

The Divorce Club

When Hollywood couples decide to split, they pick up the phone and dial Norman M. Dolin, Ronald W. Anteau, Daniel J. Jaffe or one of about a dozen Los Angeles attorneys specializing in celebrity breakups. **By Garry Abrams**

Is Linda Hamilton, estranged wife of "Titanic" director James Cameron, shopping for a divorce attorney?

The tabloids and other purveyors of gossip think so, judging by recent, breathless reports in the *New York Post* and *National Enquirer*, among many others, about the tempestuous breakup of the couple's Malibu-based marriage.

(For the benefit of those who do not habitually delve into Tinseltown gossip, the *Post* reported that Cameron and Hamilton were two-firing each other, he with a mistress and she with a stuntwoman who worked on Hamilton's last movie, "Dante's Peak." On the other hand, the *Enquirer* — as well as *People* magazine — blamed the breakup strictly on an unfaithful Cameron. Both the tabloid and the magazine portrayed Hamilton as a conventionally distraught wife, with the *Enquirer* reporting that Hamilton had exclaimed to "friends" that Cameron is "a power-hungry egomaniac who thinks he can have any woman on the planet!" The *Enquirer* also claimed Hamilton is searching for an attorney with an eye on hauling off a hefty chunk of Cameron's estimated \$275 million fortune.)

If reports about the rupture are roughly correct, the world is witnessing yet another episode in one of America's most popular and longest running, real life soap operas, the Hollywood Divorce, an exercise in public voyeurism that has entertained generations of moviegoers from Timbuktu to Tallahassee.

And if, indeed, Hamilton is looking for an advocate, the chances are good that she will make her selection from a small group of attorneys — perhaps a dozen but no more than 20 — who are veterans of the celebrity divorce circuit. This select club is made up of lawyers whose names turn up again and again on celebrity divorce papers filed in Los Angeles Superior Court, hub of the galaxy for stars in domestic distress.



For the reporters who regularly scrutinize court filings for tales of marital strife among the rich and famous, the signatures of these attorneys on divorce papers are warning flags, even when the names of the filing parties are disguised, a common tactic to avoid publicity. For instance, the press room at the Los Angeles County Courthouse is currently on red alert for a Hamilton-Cameron divorce filing, with all cases bearing certain attorneys names getting careful scrutiny. The courthouse reporters are not fooled easily. In March when singer Paula Abdul filed for divorce from husband Brad Beckerman as "P. Julie Beckerman," the press immediately discovered the ruse.

To explore the unique and exclusive niche occupied by celebrity divorce/family law attorneys, California Law Business interviewed eight of these lawyers, chosen because their names are frequently linked to celebrity splits. It is a club in which the members know each other well. Often, they are adversaries, professional rivals who spar at trials, hearings, depositions and conferences. Sometimes they refer cases to one another. Sometimes a famous client will fire one and end up as the client of another. (Comedian Roseanne Barr, divorced three times, is famous among these attorneys for her firings and hirings.) Occasionally and off-the-record, they may even question whether some of them belong in the group.

To gain entry to the club, members have developed reputations for discretion, firmness and effectiveness in marital disputes that are irresistible to the insatiable global gossip machine. Typically, a member of the club is a male in his 50s or 60s operating out of a Beverly Hills or West Los Angeles office with 10 or fewer attorneys. However, there are exceptions both in gender, age and size of firm. In addition, members often began their careers as civil or business litigators and segued into high-profile divorce work because it calls for many of the same abilities and areas of expertise — real estate, taxes, bankruptcy, torts, corporate, probate, even criminal law when a divorce turns ugly. Some also admit that they enjoy their singular roles as confidants to household names.

Because these attorneys have adapted to the pressures and complexities of high-profile, big-bucks marriage meltdowns, their phone numbers are in Rolodexes all around Tinseltown. Over the course of years they have built lucrative practices largely on word-of-mouth among satisfied celebrities and their entourages of agents, business managers and other advisers and confidants, notably entertainment and business attorneys.

"In this field, the source of business is essentially referrals," says Norman Dolin, 62, who heads up a three-attorney Beverly Hills office and, according to court records, handled the divorces of comedian Jim Carrey, actor Sylvester Stallone and Academy Award winner Billy Bob Thornton. "...Everybody's got a friend [who works as a lawyer]. So your source of business is essentially contented clients who say, 'Gee, my lawyer did a good job.'"

Dolin added that colleagues in other areas of the law are also a source of clients. "In specialty fields [such as divorce or family law], the high-profile cases are handled by a small group of lawyers," he said. "Those lawyers have developed a certain amount of peer recognition." (Like several other attorneys interviewed for this story, Dolin declined to name current clients, especially those for which no court papers have yet been filed. However, existing court records are a ready reference list for matching attorneys with famous names.)

