

By KEITH LYLE

Talking With Stephen Tarkanish 'I Love This Business'

It's not often a person is lucky enough to find a career they have a talent for and enjoy working at. If so, then Stephen Tarkanish is a man twice blessed. Tarkanish fell in love with the drums at a young age and played his heart out until the early '80s when severe ringing in the ears from tinitis forced him to give up the drum kit for a desk and phone. He formed Stephen Tarkanish Artist Referral Services (S.T.A.R.S.) and is now one of the most influential agents in the tristate area.

S.T.A.R.S., headquartered in Sparta, is more than a promotion agency. The company also books bands at over 150 area clubs, manages more than 20 clubs, and represents a roster of about 30 bands and works as a middle agent for the nation's hottest groups when they tour the Northeast.

Tarkanish succeeds in a business filled with rapidly shifting alliances and double-talk by placing an emphasis on professionalism. He adds bands to his roster that not only display talent and originality but an ability to draw consistently big crowds. Those are the bands he schedules to appear in the clubs he works with. It's an equation that ensures bands, club owners, and clubgoers the best possible night out.

"There's two words in show business," says Tarkanish. "Business is the dominate word."

Top S.T.A.R.S. acts include Bums In The Park, with WNEW's Jim Monahan on guitar, Voices, North Jersey's Kilby Taylor, the up-and-coming Turnstyles and Cats On A Smooth Surface. And don't forget The Nerds.



The Nerds, the only band Tarkanish personally manages, are the top-drawing, top-grossing band in the tristate and are easily capable of drawing 1,000 on any night of the week.

"A band like that comes around once every 20 years," says Tarkanish. "They just work."

The rock 'n' roll geeks have been thrilling crowds with their outrageous antics and strong cover sets since the mid-'80s. The band headlined a show last Summer at the Garden State Arts Center.

It was the first time a regional act had topped a bill at the internationally-known venue.

Every year, S.T.A.R.S. produces some 1,600 shows, a quarter of which are held at colleges and universities. The company works as a middle agent with national promoters in placing top bands and comedians, like Gilbert Gottfried, at colleges throughout the region. S.T.A.R.S. produces shows for schools such as Seton Hall, Rutgers, New York University, and William Paterson College. Many of the bands S.T.A.R.S. books play either all or partial cover sets.

"People want to go out and hear their favorite music that they can identify with," says Tarkanish. "They hate it when a cover band throws in an original. That's like going to a sports bar and getting into a basketball game and all of a sudden cricket comes on the TV."

Although you appreciate it, you don't know what the hell they're doing. So when you get back to basketball, you understand the game, you've seen it before. There are the other people that want to go out and try new things and hear original music. But they all go out to have a blow out...drink a couple beers relax and enjoy themselves."

In a recession-plagued 1991, a year that's seen former arena giants cancel tours due to poor ticket sales or play to half-empty venues, S.T.A.R.S. is riding high.

"It's great for us," says Tarkanish. "It's the worst year ever in the concert business and all the national acts are coming into the colleges and clubs because business is so bad. We're talking your White Lions, your Fishbones, they're all coming into the clubs so we're killing."

Still, Tarkanish admits, there are no guarantees in the music business. "It's legalized gambling, the music business," he says. "It's a gamble all the way." When looking for new acts, Tarkanish pursues acts with a unique flair and enough talent to eventually land a record contract. He will work with part-time club bands, such as Bums In The Park, only if they're exceptionally good.

He says anxious, new bands often run into trouble when they try to book themselves into clubs because they don't understand the rules of the game.

"The worst person you can negotiate for is yourself," says Tarkanish, "because you take yourself too seriously."

He says musicians may deceive club owners by overestimating their popularity while club owners may look to screw an inexperienced band out of their take. S.T.A.R.S. places every one of its bookings in writing with bands getting at least 85 percent of money collected at the door. The standard S.T.A.R.S. engagement contract covers everything, from equipment, to dressing rooms, to advertising budgets.

"When musicians complain, they're nagging," says Tarkanish. "When we complain, we're doing our job."

Tarkanish began his career as a professional musician in the late '60s, playing drums for bands such as Rhinoceros and Spiral Staircase. He studied at the Manhattan School of Music before heading off to Las Vegas. There he worked for three years as the house percussionist at the MGM Grand Hotel, where he performed with such legendary talents as Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr. In the '70s, Tarkanish worked as a studio drummer for Casablanca Records and played on numerous Village People tracks.

In 1981, he was forced to give up the drums because of a severe case of tinitis (a ringing in the ears) brought on by overexposure to loud music.

"The biggest problem you have with (tinitis) is learning to deal with the ringing, which doesn't go away," says Tarkanish. "If I scream at the top of my lungs, I can't match the volume in my head."

It was then that Tarkanish opened a recording and rehearsal studio. He also began his work as a booking agent, promoter and club manager.

"The reason I became an agent is because I hate agents in general," says Tarkanish. "It wasn't until I became an agent that I realized that there are a few good guys out there...only a few."

"I found the business to be so damn challenging," says Tarkanish. "I found it to be like my next drum solo. They say if you find something you like to do, you'll never have to work another day in your life. I love this business."