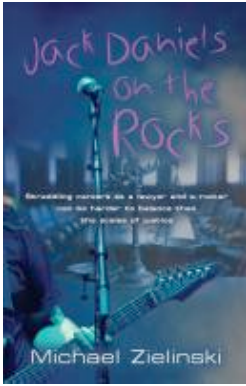


A person is shown from the side, playing a guitar. The scene is set in a courtroom, with a scale of justice prominently displayed in the foreground. A microphone on a stand is positioned in front of the person. The background shows rows of empty seats, typical of a courtroom. The overall lighting is dim and blue-toned.

Jack Daniels On the Rocks

Straddling careers as a lawyer and a rocker
can be harder to balance than
the scales of justice

Michael Zielinski



John Daniels is a criminal defense attorney who reinvents himself as a rock singer known as Jack Daniels. He finds himself caught in the crossfire of handling two divergent careers. His struggle to find his true inner self reaches a ceasefire when he leaves his law practice to capitalize on his skyrocketing music career. The ceasefire is brief as the crime of the century lures him to straddling a cross-country tightrope...

Jack Daniels on the Rocks

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Michael Zielinski

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First Edition

Chapter 1

John Daniels sat in the solitude of his office, sipping Scotch while getting sick -- of himself.

Well, sort of. It wasn't as if he were undergoing a midlife crisis. Because, at 57, he was a couple exits past middle age unless he could somehow live to 114. And criminal defense attorneys seldom have a shelf life approaching that. Yet the clock was ticking louder than a jackhammer on a long suppressed dream that threatened to light up his psyche and blow up the life that he knew.

Daniels was a prominent lawyer in Miller County, PA where the city of Braxton annually ranked dubiously high in the national crime statistics. The Greater Braxton area had plenty of bad guys, some of whom looked like good guys after Daniels gave them a legal shampoo and got them off despite their dastardly misdeeds. Daniels was a devout believer in the justice system, but pray tell there were times when he grew weary of wallowing in the criminal muck. He gave every case his all, but he knew many of his clients were scumbags who had guilt written across their foreheads until his courtroom magic washed it off. But the process couldn't wash away the hollow feeling inside Daniels that while justice may not be blind it definitely had cataracts. With Braxton's murder rate being rather robust, too many men with blood on their hands had dialed John Daniels' number, which had stained his soul to a degree.

"Damn, I need to lighten up," Daniels said aloud to himself the evening after a jury had found his latest client, a 21-year-old mother of four, innocent of second-degree murder in the fatal shooting of her latest live-in boyfriend of the month. Daniels had done a superb job of convincing the jury that his client had fired in self-defense even though her boyfriend had done

nothing more aggressive toward her than raise his voice from across the room.

His legal practice was flourishing and Daniels lived an affluent life in suburban Philmont. He was at the pinnacle of his profession, at least on the local level. But he was personally unfulfilled. He was bankrupt emotionally. His family life had vanished when his beloved wife had died of breast cancer several years earlier. She was busy in her career as a CPA and they had never found the time to have children. Daniels filled his private time with sports -- playing golf, although a cranky back had crimped both his fun and swing to a degree, and watching football and basketball. He rarely dated, even though he was tall, trim and distinguished and could have passed for 37 if it were not for the robust silver specks in an otherwise impressive head of hair. He had been so connected to his late wife Kate that he couldn't sustain any long-term interest in another woman. Since a connection to a ghost can be only so fulfilling and Daniels had no immediate plans to join Kate in the next world, he was lonelier than a hooker on Thanksgiving.

Late at night he found himself crafting rock melodies and lyrics by the light of a bottle of Scotch. The true passion of his life at this juncture was rock music. Classic rock. He listened to it constantly. In the office, even when working. In the car. At home, even while watching sports. At the gym. The only thing he knew better than the lyrics to classic rock songs was the Pennsylvania criminal code. At times he daydreamed he would have been happier had he become a rock star instead of an attorney. Granted, he probably would have been dead from drugs but the job stress would have been substantially less. He really had never confided this to anybody but Kate. And she thought he had rocks in his head -- so he buried the dream in the cellar of his soul.