Sometimes, divorce attorneys give their legal colleagues in Hollywood a nudge along the referral road, said Ronald W. Anteau of Kolodny & Anteau in Beverly Hills. Anteau explained that his firm has developed "a dog and pony show" presentation "to scare the hell" out of entertainment law firms. The object is to impress on entertainment lawyers that divorce is an area calling for special knowledge and that nonspecialist attorneys who dabble in their clients' marriages can end up in big trouble, he said. As a hypothetical example, Anteau, 57, suggested that an entertainment or business attorney would be wise to call a divorce attorney the moment a celebrity client suggests illegally "shipping money out of the country" to keep the cash out of a property settlement. Warnings like this have proved helpful in getting referrals, he said.

William Roberts, a former lawyer turned Los Angeles private investigator who said he has been hired to trace hidden assets in high-profile divorces, said that the consequences of hiding money can be severe because California law requires full disclosure of all assets by both parties in a divorce. Potentially, the court can give the money to the opposing spouse or impose large financial sanctions, he said. Attorneys assisting in the hiding of assets would face investigation by the State Bar, he said.

Nevertheless, attorney Anteau noted that a determined spouse can hide assets. Las Vegas casino poker chips and travelers checks, hidden in safe deposit boxes, are two popular ways of diverting potential community assets, he said.

Anteau added that more sophisticated schemes include taking assets offshore and hiding the loot under layers of corporations. For example, he said, a search for assets might lead from a bank in London to a dummy corporation on the island of Guernsey off the coast of Great Britain, where strict secrecy laws protect the identities of the owners of assets. And the trail might not end there, he said, explaining that chases might lead to yet another location such as Lichtenstein with a reputation as a safe haven for money on the run.

Sometimes, however, patience and a belief in the foibles of human behavior can reveal what has been hidden, Anteau said. He remembers one case in which a husband bought diamonds in South Africa and stashed them somewhere in the United States. Despite their best efforts, his firm could not find the diamonds, Anteau said. But Anteau was confident that the husband was a jerk who would make a mistake. After a year, the husband and his new girlfriend had a falling out. The girlfriend called the ex-wife, saying, in effect, "Hey, how would you like some diamonds?" Anteau got a court order sealing the safe deposit box where the diamonds were stashed and ultimately the ex-wife got the rocks. She gave the girlfriend a finder's fee, Anteau said. While celebrity divorce attorneys cite a range of skills necessary for surviving and thriving at their trade, all agreed that discretion is probably the paramount trait for staying alive in Splitville. Above all, that usually means avoiding publicity, both for themselves and their clients. With rare exceptions, the attorneys said they do not speak to the media about their clients, even though they are routinely bombarded by calls from reporters when a major divorce breaks.

"Hard Copy" always calls" when he files a big name divorce, said Dolin. "I have long taken the position that I'm not hired to be [the celebrities'] press agent," he added. "For me, there is an ethical impropriety in talking to the press."

"My job is not to answer questions from the press. That's the job of the press agent," said Anteau, whose firm has handled divorces for Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, actor Robert De Niro, actress Kirstie Alley and director Brian DePalma. "...The major thing is to keep your mouth shut because once you start talking it's easy to give away the farm."

Like a couple of others, Anteau singled out the English media as being particularly pesky about a star like De Niro who apparently exerts a special fascination over the populace of the United Kingdom.

Some of the attorneys said they strive for near-perfect anonymity and that they will take many a juicy morsel of dish to the grave.

"the Stealth Lawyer" to emphasize his ability to fly under the media's radar. That nickname was also the one used for Jaffe, 60, in a January article in *Town & Country* magazine about the country's top high-profile divorce lawyers. Jaffe, whose firm represented Nicole Brown Simpson in her divorce from O.J. Simpson, "insists that his talent for keeping his business out of the gossip columns is as attractive to clients as his skill in crafting, attacking or defending prenuptial agreements," the magazine reported.

"One of the things I have tried to do is keep my name out of the papers," said another well-known divorce attorney, the only one who asked that his name not be used. "I don't want to tie my name to celebrities' coattails," he added, referring to one effect of media exposure.

This attorney explained that he has developed a tactic for lending off media calls. As soon as he takes on a high-profile case, the attorney said his office installs a special phone line to deal with press calls. "We actually have a media line put in. It's a recording that says we represent so and so and we are unable to comment, or it refers them to a press agent. We plug [reporters into the tape] as soon as they call and most of the time that takes care of it. Otherwise, you get delayed."

The attorney noted that it is sometimes advisable to take other steps to keep things quiet. These include meeting celebrities at their homes or other locations where the risk of either the attorney or the celebrity being recognized is small. "You definitely make house calls," he said. His own office, the attorney said, is "not in a high-rise office building" where there are hundreds of eyes but in a smaller building with "a great degree of privacy."

