

# WOMC's Lisa Lisa



Photos by Daniel Lippitt

## Attorney By Day, Deejay By Night

BY BRIAN COX

**H**er voice is a subtle blend of whiskey, smokiness, and fine-grain sandpaper. It is a fine voice for a lawyer; it is a perfect voice for a disc jockey. So Lisa Orlando employs it for both. During daylight hours, the University of Detroit Mercy Law School graduate runs her practice, negotiating contracts and working to build up her clientele as an entertainment lawyer.

But from midnight to 5 a.m. most weekdays and 8 p.m. to midnight on Saturdays, she is spinning records on WOMC 104.3 as “Lisa Lisa” and producing the “Saturday Night Dance Party.” It can make for long days and longer nights. But Orlando is in her element, both behind the mic and beside a client negotiating a contract. She thrives on the energy hosting a radio program and on the multiple roles an entertainment attorney must adopt in order to successfully represent a client’s interests.

“You have to be a little bit of an estate planner, a little bit of a tax attorney, and a bit of a contract lawyer,” said Orlando. “There are so many special nuances in entertainment contracts. It’s changing every day, which is why it’s fascinating.”

In high school, Orlando was unclear what her “element” might be, but she discovered her first passion when she was studying pre-law at the University of Michigan and fell in with a small band of students who worked at the campus radio station.

When they took her to the WCBN studio located in the bowels of the Student Activities Building and she saw a student



doing a radio show, the attraction was immediate. She had found her calling.

"I got bitten by the bug," said Orlando. "I knew that was the place for me."

She switched from pre-law to study communications and began spending countless hours in the basement studio. She took part in changing the format of the university's AM station WRCN from 1960s gold to "screaming Top 40s." It was a heady time.

After graduating in 1982, Orlando accepted an unpaid internship at WDRQ to do morning drive news. She was thrilled, and broke. She moved on to a paying job at WJLB as a marketing and promotions director and then got her first big break as a "night jock" at WHYT, which played a mix of pop, hip-hop and R&B. It was while she was at WHYT that she decided to pursue a second calling and obtain her law degree with the idea of merging her career in entertainment with her interest in law.

"I was always fascinated by law," says Orlando. "And I realized that a radio career could be so short-lived. I realized maybe I didn't want to be doing this when I was 40."

And so in her late 20s, the long days and long nights that she has now become so accustomed to began. She attended to her law studies during the day and spun records at WDRQ at night. The demands of law school kept her away from much of the music party scene and out of trouble, she said, but her job kept her from having the time to take part in moot courts, work on the law review, or wrangle an internship.

"I never had the chance to cut my teeth with a professional because I had to jet off to my job," said Orlando. "I wish now I'd had the chance to do those things."

There were trade-offs, though. Instead of participating in moot courts, she had the chance to seek out young, unknown talent.

While at WDRQ, Orlando started "Open Mic Night," allowing young wanna-be artists to call in and "bust a rhyme" over the phone. If she liked it, she invited them to come perform in the studio.

Among those who caught her attention was a 15-year-old "skinny white kid who had no ride" named Marshall Mathers. During one of his radio appearances, the young rapper, who by then was calling himself Eminem, was discovered by local producers Marky and Jeff Bass, who signed him to their independent label Web Entertainment.

"I thought he was shy, but his raps were always different," recalled Orlando. "He



was always coming from left field. He was just a great storyteller."

In 1995, the year she completed law school, Orlando became the afternoon drive personality on WDRQ, where she remained for 11 years, during which time she also worked as the public address announcer for the WNBA's Detroit Shock.

She was at the peak of her radio career. It all came crashing down in 2005, though, when the radio station triggered one of the biggest shakeups in Detroit-area radio history by firing most of its on-air talent and switching to an automated-style format. The move left the airwaves void of the veteran radio personality's distinctive voice, until she returned to behind the mic at WOMC.

"Thank God for my gift of gab and street smarts," said Orlando. "They got me back."

Launching her legal practice in the entertainment field presented challenges. As a lawyer in Detroit, it was tough to compete against entertainment lawyers based in New York or Los Angeles. She nonetheless started making a name for herself and drew clients from the radio industry (disc jockeys like herself) and represented "mixologists" and producers, but it was slow going, and the big-name clients remained elusive.

"Most of the artists who make it big move to the coast and find someone to represent them there," said Orlando. "I felt

I went to law school to be a jet pilot and I was only a bus driver."

She had to "hustle the streets" in search of young, undiscovered talent. There isn't a paucity of young local artists hoping to make it big, said Orlando. Her phone "blows up daily" from performers trying to find representation, but the trick is identifying those who warrant the investment and are willing to heed her advice. She tries to assess how savvy a potential client is by their presentation and approach.

"They can be as street as they want to be once they get a deal," Orlando said, "but they have to be able to articulate what they want to be. You have to figure out how to market yourself. It can be tough. You really have to want it."

Among Orlando's clients is Norma Jean Bell, a Detroit based saxophonist, singer and producer who was once a member of Frank Zappa's touring band and is now is the driving force behind the Pandamonium label, which she founded in 1996.

After more than 20 years in the entertainment business and almost 15 years in law, Orlando is succinct in characterizing the necessary steps to being an effective entertainment lawyer.

"Build trust, build confidence, and put together a plan they can see," she said. "If you're passionate about what you're talking to your client about, I think that's fifty percent of it right there." **M**