Still, his desire to rock on became so powerful in him it burst and became a need.

And then John Daniels, the conservative defense attorney, sat bolt upright in his chair as if someone had just stuck a javelin up his ass.

"I can be a vocalist in a local cover band," he almost sang, knowing that he had talent that was shouting to be heard.

Then he laughed.

"Yeah, that will sure help my credibility in the courtroom," he said aloud. "And I gotta stop talking to myself."

John Daniels seldom talked aloud to himself. But he did sing to himself. And he had a great voice. The deep, rich voice he used as such a powerful instrument in the courtroom morphed into a baritone that sounded hauntingly like Jim Morrison of The Doors.

"It's time for Jack Daniels," he said aloud once again.

John Daniels had been Jack Daniels through law school. Even though he didn't like drinking Jack Daniels, he loved the name. When he was a star quarterback and shooting guard at Braxton High and Paxton College, which sits just a few blocks down Moss Street from his high school, the sportswriters at the *Braxton Bugle* had more fun with his name than grown men with their clothes on had a right to be.

Daniels poured himself some more Scotch and picked up the *Weekender* section of the *Braxton Bugle* to scan what bands were playing at what local clubs that Friday night.

"Time to rock on," Daniels smiled, breaking into a few self-rewritten lyrics of The Doors' *Alabama Song (Whiskey Bar)* in his otherwise deserted office.

*I don't know the way
To any whiskey bar*

Michael Zielinski

*And I know why
And I know why*

Chapter 2

Daniels looked into his bedroom mirror and frowned as if he had just inhaled a gross fart.

He was getting dressed to scout some cover bands at local clubs and his casual dress was too much John Daniels and not enough Jack Daniels. After all, a rock singer can't look like an accountant or a dentist who was at a jazz concert. His long-sleeved dress shirt and khakis screamed Too Corporate like a wailing guitar. From a fashion standpoint, he simply had no street cred as a rocker. Then again, he knew he would look like a total jerk in a crummy T-shirt and torn jeans. His next shopping trip would have to be more thought-out than the D-Day invasion of Normandy.

For now, he decided to live with what he had on and go to Blind Hermit's Tavern in the sticks and then maybe the Beer Bucket in town -- hoping he didn't get lost going to the former and didn't get shot going to the latter. With some vintage Stones blaring *Gimme Shelter* in his ears, good fortune and his GPS landed him at Blind Hermit's Tavern. When he walked in, the place was rocking with people who mostly seemed younger and cooler to Daniels. Suddenly he felt as if he must have looked like Ben Franklin to everybody. That, of course, was his -- Daniels', not Franklin's -- self-conscious perception. To the folks in the bar who may have noticed him, he looked like a conservatively dressed George Clooney, a little too distinguished-looking to rock out with the Pigs of Deception, who were adequately but certainly not spectacularly covering Led Zeppelin classics. Daniels squeezed up to the bar and finally flagged down a bartender after waving his arm until his rotator cuff started to fray just a bit.

"What do you want, pal?" barked the bartender, sporting a beer gut that spilled into another zip code and a long ponytail even though hair had deserted the top of his dome.

For a moment, Daniels almost ordered his standard Johnnie Walker Blue Label Scotch on the rocks. Then he caught himself.

"Jack Daniels on the rocks," he shouted through the din, a surge of metamorphosis shooting down his spinal column. After he got his drink, Daniels moved to a table in the rear and soaked in the atmosphere. It was a bar where the patrons took their drinking seriously. They were often buy-a-vowel drunk, spewing cuss words and looking to fight. And the men were sometimes worse.