Anteau of Kolođny & Anteau agreed that care is needed in arranging meetings. "Sometimes the hard part is being able to communicate directly with the client," he said, noting that he has met celebrities in out-of-the-way places such as the back rooms of restaurants.

In a similar vein, Dolin said a good divorce attorney knows how to get in and out of a courthouse, especially the one in downtown Los Angeles, without parading a client in full view of everyone. Consequently, Dolin and others said they are familiar with the labyrinth of underground parking lots and tunnels that offer low visibility access to the downtown courthouse. Dolin said the knowledge has been useful many times and that even when detected by a reporter or camera crew, as he once was with Billy Bob Thornton, he has been able to keep the period of exposure to a bare minimum.

Several attorneys said their job has been made easier by a recent rule that bars camera crews from wandering freely through the downtown courthouse.

And both Dolin and Anteau noted that

the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department offers a liaison service to help celebrities with fast entries and exits.

Yet even the best laid plans for anonymity can run afoul of ingrained celebrity behavior, according to Anteau. He remembers one instance in which a celebrity blew carefully laid plans for secrecy by arriving at the courthouse in a limousine accompanied by two bodyguards. The limo disgorged the celebrity and the guards at the front door and the three proceeded in a phalanx to the courtroom, Anteau said, as anonymous as bulls running loose on Rodeo Drive.

Sorrell Trope of Trope & Trope in West Los Angeles broached another angle on the keep-it-quiet front — he

won't disclose former clients to prospective clients. "If a person comes to me and wants to know who I've represented, I won't tell names," said Trope, 71, head of the largest family law firm in the country with 28 attorneys and a divorce lawyer for 50 years. That's because many of his clients don't want their names dropped even to other rich and famous clients, explained Trope, who was Cary Grant's longtime attorney and more recently has represented actresses Melanie Griffith, Nastassia Kinski and actors Rod Steiger and Emilio Estevez.

But it is not enough for the attorneys themselves to maintain a veil of silence, according to Dolin. In addition, Dolin said he insists that "everybody who comes in contact with the case" signs confidentiality agreements. That means everyone from court reporters taking depositions, to accountants, to real estate and art appraisers hired to inventory community property, he said.

One tactic for minimizing public exposure of a celebrity divorce, Dolin and others pointed out, is to hire a retired family court judge to hear the case. They noted that the private judging phenomenon has taken off during the '90s among "high asset" couples who can't settle their differences without a trial over the division of money and property. Anteau explained that private trials, or settlements without a trial, allow a minimum of paperwork to be placed in public court files. Thus, he said, it may be possible to never disclose the amount of a divorce settlement, or even the addresses of the divorcing couple.

Under the right circumstances, however, some divorce attorneys are not averse to publicity. Trope, for example, said he was interviewed many times by television reporters about the late Princess Diana's divorce

from Prince Charles and about the child custody dispute between Nicole Brown Simpson's parents and O.J. Simpson.

Sometimes, too, attorneys will go to bat for their client in the media because the opposing side has been badmouthing them.

Neal R. Hersh, 46, whose low-rise Beverly Hills office has a total of three attorneys, said he went to bat on television for client actress Halle Berry when she divorced baseball player David Justice a couple of years ago because he felt it was necessary to get her side of the story out. Hersh also operates informally as the West Coast partner of one of the country's most visible divorce lawyers, Raul Felder of New York. Felder is a frequent guest on talk shows and known for making frequent public statements about his cases.

And a few months ago Stacy D. Phillips of Mannis & Phillips in Century City opted to speak to the media about the publicly litigated child support order of \$112,000 a month she won for actress Jean-Claude Van Damme's estranged wife, Darcy LaFifer. "I got so many calls for that, I felt I had to handle it properly," said Phillips, whose other clients have included baseball player Darryl Strawberry and former Miss USA Deborah Shelton.

While the fame of their clients and the curiosity of the media lends a patina of glamour to their work, celebrity divorce attorneys insist that the glitter conceals a lot of hard work.

"After you get through who it is and what it is you're representing, you've got to do the work, you've got to be able to perform," said Hersh, whose other clients have included Larry Fortensky, who was divorced from Elizabeth Taylor and actress Robin Givens, who was divorced from Mike Tyson. "...I consider myself like a plumber. I deliver my clients a service."

Because celebrity cases tend to be complex and involve millions of dollars, attorneys said they have to be familiar with a wide range of legal specialties, including tax, pension, property, securities, bankruptcy and corporate, as well as family law areas such as child custody.

This is one of the few areas of the law where you can be a general practitioner," said Wasser.

