

# Night & Day Interview with Steve Tarkanish

Recently, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Bill Bodkin of Night & Day Magazine for an interview. We discussed S.T.A.R.S. Productions, THE NERDS, the state of the Jersey Band Scene, and more. Below is the text of the article. Steve Tarkanish is one of the most polarizing figures you'll ever meet in the crazy entertainment industry. Some people can't get enough of his seemingly unflagging cheerfulness, his larger than life personality, and his rousing "go get 'em" words of encouragement. Where others may disagree, one thing is for sure: Steve Tarkanish tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

No one in this industry can deny his proven and historic track record for discovering the biggest names in rock and roll history. He is and was the man behind the scenes.

No one also can deny his place in the music world from helping book Led Zeppelin on their first American gig, getting Guns 'n' Roses their first gig in Jersey, booking the talent for the landmark Moscow Peace Festival (w/ Bon Jovi, Ozzy and Motley Crue) to drumming for Frank Sinatra in Vegas to working with legendary promoter Bill Graham; Tarkanish and STARS Productions have been doing it and doing it well since 1965.

## History

***N&D:*** Steve, you've been involved in the music industry for a long time – when did you get your first big break in the industry?

**ST:** I had two big breaks, one as a musician and one as an agent/manager/promoter. As a musician, I began playing drums professionally at fourteen years old. Charlie Penta, agent extraordinaire of the Ty Ann Music Agency saw me play and kept me working solid. I grew up in Clifton, NJ, and there were over two hundred places within a half hour distance of where I lived for bands to play. As a teenager, the local

musicians I grew up with included Donald Fagen (Steely Dan) from Passaic, Joe Walsh (James Gang, the Eagles), from Montclair. Larry Packer (Cat Mother and The All Night New Boys) from Clifton. Larry introduced me to his producer Jimi Hendrix . My dear drummer friends Jeff Seitz (producer, engineer, and partner of Stuart Copeland of the Police), Chuck Burgi (Billy Joel, Blue Oyster Cult, Hall & Oates),– we were all in the same world together. So the competition was fierce and pressure was on. Play well or you were out.

As far as the music business goes, I had to know the fine line between business and artistry. New York City was a second home to me, I was studying drums and percussion in the city with the legends of drumming – Joe Morello, Sonny Igoe, Jim Chapin (Harry Chapin's father), Elvin Jones, Ed Shaughnessy, Don Lamond, and I was accepted to Julliard Prep. I got my first big break in the music business by working in offices, namely Capital Booking, and with Frank Barsalona at Premier Talent. For awhile I worked with Morris Levy of Roulette Records, and the late great Bill Graham at the Fillmore East. There were no business courses offered in schools at the time, so these legends were my mentors and teachers, and I never could have had a better education or a better pathway.

**N&D:** *You were one of the first people to book Led Zeppelin in the USA. Can you tell us that story?*

**ST:** For a brief and beneficially productive time I was part of a small entourage that brought Led Zeppelin to America. Working with Ron Terry, who was booking shows with Barry Fey. Barry had a sold-out show in Denver with the Vanilla Fudge and Spirit at the Denver Auditorium Arena. Ron negotiated with Barry, and I spoke with Peter Grant, manager of Led Zeppelin. It was all about getting \$1500 for Led Zeppelin. We got the Vanilla Fudge to give up \$750 out of their back end percentage, Ron worked out the other half with Barry, and because of that Led Zeppelin debuted in North America. It was a Christmas show in 1968.

**N&D:** *THE NERDS just celebrated their 25th Anniversary – how did you come to work with these guys and how did they become the most recognizable cover band in the world?*

**ST:** Who? What band? Oh, THE NERDS! I was in S.T.A.R.S. Studios in Fairfield, NJ, and we had a typical 80s, all-original hair band called AKA who were showcasing for major labels through our S.T.A.R.S./Aquarian showcases. Jimmy (Spaz) asked me for an idea because they wanted to play out more. I gave them two ideas. One was to be an oldies band called the Gashouse Gang, and the other was to be a concept band that in the midst of all the hair bands, would break all the rules. They would play original songs in cover rooms, TV music theme songs, country and western, heavy metal, polkas, opera, zydeco, and any other type of music, and their image would be the antithesis of the existing 80s image. As if that weren't enough, the band name, I said, would be THE NERDS.

As Ken Kragen (Lionel Richie, Kenny Rogers, *We are the World*) says, "always be honest, absolutely honest, never completely honest, because you'll hurt somebody's feelings." I was 100% completely honest, and after offering AKA the two directions, I didn't hear from them for over two weeks. I thought they were mad at me, but on the contrary, they came back completely excited and said "Okay! We'll do THE NERDS idea." That's how it began. So, on August 15th, 1985, THE NERDS first gig was at the Lighthouse in Lake Hopatcong, NJ (now Barbershop Recording Studios).

