

BEFORE

1973: The city's top lakefront liberal, a famous reformer and idealist, chummy with Jesse Jackson, outspoken political nemesis of the late Mayor Daley. Anti-establishment hero.



BILL SINGER'S

IT'S ONLY 8:30 IN THE MORNING, BUT ALREADY SIX OR SEVEN PEOPLE at the Board of Education offices on Pershing Road are waiting to meet with Bill Singer.

"It's been like this for the last few months," says Singer, riffling through the phone messages on his desk. "I work 70-hour weeks for the [school] board and for my law practice. The other day I flew in from Los Angeles at midnight, and spent six hours on the phone, negotiating a deal for a client. It was my first all-nighter since college."

Such are the complaints of the monied, the powerful, and the sought-after. Singer, at 48, is a partner at Kirkland and Ellis, one of the city's more prestigious and starchy firms. His phone rings constantly with calls from clients, allies, and friends, most of them high-profile and powerful, including top executives at United Airlines and "Rich" (Mayor Richard M. Daley). He commands a six-figure salary, favors sleek suits and tastefully patterned ties, and slicks his hair straight back from a slight widow's peak. He appears prosperous, self-satisfied, smug.

ousted Mayor Richard J. Daley from the 1972 Democratic National Convention. In 1975, he ran for mayor, and he lost. But his quixotic campaign was an important moment in Chicago politics. It convinced black and white activists of their nascent political might.

Then he changed. He became a corporate lawyer—the consummate insider. And many of his long-time supporters were left feeling dismayed, betrayed—and mad.

"He's gone from being a political reformer to being a political exploiter," says Don Rose, who helped lead Singer's aldermanic bid and was once perhaps his most vocal political supporter. "He's got this yen for the fast track. He feels compelled to suck up to power. He changes his style to fit the times. Look at the way he wears his hair—like Gordon Gecko [in the movie *Wall Street*]. Only Jesse [Jackson] has changed his appearance as much as Billy. At least Jesse's politics have remained the same."

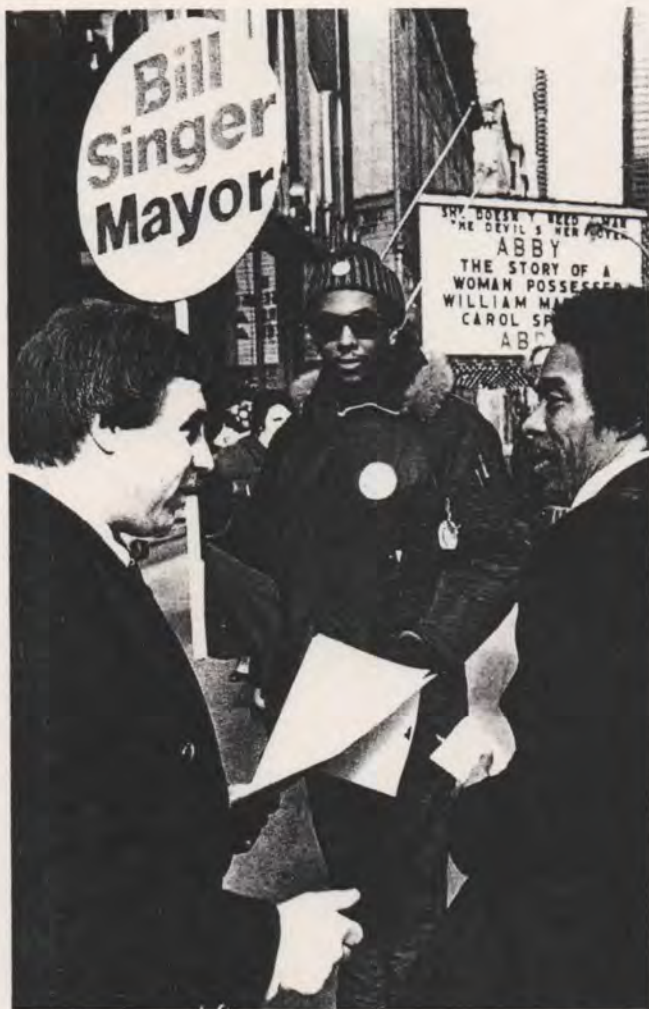
Singer's allies scoff. They say Singer changed his political tactics, but not his principles. It's fine to care about the downtrodden, but to help them, they point out, you must make peace with the powerful. Only then can you get things done.

