

# Backlot

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## THR's Troubleshooters: Top 20 Lawyers for Crime, Divorce and Other, uh, Sensitive Matters

From Harvey Weinstein to Mel Gibson, these attorneys have seen (and fixed) it all

By Ashley Cullins

**D**eath, divorce and other disasters are, unfortunately, part of life — and even the ultra-rich and famous aren't immune. But when one of those tragedies befalls the Hollywood elite, 24/7 public scrutiny makes it absolutely vital to handle the situation as confidentially as possible. Enter the industry's top troubleshooters: a group of attorneys who help their clients through the worst times of their lives — and will go to great lengths to keep their private matters behind closed doors. From answering a frantic call in the middle of the night because a star has been arrested, to quietly negotiating a custody agreement even before the divorce papers are filed, to structuring an estate to avoid tax pitfalls, these lawyers are the industry's most adept problem solvers. They don't brag about their A-list clients, but, thanks to public records and the occasional unavoidable headline, *THR* was able to compile a list of the lawyers whom stars want on their side when things go sideways.

### CRIMINAL

**BLAIR BERK** TARLOW & BERK

"It can be a very terrifying thing to be accused of something and have to defend

yourself with the whole world watching," says Berk, who has long been a go-to defender for Hollywood A-listers in trouble — and now is representing **Harvey Weinstein** amid sexual assault and harassment allegations. "When someone's



Berk



Black

liberty is at stake, it's not a game in any way," she says. Berk has been passionate about due process since she was young, when her lawyer parents would encourage discussions about the Constitution. The Harvard Law grad has represented everyone from **Kiefer Sutherland** to **Kanye West** — but she wishes her clients weren't public. Says Berk, "I want for my clients not to have their lives defined by a few moments of trouble."

**ROY BLACK** BLACK, SREBNICK

Black, who has represented **Justin Bieber**, **Rush Limbaugh** and **Kelsey Grammer**, traces his path toward criminal defense back to high school, when his family relocated to Kingston, Jamaica, and a math teacher at his new school singled him out

Illustrations by **Jason Raish**





because he was American. “He used to torture me,” says the Florida-based attorney. “I got a real hatred for petty authority.” Any time a famous name is involved in a case, says Black, prosecutors and judges go on high alert. “The only way you can win a criminal case,” he says, “is to outwork the federal or state government by a factor of three or four.”

**BENJAMIN BRAFMAN** BRAFMAN & ASSOCIATES  
The Manhattan defense attorney is the latest member to be added to Harvey Weinstein’s legal team, but he’s no stranger to high-profile cases or celebrity clients. Brafman made global headlines in clearing a sexual assault charge for former International Monetary Fund head **Dominique Strauss-Kahn**, who was accused of attempted rape by a hotel maid. Brafman’s star-studded client list has also included **Michael Jackson**, **Jay Z**, **Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs**, **Dinesh D’Souza**, former NFL star **Plaxico Burress** and embattled pharmaceutical executive **Martin Shkreli**.

**MARK GERAGOS** GERAGOS & GERAGOS  
The SoCal native learned early on that he wasn’t cut out to be a prosecutor: When he was barely in kindergarten and began tagging along with his father, a prosecutor with the L.A. District Attorney’s office, Geragos realized, “There’s a certain type of talent you have to have to be able to separate yourself from people when you’re prosecuting them.” While some of his clients have made headlines — like **Chris Brown**, whom he has repped for more than a decade — Geragos says 90 percent of his work is ending cases before they publicly begin. “Every time I see a prosecutor say, ‘We’re going to treat this person like anyone else,’ I have to laugh to myself,” says Geragos. “Things I would be able to

make go away in a heartbeat if it weren’t high profile require enormous heavy lifting if it is high profile.”

**SHAWN HOLLEY** KINSELLA WEITZMAN  
Holley was discovered by **Johnnie Cochran** while working in the L.A. County Public Defender’s office — and was soon hired on to **O.J. Simpson**’s legal defense team alongside **Robert Kardashian**. Decades later, she counts his now-famous children and their **Jenner** siblings among her Hollywood clients. She likens answering midnight phone calls to the life of an ER doctor. “You immediately are jolted with all senses firing and go into problem-solving mode,” says Holley. “Those first 24 to 48 hours are really crisis times, especially for someone who’s high profile.”

