

# THE SAND PAPER

By VICTORIA FORD

## Backstage: Band Managers Tell All

Another successful summer season has come and gone, but here's a thought worth considering: What would our beloved Island's summertime nightlife be without the live bands that draw hordes of dancing and drinking patrons to the clubs night after night, week after week? Everyone who appreciates live music is grateful to the bands for doing what they do and for doing it so well. But does anyone ever stop to thank the people who put those bands there?

In most cases (though a whole lot of self-managed, original musicians might respond with great whooping cries of protest), the credit is due largely to the management agencies responsible for putting the Island's top acts on the live music map in the first place.

The agents, after all, are the ones who judge a band's worth not by its existing following but by the following it could have, with the proper grooming, promotion and good business sense. The agents are the ones with the experience and know-how to help a band with the right stuff – talent, promise, determination and the willingness to work hard – get where it wants to go.

In a final, hats-off gesture to summer before getting down to the business of another long fall and winter, what follows is an introduction to the voices and personalities of the masterminds behind the local live entertainment industry.

Forgive its lengthiness. Once these guys were given the opportunity to discuss their expertise, it was like a floodgate had been opened. They had a lot of great insights into the behind-the-scenes world of booking and managing the bands that tirelessly supply the demand for the Island in-season's soundtrack.

## STARS Looks For Talent, Belief, Desire

Now, meet Stephen Tarkanish: Julliard- and Harvard-educated founder and president of STARS Productions, 40-year veteran of the music business, past president of the International Talent Agencies Association and founder of the New Jersey Talent Agencies Association.

Countless many band members (as well as the agents) who were interviewed by The SandPaper's entertainment writers this summer described him in no uncertain terms as a mentor, a champion of the scene, with a brilliant mind for the business and a real knack for advising, guiding and relating to musicians of all ages.

That may be partly because Tarkanish himself is a drummer. He studied percussion at Julliard Prep School in New York, N.Y., majored in music and percussion performance at the Manhattan School of Music and at Rutgers University and got his degree at Harvard University.

In his opinion, to have prior experience in being a professional musician and, thereby, "to enter a field with a tangible and intangible sense for it" serves as "a tremendous advantage." Knowing firsthand what the artists go through enables an agent to relate to their thoughts, feelings and experiences in a way that simply being a good salesman cannot, he said.

"I would not have had the rewards I've had without my experience as being a musician," he said. "There's always that added element of trust when an artist knows you've been there" and that "you're sensitive to how it feels to play to nobody" as well as to the post-show thrill after a stellar gig.

Tarkanish got his start in 1966 and, for "a great bunch of years" in the latter half of the '70s, was the house drummer at the MGM Grand and other hotel casinos in Las Vegas, Nev. He taught, played and managed music until 1982, when he developed chronic tinnitus, or ringing in the ears. By that time, however, the STARS brand name (an acronym which originally stood for Stephen Tarkanish Artist Recording Studios, though it hasn't had a specific meaning for years) had already been born, so Tarkanish gave himself over to it completely, branching out from recording, booking and management into video and soundstage production studios and eventually expanding into specialized divisions including corporate, college, wedding and other private event planning as well as political functions, fairs, festivals and theme parks, not to mention STARS West Coast, with locations in Boulder, Col. and Seattle, Wash. and leadership of Tarkanish's longtime business partner Scott Stimpson.

"I said a long time ago, 'Look – we're an agency. We have to have everything.'"

To that end, what STARS offers (to bands who fit the bill) is not just management, but education.

"Not all the bands understand the business," Tarkanish said. "And you can always see those bands a mile away." In his opinion, what bands with far-reaching aspirations need to understand is, "the business makes the world go 'round, along with your performance. It's (being able to identify) the fine line between artistry and business that makes that work."

Off the bat, there are six steps to finding out whether a new prospective band fits the STARS Productions bill, Tarkanish explained. First, artists interested in soliciting STARS should scan the "Musician's Marketplace" page on the STARS website, [www.stars-productions.com](http://www.stars-productions.com), a comprehensive checklist of everything that must be included in a promo kit to ensure consideration.

Second, after receiving and reviewing a band's viable promo kit (or what the rest of the world might think of like a résumé), he sets up a "preliminary exploratory conference" with the artist or band. He noted the Artist and Repertoire (referred to in the biz simply as A&R) department, which takes up three rooms in the office building, receives roughly 500 promo kits per week, Tarkanish said. And, every single package that arrives does get looked at. After the preliminary meeting, he outlines the agency's policies and terms of agreement and so forth, and at the same time begins to get a feel for the artists' character. In plain terms he said, "If there's too much ego and not enough honesty, loyalty, trust, ... I don't care how good the band is, they're destined for failure."