Two years went by and one day, Spaz calls me up and says "come on down and see our band tonight, we're packing the place!" I asked him "who would go see you?!" I showed up that night at the Fireside in Denville, NJ, and both entrances had lines out the door, a hundred deep. That was it, I said "we are going to take this seriously," and we did. We shattered all the clubs' box office summaries, slammed the college market, and took an aggressive direction and played in markets that would eventually become ours. Philly, Boston, Baltimore – THE NERDS became the biggest and the best. No band from Jersey ever crossed the Hudson to

Manhattan and sold hard tickets. Mark Krantz (The JFK Center in Washington, D.C.) was a big help. At the time he owned New York City's Lonestar Roadhouse and THE NERDS were up there with The Band as the number one show in the room. Within five years, I said to THE NERDS, "we're gonna headline Carnegie Hall all by ourselves." We did, and sold it out. At that point, THE NERDS literally made history. So the Carnegie Hall sold-out show, I would have to say, started it all, with much preparation before. Now everyone knew THE NERDS and they hadn't even released any recordings yet. Staying on top of the game, making the right decisions, both on and off stage, and the combination of talent, desire, and belief, are the reasons we're still together after twenty-five years. We only had one member change, because Felix passed away in 1995. THE NERDS are a prototype for any band, and yes, they are the most recognizable cover band in the world.

### **STARS Showcase:**

***N&D:** Just so people outside the industry can understand, what is the purpose of a STARS Showcase?*

**ST:** The ultimate objective of a STARS showcase is to break and develop new talent that can be booked to make talent buyers money. Also, to have an artist achieve financial security. We utilize all the marketing technology available, such as all formats of recording, bursts of press, media attention, and social networking to create a hyper-popularity with each band showcasing. Efficiency experts will say that technology is only as smart as those who use it. To achieve this we work closely with our bands, and without this reciprocal due diligence, it's like a car without an engine: it won't run except downhill. So, in today's world of hyper marketing, bands need direction so their campaign can have impact. Impact with the goods to back it up. Follow through, make the smart choices, it's qualitative, not quantitative. Success is achieved for the fortunate who possess the rare combination of unique talent, artistic and business vision, single-minded

drive, willingness to adapt and grow, and most importantly, blind luck. We consistently study a handful of consensus superstars who have put together careers that span at least a decade to model after. Taking into consideration their early artistic careers, the respective periods of dominance, the various phases that they have gone through, their ability to diversify, appeal, and move into new areas, and their common ability to sustain that most elusive quality in show-business – **LONGEVITY**. Like the stock market, experienced talent buyers want a long-term investment with bands. So rather than having a band with a short shelf life, year after year they can count on their return popularity for financial rewards.

STARS proves this with THE NERDS (28 years), the Benjamins (16 years), the Amish Outlaws (9 years), Screaming Broccoli (23 years), Flying Mueller Brothers (35 years), Mashwork Orange (6 years), The Jonzes (5 years), occasional dates with Big Orange Cone, Phillip The Meatbox, Exodus Supreme, Uptown Getdowns, Wild Ones (exclusive in NJ), The Zoo (exclusive in NJ), Goodman Fisk, Drop Dead Sexy, LauraLea & TrippFabulous, and the finest tribute bands America has to offer. Moreover, our jazz artists are Grover Kemple & Zaz Zu Zaz and Karl Latham, undoubtedly one of the greatest drummers in the world today, our club DJs and mobile DJs are the very best, and, so many other bands that have the ability to deliver year after year. The short term gain vs. the long range plan is exactly what I'm saying here. So many bands change members and names, like people change their clothes. STARS will not tolerate that. Our clients want established consistency.

I'm not putting down the fact that change is inevitable and progress is not. To progress, we must change. However, the time lost in the adjustment period has historically slowed the process of growth. The bands that stay together win together and in life, there's not winners and losers, there's winners and misery. Just as business schools and law schools teach by case method, STARS studies the careers of superstars for patterns and examples that we can adapt for our knowledge and business purposes. The bands on a STARS showcase, despite their widely divergent styles and career paths, have demonstrated the traits of

