr Galactica Band — the law firm's national band with musicians hailing from its various offices around the country. The band notably includes Rogers Stevens, a founding member of the legendary alt-rock band Blind Melon. Stevens, also a guitarist, practices law in the firm's Philadelphia headquarters offices and still performs with Blind Melon, which has undergone several significant personnel changes over the years.

"I just turned 40," says Ballinger. "So I thought it was pretty cool to be playing in a rock band again — and especially with Rogers Stevens."

The Ballard Spahr Galactica Band opening occurred because of Lindquist & Vennum merging with Ballard Spahr at the beginning of the year. "The merger is pretty fantastic," says Ballinger, and not just for reasons of musical interest. "It has helped my practice — bankruptcy law — especially to have the larger national footprint that the merger with Ballard Spahr brings with it," he says. The firm now has a major presence in New York City and Wilmington, Delaware, two important jurisdictions for bankruptcy filings nationally, he points out.

Legal niceties aside, the merger has given Ballinger's rock 'n' roll side a chance to come back onto the stage again. He's prepared to play, too: His present-day "ax" (that's a guitar for all you non-Axel Rose fans) is a Fender American Standard Stratocaster, which in layperson's terms is one heck of a guitar. "The 'American Standard' means it was made in the United States, and not in China, as are the run-of-the-mill Stratocasters these days," he says.

Of course, it's not the guitar that makes the musician, but the musician that makes the guitar wail and testify. Ballinger still has his original \$200 electric guitar that he taught to play like Stevie Ray Vaughan back in his touring days.