



SONGS FOR SANITY

How an Austin litigator faces the music.

JOHN DAVID SABA JR. HAS TROUBLE EXPLAINING WHY EXACTLY HE LIKES PLAYING MUSIC AND WHAT INSPIRES HIM TO WRITE SONGS. All he knows for sure is that if he weren't doing it, he'd likely go crazy.

"Thinking about why music is good—I don't know the answer to it, I just know that it is," said Saba. "I know that I like it, and to participate in it takes it to another level. I can't imagine what I'd be doing if I didn't make music. There will be a time when I can't do it anymore, but I don't want to think about that."

Saba's band—San Saba County—is playing an official showcase at the 2014 South by Southwest Music Festival. This marks the seventh year it has gotten a gig at the world-renowned gathering of international bands and music fans. In 2013, more than 9,700 bands and musicians applied to showcase at SXSW and only 2,278 were accepted—a 77 percent chance of rejection.

Saba sings, plays acoustic and electric guitar, and writes most of the band's songs. And his old high school classmate Chris Wellington plays guitar and sometimes the banjo and accordion. While these two have remained constant, San Saba County has had different iterations of members since it formed in 2003. At one point, there were several lawyer members, but now Saba, who practices with DiNovo Price Ellwanger & Hardy, is the only attorney. The current group—the longest standing—also includes Tom Hudson on drums and Tyler Mallory on bass guitar. Both moved to Austin from Idaho.

The band has four albums, with the most recent being 2012's *Broken Record*, and is working on its fifth. Over the 11 years that San Saba County has been playing, the initial

alt-country sound has transitioned to loud indie rock. "As a young individual, I was always kind of skeptical of bands that had changed their sound," said Saba, "but now I think that that's what you have to do to find yourself."

Saba first fell in love with music while taking after-school guitar lessons from an upperclassman at Jesuit College Preparatory School of Dallas. He and Wellington had a group that played cover songs during their high school days.

Saba stopped playing after a year or two of college but picked it up again and began writing songs a few years later when he started law school. "I guess it was a missing part of my life," he said. "Then I moved to Austin and started

practicing for the attorney general. It was there that I met John Neal. John, who once played in a band himself, and his wife, Teresa, a professional singer/writer, have encouraged me to write, listen—really listen to Dylan, hear the beauty of a vintage guitar—and to know how to balance a recording mix. In this city, it's not 'do you play music?' It's 'what instrument do you play and when are you playing?'"

San Saba County has been featured on Austin radio station KUTX, NPR's *All Songs Considered*, and in several music publications and websites. "It is very encouraging to look out on stage at the Continental Club and see most of the folks at my firm, smiling and enjoying the music," said Saba.

The band, whose members are all working professionals, makes time to practice and record rough tracks in Saba's garage studio. But for Saba—who in addition to being an active attorney is a husband and father of two young children—finding time for much else is often difficult. He jots down ideas for melodies when he gets a spare moment and later pairs them with lyrics.

"It's a chore at times, depending on where you are," said Saba. "Sometimes it flows and sometimes you just sit there and have to keep doing it and keep doing it, and you don't think you're getting anywhere. And then a month later, something pops and you realize that's what you were trying to conjure."

When he does find a few extra hours in the week, Saba faces the inefficient grind of writing songs, which he describes as being very different from legal writing and "the most headbanging process."

"You have to do it," he said. "I have a very understanding wife. You have to have support. I usually do it at night because that's the time when the kids are asleep. I have a room where I work for an hour or two when I can. You have to go off and be alone." *LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER*

To see a slide show of Saba's band, go to texasbar.com/sansaba-county. For showtimes, songs, and videos of the band's music, go to sansabaco.com.

MATTHEW HEIL © 2014

Celebrating Cinema

An entertainment attorney applies her production knowledge at SXSW.

DEENA KALAI COULD BE CONSIDERED A SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST ENTHUSIAST. She has attended the conference as a fan since 1996, but over the years, she also has served as a guest speaker, mentor, and advisory board member of the film conference. This time around, Kalai, who practices law in Austin and New York, helped choose speakers and panelists for the festival's film component. "I'm looking for a balance between creative and business topics so that content producers can have a broad selection of experts to guide them on everything from story development to distribution deals," said Kalai. "It's great to see some of the more unusual topics—it shows a creativity in not just actual content that people are producing, but the conversations about that content." Interested participants submit potential panel ideas, and final selections are based on a combination of the group's feedback, public voting, and insight from the SXSW film staff.

Kalai also will be providing free legal advice to film industry folks during roundtable discussions. "That's really fun because it's almost like having a law pop quiz," she said. "I have no idea what people are

going to talk to me about."

Kalai has always been passionate about the arts. Prior to earning her J.D., she received a master's degree in English from the University of Texas at Austin, concentrating on hip-hop and feminist film theory. While there, she critically analyzed cinema and developed a taste for quality production, and she has continued to hone that knowledge and apply it in her practice. Kalai often works beyond the typical role of many entertainment attorneys, offering clients suggestions on scripts, casting, and music choices in addition to legal advice.

"I love coming up with ideas for what would help with the casting process and who might be good for a particular role," said Kalai. "And the same thing with music. I'm really sensitive to music in film, and, to me, the music can make or break a movie."

Kalai is on the production end of three ongoing feature film projects: *The Road*, which Kalai describes as an intense road trip; a film based on the play *Anna in the Tropics*; and *Volley Girl*, which focuses on the lives of young beach volleyball players. Three of Kalai's clients have films that will show during this year's SXSW.

Still, don't expect Kalai's SXSW involvement to be all work and no play. The seasoned attendee said she loves all aspects of the festival. "It's such a hyper-concentration of talent." *HANNAH KIDDOO*



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Monty and Ramirez,
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Wasif Qureshi
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Sarah Saldaña
U.S. Attorney's Office,
Northern District of Texas

Appointed to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder's Advisory Committee.