Next, Tarkanish imparts his time-tested recipe for success, which he calls "the Golden Triangle" and contains (you guessed it) three essential ingredients: talent, belief and desire. Talent speaks for itself, he said; but the individual members of a band must also have, and demonstrate, unwavering belief in their future, in each other and in their agency; and the band must have the strong enough desire to get out onstage – weekends, holidays, out-of-state – and give everything their collective "all" to every performance.

Experience has proven that, invariably, if an act tanks, the absence or failure of one of those three elements is the reason, he said.

The next step is a biggie: the business analysis, in which strategies and objectives are carefully defined. "They all have to match like the parts of a car," he explained, alluding to the classic 1974 Robert M. Pirsig novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

"If they get this far," he said, "I know they have a business head, ... (and) it's good enough to send the ship out to sea."

Last, and perhaps most importantly, is goal setting, wherein a band's concept is established and its game plan for realizing the concept is laid out.

"I always say, 'a goal is a dream with a deadline,'" Tarkanish quipped. STARS uses a five-year plan, with which "every band we have ever given (it) to has succeeded."

Bands must understand the need for a workable and marketable dynamic, he continued, citing the Nerds, which he described as "the grand-slam, ultra-omnipotent" act, as the perfect example of "a brilliant concept." Another is the all-female rock band Good Girls Don't; Big Orange Cone® is basically a group of Chippendales that play great music, he said; The Benjamins have the "pretty boy" thing going for them; and infamous Dog Voices'. Rather than slap an image on a band, Tarkanish said, "we try to bring it out of them, to make them aware of it," beginning by simply asking them, what is the band about? The band should bear in mind, he added, that "if (the band name) doesn't represent a way of life, you won't reach people." Examples he cited of actual band names that crashed and burned were The Dentists, even The Schwarzeneggers.

Once a cover band's identity is nailed down, he described the climb to greatness as a three-tiered matter of having great material, a high-energy stage show both musically and physically and a firm grasp of conceptual development – a band's constant dynamic reinvention of itself.

Ultimately, the right combination of promotion and business tactics, together referred to as a "booking plan," is what will cause expansion of the geographic area a band covers, the best approach to which is gradual, Tarkanish said.

"Without a booking plan, bands are nothing but egos and empty holes," he said. Still, the bottom line remains, as it always has been: "filling a nightclub and putting on a great show."

## The State of The Industry

As a manager, Tarkanish said, "knowing the artist on the stage and the audience on the floor" is essential. A manager must ask himself, is the band throwing the party, or just entertaining it? Meaning, is the band attracting a following and drawing people to the show?

But the real key, he said, is the art of promotion, on which "countless hours" are spent. In addition to the office staffers who work closely with members of the print media, each band has a "street team" in charge of sending out mailers and emails to drum up attendance at shows. It's unfortunate, he added, that the hardworking promoters are "so overlooked" in the grand scheme.

Promotion tends to be a little trickier in the Long Beach Island area, he noted, without a great deal of radio and record company support available, but sponsorship from beer and liquor companies is a big help, as in the case of Big Orange Cone®, backed by Coors Brewing Co., and Dog Voices, with Budweiser. Geary, too, has secured the sponsorship of Anheuser Busch.

"We have taken promotional campaigns to the max," Tarkanish said. "Nobody can say STARS doesn't take any shots," Tarkanish laughed. "I, personally, probably take more shots and make more mistakes than anybody."

Long Beach Island, in particular, he said, is "such an important marketplace for our bands," though in general, New Jersey is "a Mecca" of live entertainment, with "the healthiest market for cover bands in the country" as far as supply and demand in nightclubs and on college campuses are concerned. On a national scale, however, "right now, the industry is so difficult," which he attributed to the economy and, to some extent, the widespread threat of smoking bans in indoor places.

## 'Let's Cooperate, Not Compete'

Business, marketing and promotion, intuition, initiative, credibility and trust – for their varying viewpoints on many aspects of the entertainment industry, the men at the top of the Island's Big Four seem to share the same sense of what works.

So, fittingly, Tarkanish's business philosophy as it relates to dealing with artists and venue owners is much the same as his attitude toward his fellow agencies: "Let's cooperate, not compete."

Whereas the booking industry used to be very competitive, he said, "we're finding that if we all work together to make a better scenario, it can only strengthen the business and make everyone win bigger." In short, "being territorial doesn't pay."

Arbeeny confirmed that when he said there is a real sense of cooperation among agencies now, "more so than there ever was," as agency heads are making a habit of "working together instead of against each other."

"When I was starting out in the business," Geary recalled, "Stephen (Tarkanish) was already very well established. And when it seemed that every competitor was out to hold Shore Bets down, ... he was, like, the one person that helped me out."

"One thing I have to be proud of," Tarkanish said, "is, through the years, we've successfully maintained a great relationship with everybody that books bands down there. I just hope the live music scenario remains, as it always has been, a staple of entertainment on LBI."