Several of the attorneys likened celebrity divorces to business cases because the resolution of the divorce turns on determining what is community property under California law from a tangled thicket of assets.

"A celebrity divorce is basically a business case except for the custody and visitation issues," said Anteau. "If you've got a writer who wrote four chapters of a novel before marriage and six chapters after marriage, then technically 40 percent of the book is not community property."

While California law may require full property and income disclosure by both sides in a divorce, there is still plenty of room for worry, attorneys said, explaining that celebrity assets often consist of income from royalties, residuals and the like that can be subjected to a variety of accounting interpretations.

"If you screw up on a big asset case, the numbers are worth more than your malpractice insurance," said Jaffe of Jaffe & Clemens.

Perhaps the most harrowing specter in a big divorce case is that one side or the other has hidden big chunks of property and money in order to avoid splitting it with the soon to be ex-spouse, a number of attorneys said.

Dolin said he tries to determine if the opposing side has tried to hide income by having money paid into accounts in Europe, Asia, or elsewhere, whether property is held in the names of relatives and whether community property money is being used to support lovers.

Private investigator Roberts says that suspicion that the other side is cheating can run high. He frequently is hired to check for wiretaps on home phones and fax machines, he said, because electronic bugging is not uncommon in high-stakes divorces where either side "may want to know what the other side's on to."

Conversely, some attorneys said that celebrity divorces sometimes are more easily settled because there is plenty of money to go around.

"I can say to my client, 'Just give her another million and this will go away. Or would you rather be down at the courthouse throwing things at one another?'" Jaffe said.

Said Hersh, "The reason these cases settle is that these people can afford not to look at every nickel and dime."

As for themselves, the attorneys say they make decent livings but that their earnings are far less than those of litigators who can take a percentage of an award. Phillips of Mannis & Phillips explained that divorce attorneys generally are restricted to billing by the hour by California law, which seeks to discourage attorneys from "promoting divorce" through the temptation of taking a percentage of big divorce settlements. Phillips estimated that her top-earning colleagues make from \$750,000 to \$1.2 million a year.

Jaffe said that a top-flight divorce attorney probably earns an income comparable to a partner at a major law firm. He added that it is "hard to bill less than \$50,000" on complicated cases dealing with substantial assets. On the other hand, he said he works for out-of-court settlements even though he could make more by taking cases to trial.

All of the attorneys agreed that dealing with celebrities demands a combination of firmness, diplomacy and personal toughness that can be trying.

One of the conditions of the work is occasionally being yelled at by clients, in rare cases being threatened with physical harm, several attorneys said.

"There are very few days that are peaceful," said Wasser. "There's a lot of anxiety and emotion and you have to be able to cope with it."

When things aren't going well in a divorce or the emotional roller coaster of the process is taking its toll, clients tend "to take it out on their lawyer," said Jaffe.

But sometimes, the job requires yelling at the client.

Celebrities are "not used to someone saying, 'Get your butt in my office because we've got to deal with these interrogatories.' They'll say, 'Give it to my assistant.'" Dolin said. "I tell them, 'This is your life, not mine.' ...They don't live in the real world and you've got to deal with the real world. I may have to tell them, 'You've got to go to court tomorrow and we've got to talk about how to get you into the courtroom without people noticing.'"

Sharp words, however, are likely to be balanced by acts of consolation. All of the attorneys said they are on call at all hours and days of the week. Most said they give out their home numbers to at least some clients and have become accustomed to calls at odd hours by stressed out clients.

"I get calls at all hours, all days," said Trope.

"These are people who when they need assistance, they want assistance," Anteau said.

"When somebody calls me at home, there is something serious going on that has to be dealt with," Hersh said.

Besides their clients, celebrity divorce attorneys said there is one other group of people with whom they practice diplomacy, their colleagues. Because they are few in number and frequently oppose one another, they try not to make personal foes out of their professional opponents.

"It's a small community and you have to do your best not to make enemies," Phillips said. "If you have to litigate, you do it with courtesy."

Both Phillips and Dolin said that personal credibility with colleagues and judges requires that divorce attorneys should espouse reasonably consistent positions from case to case whether representing the "income earner" or the "non-

income earner." Otherwise, an attorney may be seen as lacking in legal integrity, Dolin said.

"It becomes very important that the judge trusts you and believes what you say," Dolin said. "The integrity of the lawyer is a major event in how a case goes."

Said Phillips, "You tend not to take extreme positions, which are not in the best interest of your clients anyway."

Hersh put a slightly different spin on it. The skill of a divorce attorney is putting the best possible appearance on his client's side of the story, he said.

"We are artists," said Hersh. "We have a blank canvas and we want the judge to see it as an English countryside. It's perception, what we do."