Daniels was there on a scouting mission, to see if he could project himself actually performing in a local club. Since the lead singer in Pigs of Deception looked more like a dorky mechanic than Robert Plant and had a shrill voice, Daniels knew after the band's set had concluded that he could do THIS - - that John could morph into Jack. The Jack had gone down well and after sauntering up to the bar for a second drink, he spotted the Pigs of Deception vocalist talking to a heavysset blonde who had bigger arms than an NFL lineman and a chest big enough to play the Super Bowl on if the players were willing to slide downhill. Daniels walked up to him for a chat, but made a mental note to be casual and not sound as if he were talking to a guy on the witness stand.

"So how long have you been a vocalist?" Daniels asked, immediately realizing that had indeed used his attorney tone after all.

The long, lanky singer with the greasy and thinning long blond hair smiled and quickly responded with a laugh: "Hell, I don't think I've ever been a vocalist. I just belt out songs I love. If your band plays loud enough, it drowns the singer out

anyway. People in clubs love bands that rock, and if the singer doesn't screw up too much, they're happy."

The singer soothed his tonsils by taking a long gulp from his bottle of Budweiser.

"Why do you ask?"

Daniels felt as awkward as a clumsy pre-teen with his shoes tied together at his first school dance.

He paused for a couple minutes and replied: "Well, I've been singing rock classics since they were fresh releases and I thought it might be fun to try this ... even though I'm not a kid anymore."

"Well," said the Pigs of Deception vocalist, "go for it. But you need to dress down a bit. You look like an accountant or something."

"Actually a lawyer," grinned back Daniels.

"Solicitor, I got a good stage name for you -- Esquire!"

His yellow teeth beamed (if yellow can actually beam in a dark bar) back at Jack, who merely smiled.

"Listen, give me your business card, counselor. I know a lot of guys in bands around Miller County and if I hear of an opening, I'll let you know. You pretty much cover the usual bands -- the Stones, Zeppelin, the Animals, Clapton, Springsteen, Hendrix, The Doors, Van Halen?"

"Exactly," Daniels said, brightening. "I'm partial to The Doors. Some people think I sound a little like Morrison."

"No shit," said the singer. "Hell, we gotta a few Doors songs coming up in the next set -- *Light My Fire*, *Hello I Love You* and *L.A. Woman*. Why don't you step up to the mic and fill in for me? My Morrison ain't all that hot."

Daniels tried not to gulp. "Dressed like this?" he protested.

"Screw it," the singer snapped. "You're on. You might even get some clients out of this."

"Why, are they going to riot and get arrested for tearing down the place in protest?" Daniels asked, not feeling all that funny.

In fact, Daniels quickly began scanning the club to see if he recognized anybody. To his relief, he did not. Nevertheless, he hadn't felt this nervous since he had taken the bar exam. And at least he didn't have to do that before a live audience. He scrambled to the bar for another Jack Daniels to drown out any stage fright. But even before he took another shot of Jack, the steel in his spine stiffened and he realized that if he was going to become a rock vocalist, to paraphrase The Chamber Brothers, the time had come today (or rather tonight). So when it was time to take the stage a few minutes hence, the freshly minted Jack Daniels had his game, uh, stage face on.

The Pigs of Deception vocalist, Butch Braxton (who was not the town's founding father), bellowed into the microphone: "Boys and girls, this is a special moment in time. Here, for the very first time, is Pigs of Deception guest vocalist Jack Daniels. And that, believe it or not, IS his real name. And he's going to wail some Doors' songs in his best Jim Morrison!"

Then as the Pigs of Deception went right into *Light My Fire* as Daniels, a jolt of excitement and confidence shooting up and down his spinal cord like a manic elevator, walked up to Braxton and took the microphone from him.

From the first note Daniels exuded a commanding presence and was drop-your-beer-bottle good.

Without missing a beat, Daniels' rich baritone suddenly captivated everybody there, with the band playing with an extra dollop or two of adrenaline as Daniels compellingly brought the lyrics and Jim Morrison back to life. Who knew that an impersonator could bring back the dead and even throw in a funny encore?