**THOMAS MESEREAU** MESEREAU LAW GROUP  
**Bill Cosby** is Mesereau’s latest high-profile client, in a roster that has included Michael Jackson, **Robert Blake** and **Mike Tyson**. The Harvard and UC Hastings grad says he has deep empathy for the underdog and prides himself on “finding the good in people and making prosecutors and police prove their case.” Mesereau trusts American juries to rise above the sensationalism of famous defendants, but he tries to keep his clients and himself out of the press by avoiding charges in the first place. “I find it despicable and very disturbing that many lawyers promote themselves at the expense of their clients,” he says. “I’ve been quite upset at times when TMZ would call me and ask, ‘Is it true you’re representing someone?’ and I had told nobody, except maybe a police officer.”

**VICKI PODBERESKY** ANDRUES/PODBERESKY  
“I was always a bit of a renegade,” says Podberesky, who discovered her passion while participating in USC’s Post-Conviction Justice Project. “All I wanted to do was be a criminal defense lawyer.” Among her highest-profile cases are representing **Bruce Lisker**, who was freed from prison 26 years after having been wrongfully convicted in 1983 for murdering his mother, and working on the legal team for *Survivor* producer **Bruce Beresford-Redman**, who is behind bars in Mexico following a murder conviction. Now she’s representing a student athlete at her alma mater who lost his eligibility after Trojan basketball assistant coach **Tony Bland** was indicted for taking bribes from sports agents. Says Podberesky, “I have a truly innocent person who is being penalized because someone connected to him allegedly took some money.”



Brafman



Geragos



Holley



Mesereau



Podberesky



Ginsberg



Hersh



Jaffe

## DIVORCE

**LARRY GINSBERG** HARRIS GINSBERG  
“I don’t look at divorce as a failure,” says Ginsberg. “I think of it as the evolution of a relationship.” The Pepperdine Law grad, who has represented the likes of **Mel Gibson** and **Kate Hudson**, aims to minimize the drama of a highly emotional process and keep it as private as possible. “It’s nobody else’s fucking business,” he says. Ginsberg’s parents went through a difficult divorce when he was 6 years old, and he has no doubts the experience contributed to his decision to study social work and practice family law. “A therapist would have a field day with why I enjoy my work as much as I do.”

**NEAL HERSH** HERSH MANNIS  
The Beverly Hills attorney’s first ultra-high-profile case was representing **Robin Givens** in her divorce from Mike Tyson in 1989. “When I finished that case, people would say, ‘I’m sure I’m not a big enough case for you,’” says Hersh, who was then just beginning to build his practice. “People thought that I was so well known that they shouldn’t come to the firm, but the opposite was true.” Since then, he has been linked to such stars as **Debra Messing**, **Kim Basinger** and **Camille Grammer**. “I love being in trial, but more importantly, I like the strategic intellectual planning of how to navigate a case,” he says. “Our job is to be creative and come up with solutions where people think they are not available.”

**DANIEL JAFFE** JAFFE & CLEMENS  
One of Jaffe’s first entertainment industry clients was **Tichi Wilkerson**, the widow of *The Hollywood Reporter* founder **Billy Wilkerson**. She ran the outlet for more than two decades. During 40-plus years in the business, he also represented **Nicole Brown Simpson** in her divorce from O.J. and **Rupert Murdoch**’s second wife, **Anna** — who reportedly parted with more than





a billion dollars. “Our client base is primarily entertainment people, business people and scions of enormously wealthy families,” he says. “We deal with more money than virtually any other field of law. We’re dealing with estates from \$50 million to \$8 billion.”

**JOSEPH MANNIS** HERSH MANNIS

Growing up, as he puts it, a “poor person from nowhere,” Mannis liked the idea of working in an intellectual business. He almost took a job teaching at the University of Indiana, but his now-wife vetoed a move to the Midwest. Instead, he has spent decades as a divorce attorney to the rich and famous, such as *Jurassic Park* scribe and *ER* co-creator **Michael Crichton**. “The size of these cases just gets bigger and bigger because people have more and more money,” says Mannis. “People spend hundreds of thousands of dollars fighting over who gets the cat.”

**LANCE SPIEGEL** YOUNG, SPIEGEL & LEE

Spiegel doesn’t usually talk to the press, which was evident when *THR*’s first call for a scheduled interview was errantly transferred to a polite, yet blunt, automated message explaining the firm doesn’t take media inquiries. Such is the protocol when Spiegel’s clients include **Brad Pitt**, **Reese Witherspoon** and **Meg Ryan**. A child of divorce, Spiegel makes sure that splitting couples focus on their children’s well-being. “I do a lot of custody litigation,” he says, adding that the highlight of his job is knowing “there are kids sitting at holiday dinner tables and they’re there because I helped make it happen.”

