

CONTRACTS ROCK

THE SMOOTH (OR NOT) POP STYLINGS OF LAW PROF MARK PETTIT

THERE'S SOMETHING about the uniform commercial code that makes you just want to rock out — at least if you're Mark Pettit. For about twenty years, Pettit, a School of Law professor, has spiced up his contracts course for first-year students by singing versions of pop, rock, and rap hits with new lyrics about case law and the plight of 1Ls everywhere who struggle to master it.

Pacing in front of a class of about sixty students typing notes on laptops, Pettit certainly doesn't look as though he's harboring a hidden rock star. A balding, affable academic type, he wears dark slacks, a light blue button-down, and a broad-striped blue and gray tie. He starts quizzing the students, asking someone in the back row about the 1887 case *Sherwood v. Walker*, which involved the disputed sale of a cow. "Ms. Gil, why is the passing of title deemed important?" She answers to Pettit's apparent satisfaction, but he presses on, asking her, "Would this be an appropriate case for specific performance?" and then, "Under what scenario would the court be most likely to undo the deal and give the cow back to the Walkers?"

As the class enters its fiftieth minute, Pettit quietly announces, "OK, I have a song to close," and he grabs a yellow plastic amplifier and microphone from behind the lectern. The hum of laptop typing fades, and Pettit offers a modest introduction. "This is sup-



posed to be Billy Joel," he says:

It's ten o'clock on a Wednesday morn'
And the usual class shuffles in . . .

He has a decent, albeit slightly reedy, singing voice that warms to the chorus:

Give us the rules, you're the contracts man.
Teach us the rule of law,
Well, we're all about ready for therapy,
And finals might be the last straw
Oh law, law, law, law, law, law,
law . . .

Pettit says his formal music training never advanced beyond

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—Mark Pettit,
LAW professor

singing in the church choir in Waterbury, Connecticut, where he grew up. "But this is not about a great voice," he says. What it is about is setting first-year law students at ease when they're "on call" — when he puts their memory and legal reasoning in the spotlight.

"The atmosphere in class can be somewhat tense," he says. "I call on people at random and tend to stay with them for a long time, asking tough questions. So if I can make myself look a little ridiculous, students are less afraid to take risks."

Ms. Gil, also known as Lindsey Gil (LAW'10), says it works. "It's wonderful, because it makes you realize that if you

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make a mistake when you're on call, it's not such a big deal."

Sitting next to Gil, Drew Larson (LAW'10) mentions LAW's number-one ranking in the *Princeton Review* for faculty quality, a report that describes "incredibly personable" faculty with "quirky teaching styles." "That whole thing was based on Pettit," says Larson.

And while the singing is usually a solo act — with notable exceptions, such as "Don't Go Breakin' My Nose" (about a contract dispute over a failed nose job), an homage to an Elton John and Kiki Dee duet — it's also a form of class participation. Pettit sings only songs that have been penned by his students over the years, combining an inventory of greatest hits (such as the Michael Jackson send-up "Breach It") with new submissions, among them a LAW version of "Apologize" by Timbaland:

One L on call, I'm avoiding eye contact,
but you just stare and frown.
I'm hearing what you say, but I
just can't make a sound,
I look to my laptop, but there's
nothing written down,
I stammer sorry, but you say:
It's too late to apologize.

In case students have any doubt that Pettit doesn't take himself too seriously, he'll sometimes use props in the act, such as a red plastic toy guitar, sunglasses, and a baseball cap that he wears sideways when attempting a rap.

Pettit's performances started back in the early 1980s, the first year he taught contract law, when he agreed to read aloud a student's poetic tribute to a classic case about botched skin-grafting surgery. More poems followed, including one about a case involving actor Robert Reed, who played Mike Brady on *The Brady Bunch*, which was submitted with a request that it be sung to the TV show's theme song.

"I said, 'Wait a second. I have to have some decorum in the classroom,'" Pettit recalls. "But it went over big. And once that happened, I lost all dignity." **CB**