vision, judgment, tenacity, and a willingness to change that matches the undeniable talent that each band possesses. The bands showcasing have the raw ability and choose to make a full-time commitment to persevering in the brutally competitive music world. STARS will always offer words of encouragement, tempered by blunt pragmatism. We never underestimate the stress involved with irregular hours, constant travelling, and all the hard work involved to achieve the standard of excellence STARS insists on before we choose a band to showcase. No one will see a band on a STARS showcase that doesn't have a special drive that allows them to keep going while others would give up. Nothing succeeds like success. The entertainment business is a business so sophisticated and complex as any other potentially lucrative endeavor. Apart from the financial rewards and satisfaction that go with achievement the entertainment industry offers its participants a certain indefinable feeling that makes people do whatever is necessary to experience it. Call it the "SMELL OF GREASEPAINT, THE ROAR OF THE CROWD" but whatever it is, it gets in your blood, quickens your pulse, and makes all the headaches seem bearable. I'll tell you, there's no business like show business, and it's all show business.

**N&D:** *How long have you been doing showcases?*

**ST:** STARS has been doing showcases, and working on showcases, since the mid-60s. Any show should be looked at as the greatest show on Earth. You don't have a second chance for a first impression, and moreover, you're only as strong as your last performance. So really, any show is a showcase. As the saying goes, "Ziegfeld's out there!" You never know who's going to be in the audience. Showcases must be accompanied by a practiced, pro-active strategy. To some agents it's a crutch, but to pros it's a tool, because it helps build something. In this case, it helps build an artist's career.

**N&D:** *You are recognized as one of the top entertainment executives in the world. Can you elaborate on your reputation?*

**ST:** It was, as always, very difficult as most A&R representatives, record executives, promoters, agents, and managers know, to choose the right artists. Sometimes what we like isn't what necessarily works in the marketplace. However, there is plenty "real estate" for a great band. Many agents promote bands that can't deliver. My edict is to deliver on everything I said I was going to do. There's a plethora of artists out there. Which makes it increasingly difficult to pick from. When the right act comes along, we look for the right band, in the right place, as well as the right place with the right band. Please note, I'm being as simple and basic with this question as I can. One of my recent pleasurable experiences is dealing with a dear friend since childhood. His name is Andy Wallace, a Grammy-Award winning re-mixer, mixer, and producer. Artists such as Limp Bizkit, Disturbed, System of a Down, Slipnot, Puddle of Mudd, Lincoln Park, Stained, Blind Melon, Rage Against the Machine, Phish, Madonna, and so much more, as well as creating the alternative music sound by working with Nirvana.

**N&D:** *What's your opinion of the current state of the entertainment industry? Do you think there is talent that can bring something fresh and new to the table?*

**ST:** The macro version of your question is the same philosophical question of "does anyone go to a club to hear the music, or to have an aesthetically pleasing musical experience?" I.e., is it the event, or the music? The state of bands, be it cover or original, is the perception and understanding of their staying power. They must create an experience so extraordinary that the initial hit of musicians drawing people translates into the experience that everyone remembers. It's not the play, it's the re-play. For example, when I worked Woodstock '94, it was based on an event so amazing that twenty-five years later, it was still the benchmark. STARS gets over one hundred inquires/offers a week for our top acts to perform. So my opinion of the current state of bands/music is that no matter where you are or who you are, you have to treat every show like it's the biggest event of your life and it's the greatest show on Earth. Bands must realize that their bands

are a business, and the more you put into it, the more you get out of it. Every marketing plan must differ from show-to-show, or it's only a grid. What bands have to do to be successful is realize that human beings respond to hooplas like emergencies. Invite groups, not just individuals, because people will suspend disbelief if they come in groups. The fans must get real incentives. Innovation comes with experimentation, risk-taking, and trial and error. Events must be worth losing sleep over, they must be awe-inspiring. The way a musician spends his evenings can result in success or failure of his or her career. Exceed the fan's expectations, provide and promote a promise, as well as your product. Stay true to the band's mission and values, and remember what Walt Disney said: "This was all started by a mouse."

Playing in a band without promotion is like winking at a girl in the dark – you know what's going on, but no one else does. There is a core mentality of a relationship between touring and selling records. That is, in the record business it's about units sold, and in the touring/booking business it's about tickets sold. What's the bottom line? No matter how fresh and new the band is, it will always be about how many people they draw, and how many tickets they sell.

## **STARS Today and Beyond...**

***N&D:** What are some new and exciting things going on in the world of STARS Productions?*

**ST:** STARS is expanding its departments to better serve our clients. We are focusing on making things better and bigger. This common sense, together with uncommon thinking is resulting in the assembly of new, exciting entertainment. We are going to be signing more cross-over artists, that is, artists that can deliver strong shows both to the private and public sectors. We will be covering demographics that span globally and as always, try not to miss a shot or opportunity. We will always have the supply to meet the demand.