"Bill's doing what he's wanted to do for the last 20 years—he's fixing the schools," says Alderman Edwin Eisendrath (43rd), who has been publicly endorsed by Singer in his campaign to unseat Congressman Sidney Yates. "He loves the political life here. He likes being in the fight. He doesn't back down, especially when he knows he's doing the right thing."

Who's right? Or, more compelling, who's Bill Singer? Is his a story of how power corrupts, or of how a principled politician grows wise with the years?

In the early morning of the long workday I spent with him recently, figuring the opportunity might never arise again, I asked him about the criticism that he's sold out. But he's a busy man, always running from one appointment to the next. He can spare precious little time for introspection. He glances at his watch. "We'll talk later," he says.

"I promise."



Singer's quixotic 1975 mayoral race may have been doomed but was still momentous: It helped convince black and white activists of their nascent political might.

WILLIAM SHELBY SINGER'S first venture into politics came in 1952. He watched on TV as the Democrats nominated Adlai Stevenson, Jr., to run for President. He was 11.

In those days, his primary passion was sports. His father, a salesman for a corrugated-container business, took him to White Sox games. He was an only child, growing up in South Shore, then a middle-class Jewish community. He played guard on the South Shore High School basketball team.

In 1958, he went to Brandeis University, and there he fell in love with politics—Kennedy politics. "John Kennedy was my idol," says Singer. "He had the right mixture of humaneness and leadership. He charmed the world."

He worked on Bobby Kennedy's successful 1964 senatorial campaign. He graduated from Columbia University's law school, got married, and returned to Chicago to clerk for a Federal judge. He got a job with a downtown law firm. He avoided induction—and the Vietnam War—with a student and marriage deferment.

"Billy was our downstairs neighbor," says Jim Lurie, a

Lincoln Park resident who was active in local politics. "He was idealistic and dedicated to politics. I remember that Billy went off campaigning for Bobby Kennedy in Indiana when his wife [Connie] was about to give birth. He was so involved that he asked us to look after Connie in the event that he would miss the birth. That signaled his dedication to causes."

Lurie introduced Singer to Bob Houston, a key volunteer on Eugene McCarthy's 1968 Presidential campaign, who brought the 28-year-old lawyer before a search committee looking for candidates to run in a special 44th Ward aldermanic election. The year was 1969. The election was to be one of the first local elections after the tumultuous 1968 Democratic convention; lakefront activists saw it as a chance to register dissatisfaction with Mayor Daley, the mainstream Democratic Party, and even the Vietnam War. Singer's chief opponent was James P. Gaughan, hand-picked to run by 44th Ward committeeman Edward J. Barrett.

"It was an emotional and tough campaign," says Singer. "They called us porcupines. They said we were hairy and had big noses. It

BILL SINGER'S MAKE-OVER

was a slur, but the porcupine became our badge of pride. It was much bigger than a normal aldermanic election. It became a statement on the times. I got a letter from Norman Singer, a former college roommate of mine. He was a doctor in Vietnam, and he wrote, 'I don't know if your election has anything to do with this war. But if it does, get us out. This is madness.' By the time I got that letter, Norman had been killed in battle."

Singer beat Gaughan by a slim margin, 427 votes. Two years later, he was re-elected, this time in a newly drawn 43rd Ward, with 67 percent of the vote.

That was a decisive—and important—victory for the fledgling coalition of black and white activists then developing. Singer had the coalition's full support. And he used it to great advantage the next year, 1972, in what would become a historic example of power brokering. That was the year when Singer and Jesse Jackson challenged Mayor Daley's slate of delegates to the Democratic National Convention with their own slate.

"We argued that blacks, women, and Hispanics were being discriminated against in the delegate selection process, which had been closed," recalls Wayne Whalen, the lawyer who spearheaded that 1972 convention effort. "True, the Daley delegation had been elected by voters in the Democratic Party. But we argued that it was a violation of party rules to discriminate."

Eventually, the Jackson and Singer contingent was victorious. The national Democrats voted to seat them, and booted Daley's delegation from the convention. "I didn't want to see Mayor Daley kicked out of the convention," says Singer. "I wanted to compromise. But Mayor Daley didn't want to compromise."

Flush with victory, Singer announced he would challenge Daley in the 1975 Democratic mayoral primary, running on a bluntly reformist platform. He vowed to cut City Hall waste and trim the public school bureaucracy.

