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8 Mile High

With Eminem on his A-list, lawyer Randall Cutler is all about hip-hop.

By Kate Bolick '95



PHOTO BY ARTHUR COHEN

It's the afternoon of the 18th annual MTV Video Music Awards, and mid-town Manhattan is steeling itself for a celebrity onslaught. In a few hours, the phalanx of yellow cabs outside Radio City Music Hall will give way to a river of limousines, half of 6th Avenue will be closed off and concealed beneath a long red carpet and, finally, the stars will descend—Britney Spears, P. Diddy, Bruce Springsteen, Christina Aguilera. It's the music industry's most triumphant moment of self-congratulation.

Downtown, in his Union Square office, Randall M. Cutler '91 is largely indifferent—a reasonable reaction given that he is, after all, a lawyer and the VMAs couldn't be a less buttoned-down affair. But wait a minute. What's with the flashing, diamond-studded pinkie ring on his right hand? And the array of framed platinum LP's hanging on the wall behind his desk? And the massive turntables hulking just outside his door? Cutler isn't just any lawyer—he represents the night's biggest star: the controversial and wildly popular rapper Eminem.

"Honestly, I have a problem sitting through awards shows," Cutler says, a shrug explaining his lack of interest in the night's ceremony. Behind him, a wall of windows lets in the wan light of a rainy, late-summer afternoon and the noisy bustle of Union Square 17 floors below. "But I'll go to the parties afterward. Probably Puff Daddy's, over at Cipriani's in Tribeca. A fun place."

Before the evening is out, his most visible client will sweep the VMAs with four awards, securing his status as pop culture's current top dog, but for Cutler today is a day like any other. That morning, not too early and not too late, a driver picked him up at his Lower East Side bachelor pad and chauffeured him to his office. (Cutler's own car, a 1940 Hudson, has been stuck in Vegas for ages, undergoing bodywork; he keeps a picture of it in his wallet.) His office, Cutler & Sedlmayr LLP, a boutique law firm comprising two partners, two counsels, three associates and a couple of interns, is a hip, handsome, laid-back environment that more closely resembles the interior of a recording studio than a law firm. Indeed, with his short, spiky hair, easy smile and insouciant attire (loose jacket over a casual sweater), Cutler himself more closely resembles a record producer than a lawyer. He'll spend the day tending to the contract needs of his list of more than 200 clients—among them Ice T, Cypress Hill, Gizza, Beatnuts and 50 Cent—schmoozing, making deals and keeping track of payments, advances and license requests. Then he'll decide whether or not to retire to some favorite lounge or another with friends.

It's a flexible lifestyle, and one perfectly suited to someone who claims to "not have the mentality of being able to work for The Man. I'm way too individualistic. I just like to do things my own way, even if they're not the right way." In fact, if the Bronxville, N.Y., native had had his way, he wouldn't have gone to college in the first place. "I knew I was going to pursue law and kind of wanted to skip college and go straight to law school, but they wouldn't let me," he says, laughing. "I didn't really mind. I figured after growing up in New York I needed to be around some trees." The source of Cutler's precociously pronounced interest in the law is hardly mysterious: both of his parents were lawyers. His father worked as general counsel in a corporate firm, and, until she started having children—Cutler is one of five—his mother worked for a trusts and estates practice. "The two of them taught me the law," Cutler says. "I remember looking at my father's papers on his desk when I was a little kid and him telling me what they were about. Meanwhile, my mother stayed on top of the law even more than he did, even though she'd stopped practicing."

Once at Colby, Cutler fueled his legal interests with a government major, studying under Tony Corrado and Sandy Maisel. He remembers with special fondness a class taught by the late Maine Supreme Court Justice Morton Brody on American jurisprudence, for which Cutler wrote a long paper on the insanity plea. It wasn't law school, but it wasn't bad.

Meanwhile, he nursed his other passion—music—by hosting a blues show on WMHB and taking a few music classes. "The roots of all the music everyone likes right now are jazz and blues. I'm really into the blues—Robert Johnson, Delta Blues, stuff like that. It's fifty times more soulful than jazz," he says.

Cutler went straight from Colby to St. John's University School of Law, in Queens, which, in keeping with his individualistic streak, he chose for its application-based program, with the idea that it would better prepare him to go into private practice. "Some schools

make it easier than others for you to go out on your own right away and not be reliant on a law firm to show you the ropes. Harvard, for example, doesn't teach you how to make a document that's going to pop in court." During his summers he worked for the City of New York in the Corporation Council, for a labor law firm and for a criminal law firm. "The summer I worked for a very big law firm was the summer I knew for certain that I wouldn't go that route. You lose your life, you lose your soul. I'd rather sell my soul and get into something I like and worry about the consequences later," he says with a laugh.

After graduating from St. John's in 1994 and interning for six months at a boutique entertainment law firm much like his own, Cutler became the senior vice president of business affairs at Inverted Records. Along the way, he met a lawyer named Theodore Sedlmayr, who was working with some minor entertainment clients through a real estate firm. Barely a year out of law school, Cutler was eager to strike out on his own. "I said, 'Look, I'm going into private practice and I would really like to have a partner. You seem smart enough. I'll help you get your feet wet with some of this contracts stuff, and I'll take any garbage that comes through as long as we can make money on it. You can just concentrate on the entertainment side.'" Once they were floating as an entertainment firm, Cutler switched over to the entertainment side entirely.

This was in 1995. For the first few years their clients were the sort big in the hip-hop scene but not outside of it—Frankie Cutlass, Craig G, Melkie Sedec, the producer EZ Elpee. And then in 1998 Cutler and his partner met a struggling artist and his struggling manager—Eminem (Marshall Mathers) and Paul Rosenberg. "It took a while at first—there were delays getting 'The Slim Shady LP' out—but once everything came together, it came together"—and here Cutler snaps his fingers—"right away. We crossed over to big time."

Perhaps now is a good time to note that though Cutler represents *popular* artists, he will have nothing to do with *pop* musicians or *pop* music.

"I hate pop music. But it will collapse in on itself—it always does. A good, catchy song only goes so far in saving your soul. And we all need to be saved now and then." But isn't some hip-hop, well, pop? "Nelly's 'Country Grammar' song, or the 'Thong Song' [by Sisqo]—those are pop," Cutler concedes. "But *real* hip-hop isn't pop at all, it's what rock used to be—scary and rebellious and what parents don't want their kids to listen to. Eminem is a coup precisely because of that. He *seems* like a pop artist, so parents think he's okay, but really he's pulling one over on them."

Unfortunately for the gossip-mongers, Cutler is not at all interested in divulging anything about his celebrity clients—or the film *8 Mile*, which he helped produce. In an interview prior to the film's release, Cutler would promise only that it would be "extremely popular."

Hype? Bravado? Try understatement.

"As of today, *8 Mile* is the number-one movie, and the soundtrack is the number-one album," Cutler says later, after *8 Mile* had, in fact, hit the top of the charts. "Not bad."