**LAURA WASSER**

WASSER COOPERMAN & MANDLES

Wasser, who reps **Angelina Jolie** and **Johnny Depp**, is a second-generation divorce lawyer who specializes in ultra-high-profile splits. When children are involved, the Century City-based attorney emphasizes productive co-parenting — and she’s proof it can work. Wasser has two sons, each from a different relationship. “The dads and I are family,” she says. “We’re all having Thanksgiving with my current boyfriend and his two kids.” She teaches younger associates at her firm to be less litigious and more settlement-oriented. “With that comes the ability to streamline things,” she says, “and not end up arguing over a \$400 lamp.”

TRUST AND ESTATES

**BRADFORD COHEN** JEFFER MANGELS

Cohen traded in a career as an IRS auditor



Mannis



Spiegel



Wasser



Cohen



Eisen



Feinman



Mitchell



Mulrooney



Strauss



Zwicker

for one representing clients across film, television, music and sports. “You really get to see what makes people tick and what they’re made of,” says Cohen, a hybrid income tax and estate lawyer. “You get to hear how they feel about their spouses, their kids and philanthropy.” The New York University School of Law grad says intangible assets, like posthumous rights of publicity, and contingent compensation make planning for entertainers more complex. As Cohen explains, “You need to build an infrastructure so that the estate can maximize and monetize these assets in an appropriate way.”

**JEFFREY EISEN** MITCHELL SILBERBERG & KNUPP

As an undergrad at the University of Pennsylvania studying accounting, the Staten Island native initially thought he would become a CPA. “I had actually never met a lawyer before I decided to go to law school,” he says. But as the lawyer for estates like that of **Farah Fawcett**, Eisen discovered a much more exciting and rewarding profession than if he were a typical number cruncher. “Representing **Muhammad Ali** and his wife has been the greatest honor of my career,” says Eisen. “Some people think estate planning is like a cookie cutter. That couldn’t be further from the truth.”

**ABBY FEINMAN** KATTEN MUCHIN ROSENMAN

“My father used to sit me down at night and prod me to figure out what I wanted to do,” says Feinman, who settled on a law career while still in high school. As the head of her firm’s L.A. trust and estates practice, she works with many Hollywood types. Probate documents revealed Feinman reps **Carrie Fisher**’s daughter, actress **Billie Lourd**, but she’ll just say her client list is an eclectic mix. “I can’t think of any aspect of entertainment that I don’t have a client in,” she says, before playfully adding, “I don’t have a makeup artist.”

**BURTON MITCHELL** JEFFER MANGELS

A colleague described Mitchell’s client list as “everyone at the Oscars” — and that doesn’t just mean stars. “There’s an unlimited amount of work,” says Mitchell, whose clients also include lawyers, accountants, agents and business managers. The Georgetown Law grad says wealthy individuals should give extra thought to the looming 40 percent federal estate tax and come in for an estate checkup every three years. “You can’t wave a magic wand and make it go away,” says Mitchell, “but there are legitimate steps you can take to transfer wealth to minimize taxes.”



**MICHELE MULROONEY** VENABLE

The USC grad represents clients in all areas of entertainment, including **Mel Gibson**, which became public during a custody battle with his ex-girlfriend. In addition to estate planning, Mulrooney also consults on prenuptial agreements and divorces. “I’m one of the few people whom they can really trust,” she says. Mulrooney chairs her firm’s West Coast trust and estates practice and is already creating her own professional succession plan. “I want to do this for quite a bit longer,” says Mulrooney. “But when I don’t want to do it anymore, my clients are going to have great representation.”

**ROBERT STRAUSS** WEINSTOCK MANION

Strauss represents industry elites on both sides of the camera — and one of his clients became public in a very Hollywood way. “I represent **Gene Simmons**, and he asked if he could film an estate planning episode for his TV show,” says the UCLA Law grad. “I had to have a private conversation with him about the need to not disclose real stuff publicly.” Strauss embraces the unique challenges of his niche. “The more complicated the matter,” he says, “the more creative we get to be and the more value we can add.”

**LAURA ZWICKER** GREENBERG GLUSKER

After she majored in history at Washington University in St. Louis, Zwicker’s father told her there were no jobs in the humanities and she should consider law school. Now, she’s working with ultra-high-net-worth families as head of her firm’s private client services group. “We end up being involved in so many facets of a client’s life because they all tie back to their wealth,” she says. “I have clients who have me interview their household staff.” One of her most challenging and rewarding matters was helping **Shelly Sterling** through the \$2 billion sale of the L.A. Clippers after husband **Donald** was banned from the NBA. **THR**