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'Uncle Norby' - from jazz clubs to courts

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To his clients, he was "Uncle Norby." To music lovers, he was host of a popular New York jazz club. And to many black music entertainers, the fast-talking pitchman was - by his own and other accounts - "the No. 1 agent in America."

At one time Norby Walters numbered among his clients luminaries such as Ben Vereen, Patti LaBelle, Luther Vandross, Kool & the Gang, the Commodores, Miles Davis, Peabo Bryson and Stephanie Mills.

But these days Walters himself is taking center stage in a federal courtroom in Chicago where the docket call reads: Case No. 88 CR709.

It is not a role the silver-haired and quick-tongued Walters wears easily.

"It's terrible," Walters, 58, groaned last week at the end of the first week of his federal racketeering, conspiracy and mail fraud trial.

"What would my father say? What about my three sons?" asked the Brooklyn-born Walters as he surveyed the cluster of attorneys huddling over exhibits to be submitted into evidence.

Federal prosecutors say Walters and his partner, Lloyd Bloom, 29, signed up 44 college athletes before their amateur eligibility expired, paid them off with cash, airline tickets, hotel rooms and expensive cars, and then used threats to keep them in line.

The seven-count federal indictment contends Bloom and Walters enticed the collegians - all of whom were black and on athletic scholarships - with several thousand dollars in cash up front followed by monthly payments and postdated contracts.

"This is not a crime done to anyone," Walters commented. "The government is fighting the battle of the NCAA. It does not belong in court. I can't believe I could go to prison for this."

Walter's career as a talent agent got under way after a long history in restaurants and nightclubs; Walters and his family owned 21 popular spots in the New York area.

His father, Yosele "Soldier" Meyer, ran a popular black jazz club in Brooklyn that he turned over to his sons Norby and Walter.

They, in turn, opened an upscale nightclub. It was to be called Norby & Walter's Bel Air, but after the club's sign went up as Norby Walters' Bel Air, Norby decided to change his name.

Other establishments followed, including a restaurant Walters shut down in 1968 after two mob shootings and loss of a liquor license.

The personable, savvy Walters then turned to the music business and founded World Sports & Entertainment Inc. In time he became the foremost booking agent for black entertainers in the country.

"I specialized in rock 'n' rollers," Walters recalled last week during a break in the court action.

But after Bloom approached him in 1984 about expanding, Walters said he agreed to sign on black college athletes.

In a 1985 recorded sales pitch to University of Iowa running back Ronnie Harmon, Walters was heard boasting, "Why do these people flock to me? They flock to me because . . . they know that I can go into the major companies, the major football company or record company or motion picture company and make a multimillion-dollar deal. Very few people . . . can make a deal like that, with all the built-in bonuses and equities and so on and so forth."

The almost nonstop spiel played for jurors at his trial depicted 40 minutes of vintage Walters as heard by Harmon and his father.

"The name of the game is to be able to take talent . . . and open up the doors of the commercial world. . . .," he said.

In a 1987 interview in the Atlanta Constitution, Walters defended his show-biz approach to college athletes.

"What's wrong with a little razzle-dazzle?" Walters asked rhetorically. "What's wrong with having fun? Live life. Don't be afraid of it."

About a month ago Walters sold his agency business.

"Because of this," he explained last week, waving his hand

expansively toward the courtroom. "Who would have thought I would be

here defending myself against a crime?" "This is not a crime done to anyone," says sports agent Norby Walters. "The government is fighting the battle of the NCAA."

"This is not a crime done to anyone," says sports agent Norby Walters. "The government is fighting the battle of the NCAA." Credit: Associated Press

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