Frank Barsalona

By Dave Marsh and Jon Landau

hen Frank Barsalona began his career as an agent (he'd had a brief career as a yodeler as a teen), rock & roll was, to use his expression, "lower than the rodeo," the abso-

lute bottom rung of showbiz. Because of the contempt in which rock and R&B were held, young artists were hoodwinked with promises of big-time movie, television, or nightclub careers, weaned from the music that had made them famous, and then discarded.

Frank, who represented the Beatles among others at the old GAC agency, began Premier Talent with a small group of artists – Mitch Ryder, the Who, and Herman's Hermits – and a simple premise: He respected the music and the artists who made it. He wouldn't try to create performers suitable for showbiz. (Premier Talent not only never represented its artists for film work; it never opened a Hollywood office.) Instead, Frank was determined to create a version of show business suitable for such performers.

He first labored to stabilize the fly-by-night concertpromoting business itself, identifying the venues and agents where the transformation of rock from entertainment underbelly to an unparalleled world of its own could take place. The result became a truly professional environment in which the music prospered both financially and creatively.

Frank's vision became real for several reasons. The most important was that rock music was coming into its own. Among Frank's early clients were bands like

the Who and the Yardbirds, who played major roles in redefining the music. For bands like these, a fifteen-minute spot in a package show wasn't enough. At the same time, the rock-ballroom circuit was developing, and with it a new breed of promoter closely associated with Premier, such as Bill Graham in San Francisco,

Don Law in Boston, Larry Magid in Philadel-

phia, Aaron Russo in Chicago, Barry Fey in
Denver, Alex Cooley in Atlanta, and
Steve Wolf and Jim Rismiller in Los
Angeles, to name a few. With Frank's
endless support and encouragement,
these and other excellent promoters
created new environments, venues, and
working conditions for rock artists,
which allowed them to play at their best and

Frank Barsalona uniquely understood how to bring together these performers and promoters, as well as key figures from the record companies, and knit them into a community. There was nothing Frank enjoyed more than sitting after a show at the old Boston Tea Party or the Fillmore East with the artist, manager, promoter, record-company folks, and assorted others, talking about the future. Through it all, he pioneered even more beneficial arrangements for the artists he represented and brought his sense of fairness and

be treated with the respect they deserved.

ethics to a world that needed them.

Those who drew closer to Premier benefited in other ways. It was a remarkably nurturing environment, partly because Frank himself played such an avuncular mentoring role with artists like Pete Townshend of the Who and Peter Wolf of the J. Geils Band, as well as countless managers, record execs,

▶ The founder of Premier Talent, Staten Island native Frank Barsalona, taking a break from his very busy schedule, June 1978



and even a few fortunate journalists.

It is typical of Frank that several key figures at Premier were women, even at a time when female music executives were rarer than they are now. Most notably, there has always been the groundbreaking Barbara Skydel, executive vice president and Frank's partner at Premier, an especially adept agent and

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talent finder who was as ever-practical as Frank often was not; Jane Geraghty, long one of Premier's best agents; and Frank's wife, June Barsalona (who, as June Harris, had herself been an important figure in Beatles-era rock journalism).

In the end, Premier's musical world was best defined by the extraordinary group of artists that it worked with at one time or another, often for the length of their careers: the Who; Jeff Beck; Ten Years After; Humble Pie; Jethro Tull; Joe Cocker; Led Zeppelin; the Eagles; Earth, Wind & Fire; Journey; the Clash; MC5; the Stooges; the Ramones; Talking Heads; Eurythmics; Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band; the Pretenders; U2; Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers; and Bon Jovi, to name just a few.

Frank is a very private person who has never accepted many awards or had his story told very often. The accomplishments he made with Premier are easy to take for granted—in fact, Frank probably takes them for granted—unless you happened to watch them happen. In retrospect, that one person played a key role in developing so many aspects of the live-rock business is even more amazing because his name is unknown outside the concert industry. Maybe that's another reason it worked out so well: Frank always knew where the spotlight belonged.

Barsalona with Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson (center) and Terry Ellis, 1977



Barsalona having a chat with the Who's drummer, Keith Moon



■ Barsalona (third from right) surrounded by some of his earliest clients, Peter Noone (in striped pants) and Herman's Hermits, and joined by a few pals, circa 1965.
■ Barsalona with a selection of the gold records given to him by numerous grateful artists.



