

Revealed: Billboard's 2019 Top Music Lawyers Led by BTS Counsel Debbie White of Loeb & Loeb

LAWYER OF THE YEAR



DEBBIE WHITE
*Partner/vice chair, music industry; Loeb & Loeb
New York University School of Law*

(Diana King) Debbie White photographed on July 29, 2019 at Loeb & Loeb in Los Angeles.

As an adviser to an impressive roster of international talents, Debbie White has been traveling nonstop this summer for work. To Shanghai to speak on a panel about music licensing and meet with the music executives of Chinese conglomerate Tencent. To Seoul for her client BTS' fifth annual Muster fan-appreciation festival. To Los Angeles for two days of meetings, then on to New York to catch client Regina Spektor's final performance on Broadway.

"Sometimes I ask people, 'What day is it? What time is it?' because I don't even know where I am," she says.

White is the U.S. legal adviser for both BTS, the K-pop septet whose success has been both a commercial and cultural milestone, and the boy band's label and management company, Big Hit Entertainment.

In recognition of an extraordinary year fostering the success of BTS and Big Hit as well as a clientele that includes Chinese technology and entertainment giant Tencent; Citi; Bank of America; Uber; Ty Stiklorius' management company, Friends at Work; British legends Duran Duran and The Who; and artists Melanie Martinez, James TW, Emily Ann Roberts, Tomorrow x Together and Spektor, among others -- White has been named Billboard's Lawyer of the Year for 2019.

BTS' most recent album, *Map of the Soul: Persona*, topped the Billboard 200 in April, the group's third release to do so. In the United States alone, the band's catalog has accumulated 5.4 billion on-demand streams and 3.1 million song downloads, according to Nielsen Music. BTS spent most of the summer on its *Love Yourself: Speak Yourself* Tour, which launched in May and has grossed \$99.3 million with a series of U.S. stadium doubleheaders, according to Billboard Boxscore.

The tour required White to keep her bags packed. She oversees all business aspects of the group's lucrative deals on a daily basis -- while constantly guarding against bootleg BTS merchandise reaching its fan army.

Serving as the band's outside counsel, she negotiates all North American deals, as well as the global distribution deal for its 2017 concert film *Burn the Stage* and follow-up movie *Bring the Soul*, which has grossed over \$4.5 million stateside since its domestic release on Aug. 7, according to IMDb Pro. (Big Hit announced Aug. 11 that the act will take a break after the tour "to present themselves anew as musicians and creators.")

For The Who -- which now includes original members Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey, plus supporting musicians -- White handles all North American deals, including the band's Moving On! Tour with Live Nation. For Martinez, she has offered guidance as the Queens native readies a new album and self-directed film, both titled K-12, for a Sept. 6 release. For Stiklorius, she handles all business affairs for Friends at Work.

"I literally don't sleep," says White, who is in frequent contact with her clients. "They will text me and it will be two o'clock in the morning, and I just respond, 'Hi.'"

At a young age, White knew she wanted a career in entertainment but thought it would be in the spotlight. Routinely cast as the lead in plays at summer camp, she learned a hard lesson during a Wizard of Oz tryout when a classmate scored the role of Dorothy and she was cast as Glinda the Good Witch.

"I thought, 'I've got to figure out something because I don't think I'm going to be the star,'" says White.

She chose to advise stars instead. White attended New York University School of Law, graduating not only magna cum laude but as a member of the Order of the Coif, a society that recognizes law students who achieve distinction.

White began her career at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett as a corporate lawyer. Her break came when she got a call from a headhunter to meet with renowned music attorney Allen Grubman. After a six-month interview process -- and after agreeing to a pay cut -- she was offered a position. A decade later, having learned the trade with that firm, making partner and honing her skills with such clients as Whitney Houston, Duran Duran and John Mellencamp, she decided to focus on building her own client roster and joined Loeb & Loeb.

"I had my Jerry Maguire moment when I was leaving Grubman and said, 'Is anyone coming with me?'" says White, who was pleasantly surprised when client Duran Duran agreed to follow her. She says it took four long years before she started to bring in other big clients, but then her hard work and determination paid off.

Whether she's advising stadium-packing superstars or rising singer-songwriters, White is watching broader industry trends and battles. She calls the Copyright Royalty Board decision to increase the rate of payments by streaming services "long overdue and a step in the right direction for songwriters and artists who write their music."

"If the CRB decision stands," she adds, "Spotify and other services will be scrambling to find new ways to keep their music business profitable. I think we might see increased subscription rates to consumers as a result."

White credits her success to her New York attitude and straight-shooting business acumen. Her tell-it-like-it-is approach is refreshing -- honest, forthright and transparent. She has no qualms about explaining to a new artist that getting a record deal is not a quick meal ticket to success, but that the best route is to focus on growing an audience and building momentum gradually.

"I'm not sugarcoating them, beating around the bush, and I'm also not a paper-pusher," she says. "I think you really have to rely on yourself and look at yourself in the mirror and make sure you are doing the right things so you can sleep at night."

Then again, she adds, "I don't sleep at night because I'm concerned about what's going on in Korea and China."

– CLAUDIA ROSENBAUM