Daley clobbered him.

Rough days followed. He had amassed a large campaign debt. He and his wife divorced. Already overweight, he gained an additional 25 pounds. Without his aldermanic seat, he fell from the public eye, and it hurt. This was, after all, a man whose "lust for [political] office is in him like another lung," according to a 1982 feature article in the *Sun-Times*. In 1978, he announced his candidacy for U.S. senator, and then withdrew because the party would not slate him (not a surprise, since Singer had worked to evict many slate makers from the national convention only six years before). In 1979, he considered a run against

Mayor Michael Bilandic, but opted not to undertake another apparently hopeless campaign. After Jane Byrne's miraculous triumph, he kicked himself. "I could have been mayor," says Singer. "I could have been senator. For a while it bothered me. But what's the point [of complaining]? I didn't run."

As the 1970s ended, he found himself working as the low-paid executive director of an obscure not-for-profit agency. That's when friends who worked for Kirkland persuaded him to join their firm.

"I was almost 40," says Singer. "I had two kids in school. People my age were buying their second houses, but I had no investments. I needed money. I decided it was time to get on with my life."

AT 11:45—HIS MEETINGS AT THE BOARD COMPLETED—SINGER HOPS into his grey BMW and heads for the Loop. He's got a noon lunch appointment at the Standard Club. He's running late.

With his left hand he steers the car and clutches a bunch of phone messages. His right hand holds a telephone. He's driving up the Dan Ryan at 55 miles an hour.

"I heard the vote was unanimous," he says. On the other end is Frank Kruesi, Mayor Daley's chief of programs and policy. They're discussing a lease—approved that day by the City Council—for a new reservation center at O'Hare; it's a lease Singer had negotiated on behalf of his client, United Airlines.

Singer chuckles at something Kruesi says. This is black-slapping networking, done at high speed. And Singer is not watching the road. Suddenly, he realizes he's heading for an exit he doesn't want to take. He swerves back to the expressway without looking to see if traffic's coming.

I clutch the door handle. Singer's not wearing a seat belt. "Look, man," I say. "Why don't you use the speakerphone so you can drive with two hands?"

Singer smiles. I realize he's not listening to me. He pushes the number of a reporter from *Newsweek*. As he zips into the Loop, he's answering her questions, and he's still got one or two phone calls left to return.

AT KIRKLAND AND ELLIS, A NEW Singer emerged. He chuckled his clunky slacks and jackets, and donned sleek suits and skinny ties. He started jogging; he lost

40 pounds. He wore his hair curly; it looked permed. He skied in Colorado and started collecting Native American artifacts during vacations in Santa Fe. He seemed to have a permanent tan.

Kirkland put him in charge of governmental affairs. In other words, he was a lobbyist, a \$250-an-hour lobbyist. He was expected to use his political connections to gain (continued on page 196)



*Ed Vrdolyak: anti-reformer,
power broker, accused race-baiter.*

*Singer's sudden friendship
with him left his own one-time
supporters feeling dismayed,
betrayed—and mad.*

tax breaks or subsidies for his clients. He hadn't been on the job long before he became chummy with then-10th Ward alderman Ed Vrdolyak.

This relationship astounded many Singer watchers. During their days together in the City Council, Vrdolyak had openly mocked Singer as well as other reformers. But Singer claimed to have always liked Vrdolyak. He said he'd always considered him a bright man, brash and dynamic. Most important, Vrdolyak was effective. He was powerful. Liberal reformers watched their legislation die in committee. Not Eddie. He snapped his fingers, and bills were passed.

One especially interesting bill was the 1984 ordinance mandating the installation of smoke detectors in residential buildings in Chicago. Vrdolyak introduced the bill—which had been drafted by Singer—and, at Vrdolyak's prodding, it passed.

Many people, Singer included, hailed it as legislation that would save lives. Others pointed out that, perhaps coincidentally, among Singer's clients at the time was B.R.K. Electronics of Aurora, which manufactures smoke detectors.

An equally interesting and more politically reverberant Singer/Vrdolyak collaboration had occurred earlier. In 1982, Singer went to Vrdolyak on behalf of a good-government group that wanted an expanded public role in the cable television agreement then being negotiated.

"We wanted an open process, and Vrdolyak saw to it that the Byrne administration gave it to us," says Singer. "That piece of cable legislation was one of the most progressive in the nation."