*Girl, bring along plenty of matches
It's gonna take a lot to ignite my fire
Grab a blowtorch too
But try not to set me on fire*

By the time his revised *Light My Fire* had flickered out, a flame of applause shot through Blind Hermit's Tavern and Butch Braxton suddenly felt like Wally Pipp to Daniels' Lou Gehrig, who wound up playing a billion and two games at first base for the New York Yankees in the Babe Ruth era after Pipp missed a game with a hamstring or something twanged like a bad guitar string. Braxton was walking over to take the microphone from Daniels when the Pigs of Deception got right into *Hello I Love You* because everybody in Blind Hermit's could plainly hear that Jack Daniels was a Morrison sound-alike and a kickass rock and roll singer. Daniels practically stiff-armed Braxton and kept possession of the mic as if it were a ticket to ride to the future, with the here and now of the moment offering a delicious bit of foreshadowing.

The rocking crowd knew Jack Daniels' name and it loved him.

After the Pigs of Deception and Jack had belted out *L.A. Woman* with an electric sizzle, Daniels bowed and basked in the warmth of the patrons. The surge of excitement coursing through Jack was something he had never felt this intensely, even when he had won his first first-degree murder case. Daniels handed the mic back to an ashen Butch Braxton and bounded over to the bar for another Jack Daniels on the rocks. While at the bar, Daniels further bathed in adulation as guys and girls clapped him on the back, asking if he had ever sung on stage before.

"Never?" yelped one balding guy. "You gotta be shitting me!"

After exchanging in some excited talk with some others, a distinguished-looking guy in his 30s approached Jack -- which prompted Daniels to spin through his Rolodex of memories, trying to place the man's face.

"You probably don't remember me," said the thin man with impeccably combed blond hair. "Ryan Hartwell. I was a young assistant DA when you kicked my ass in the Benson-Davis rape trial. That son of a bitch was guilty as hell, and you got him off because I was no match for you. But I learned a lot from you and it helps me as a civil litigator these days. And now I find out that you also kick ass as a rock singer. Do you walk on water, too?"

Daniels looked uncomfortable even though his smile had not turned upside down.

"I was hoping nobody from my legal world would see or hear this," Jack said. "First time I've ever done this but always wanted to."

"You should have done it a long time ago," Hartwell gushed. "You're damn good. But I guess singing in local bars hardly pays what you bring in as an attorney."

"Hardly," Daniels laughed. "But this isn't about the money. It's about me. Thanks for the kind words. Let me buy you a drink. What are you having?"

"I mostly drink white wine, but let me toast you with Jack Daniels. On the rocks."

After the Pigs of Deception had finished their set, the band members all came over to Daniels and offered their congratulations.

"You kicked ass," said the guitarist, whose eyelids were so droopy he looked as if he was perpetually asleep. "If Butch here ever gets a sore throat, we now know we have a backup vocalist."

"Butch looks like a guy who just swallowed his microphone," cracked the towering bassist, putting a playful headlock on Braxton.

"Relax, Butch," laughed Daniels, "I'm not after your gig. You gave me a shot, and I owe you. If you ever need pro bono legal advice, just call me."

"You can handle my next divorce," Braxton quipped, looking relieved. "And keep rocking. I'll let you know if I hear of any local bands in need of a vocalist."

"I'm damn glad I came out tonight," Daniels beamed, buying a round for the band.

Looking at all the impressed faces surrounding him like a thicket of thirsty trees, Daniels knew his stage debut hardly had been like an ice pick in their ear drums.

Chapter 3

Jack Daniels was back to being John Daniels the following morning as he sat working on his office PC. Or so he thought. Because his alter ego Jack surfaced when his receptionist walked in giggling.

"How was your evening last night, John?" asked Susan, a perky and petite bundle of blonde energy in her late 40s. "Or should I call you Jack?"

Daniels groaned loud enough to be both John and Jack.

"OK, who do you know who was at Blind Hermit's Tavern?" he asked with a pained expression. "Or do I really want to know?"

"My niece Monica," replied Susan, smiling more broadly than a Jack O' Lantern pumpkin. "Actually, she said you were quite good. But you were dressed like a lawyer who had misplaced his suit and tie."

"Well, at least she didn't say I sucked," Daniels said.