Some observers were more skeptical. A 1985 revision of the cable legislation—which, like the original bill, was drafted by Singer and introduced and vocally backed by Vrdolyak—was criticized in a 1985 op-ed piece by the *Tribune's* then-television critic, Marilyn Preston. She said the new legislation amounted to a classic "bait and switch," in which Singer and Vrdolyak had created a model cable TV proposal, and then had deliberately altered it substantially so that it would favor the cable industry. The revision of the legislation, as written by Singer, was passed.

Even before this controversy arose, the cable television brouhaha had had major repercussions, ones that went well beyond the cable industry. The issue changed the political landscape of Chicago.

In return for her support of the original bill, Byrne asked for Singer's support

against Harold Washington and Rich Daley in the 1983 mayoral primary. He publicly gave it to her. On the same day, she announced his appointment to the city's cable commission.

"What could I do? The one thing I asked her for—an open cable process—she gave me," says Singer. "OK, so Byrne wasn't the greatest mayor. But on cable, she did the right thing. If I don't support her after that, what kind of guy would I be? If she wins, she'd never talk to me again."

His former allies—most of them Washington supporters—were aghast when word broke of Singer's Byrne endorsement.

"I criticized him in public, and later we had a meeting and he started yelling at me," says Rose. "He's got a tremendous temper. He was screaming, 'You have no right to criticize me.' I started yelling back, 'I have a right to say when you're selling out. I own a piece of you. I helped make you.'"

Despite Rose's vitriolic and well-publicized criticism—he wrote a column in the early eighties for *The Reader* that awarded Singer the "Jane Byrne Award for Rancid Reformers"—Singer remained allied with Vrdolyak throughout the early years of Washington's first administration. This was during the heyday of the Council Wars, when Vrdolyak was fighting to block any and all Washington-led legislation. In 1984, Singer introduced Vrdolyak to a gathering in Lincoln Park as "my friend." That same

Singer's support for Vrdolyak began to wane soon after Vrdolyak fell from power.

year Singer ran as a Mondale delegate, on a slate put together by Vrdolyak.

His tight alliance with Vrdolyak helped weaken the bonds between black and white liberals. To many blacks who had supported Singer in his 1975 mayoral bid—over Daley and a black state senator named Richard Newhouse, Jr.—Vrdolyak was anathema. They considered him a race-baiter. It hurt them to watch as Singer helped stymie the coalition building he had once championed; it hurt them to watch

Singer work against the city's first black mayor. They felt acutely betrayed.

"This was a time when we really needed our white friends to stay with us because Vrdolyak was race-baiting," says Jacky Grimshaw, a former Washington aide who had coordinated several South Side wards for Singer's mayoral campaign. "When we needed him to take a stand against bigotry, Billy wasn't there. That really hurt. It was especially hard for me because I had worked for his '75 campaign."

Not until about 1987 did Singer's support for Vrdolyak begin to wane—coincidentally just as Vrdolyak's own power waned. Having lost control of the City Council after the special aldermanic elections of 1986, Vrdolyak could no longer control legislation. He could no longer get things done.

When Vrdolyak ran for mayor in 1987, Singer stayed neutral. After Washington died, Singer made it clear: From now on he was a Daley man.

"I've always liked Rich personally," says Singer in explanation. "I mean, I like him as a man. I can't say the same thing about Vrdolyak. I'm not saying I didn't like or admire Eddie. He was a man who, when he gave you his word, he kept it. And I appreciate that. But he didn't follow my advice. I told him he was race-baiting. But he didn't listen to me." Singer becomes emphatic. "You have to understand, Vrdolyak and I had a relationship," he says, "but we were never really friends."

SINGER—HIS EAR TO THE PHONE—LEANS back in his swivel chair and peers out the window of his law office on the 59th floor of the Amoco Building.

On the other end—sharing a joke—is Tom Corcoran, secretary of the Board of Education. Corcoran, no fool, has been Singer's steady ally since he went on the board. Board members and superintendents come and go, but bureaucrats like Corcoran remain. They know the tricks of survival. They laugh at Singer's jokes, feed him inside information, constantly tell him that he's right.

As Singer talks, Ronald Miller, a lawyer retained by the board, and Basma Price, the board's real-estate manager, wait. As chairman of the board's finance committee, Singer oversees the board's property transactions, and Miller and Price are in his office to discuss the value of the board's land holdings on State Street. The meeting was scheduled for two o'clock, but Singer was