"So what's up with the rock singer bit?" asked Susan, cutting to the chase.

"Always wanted to try it and I figured I'd better do it before they had to wheel me on stage," Daniels said, a sheepish grin hanging from his lips.

"Rockers are getting older all the time," Susan said. "Look at the Stones and The Who."

"Do you think if I started doing this regularly in local clubs that it would hurt my credibility?" Daniels asked, a storm cloud of concern trespassing across his forehead.

"Well, sort of," Susan said. "Then again, maybe not. Having a hobby doesn't have to marginalize your reputation as a defense attorney. If you're good in court and have the name, and you have both, that should be enough. After all, there have been

very successful attorneys who are womanizers or drunks. Or spend a lot of time golfing. The difference here is the degree of exposure. A lot of people around here know you and the transition from John Daniels to Jack Daniels could be startling to some."

"I know," Daniels said, fingering the knot in his tie as if it were a Fender guitar. "I know."

"Then again, some of our clients won't care ... they're not exactly CEO types," Susan said with a laugh. "Why don't you give this a shot and see how it plays out?"

"You know, I just might," Daniels said, flashing a raffish grin. "If I can be cocksure in the courtroom and on stage perhaps that will just add to the Daniels mystique. After all, I am a Gemini."

"Get over yourself," she cracked. "You have some briefs to read. So rock out with those and rock on later."

"Your niece just had to be at Blind Hermit's, didn't she?"

"So glad she was."

Later that day Daniels was at a murder arraignment for a local beauty salon owner accused of drowning his wife in the bathtub when one of the sheriff deputies, a forty something country dude who spent most of his time pub crawling, busting balls and soothing his itchy trigger finger at shooting ranges when he wasn't serving warrants and falling asleep in his van because of his nocturnal hobbies, asked Daniels if he sang any rock standards done by bands other than The Doors.

"Was the whole damn town at Blind Hermit's last night?" quipped Daniels, trying to make light of something that suddenly felt heavy in his chest.

"Hell, I don't know," replied the deputy. "When I saw you up there impersonating Morrison, I lost sight of everybody else. I couldn't believe the honorable John Daniels was on stage."

Before you started singing, I was tempted to shoot you and put you of your misery.”

Esteemed criminal defense attorney John Daniels dissed by a lazy deputy sheriff with a heart shaped like a revolver, thought the esteemed John Daniels. Or did the deputy merely throw Jack Daniels under the bus, wondered the newbie rock singer Jack Daniels.

John Daniels and Jack Daniels ... with apologies to Rudyard Kipling, Daniels (not sure if it was John or Jack or a combination of both) started whispering "never the twain shall meet" under his breath.

"Then you started singing and man, you were good, I ain't kidding you," the deputy sheriff continued. "I've seen you in the courtroom and I never thought you could be that cool. You were as cool as the underside of a pillow."

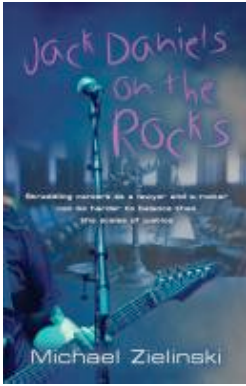
"Well, glad I didn't come across as some dork," Daniels said, somewhat relieved.

"Of course, it shocked the hell out of me," the deputy sheriff said, then offered some advice: "Maybe you should sing your closing arguments from now on."

"Yeah, like that's going to happen," Daniels said, ending the conversation.

For the remainder of the arraignment, Daniels felt out of sync -- sort of, pardon the pun, off key.

And it disturbed him. He obviously had to seriously consider whether he was going to continue to give voice to Jack Daniels.



John Daniels is a criminal defense attorney who reinvents himself as a rock singer known as Jack Daniels. He finds himself caught in the crossfire of handling two divergent careers. His struggle to find his true inner self reaches a ceasefire when he leaves his law practice to capitalize on his skyrocketing music career. The ceasefire is brief as the crime of the century lures him to straddling a cross-country tightrope...

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