Hearing a snatch of an old song can take you back a few decades to the precious years of your youth. Three Wilkes alumni of the mid-1960s can go one better: They still play the songs—together, as the Starfires.

Robert Gardner and Eddie Day Pashinski, both ’67, and Johnny B. Hall ’65 attended Wilkes College during the rock ’n’ roll era. With the TV classic American Bandstand inspiring thousands of teenagers across the country, dance bands were all the rage. Gardner, Pashinski and Hall joined four friends to create a band that still is part of northeast Pennsylvania memories.

The Starfires were summertime fixtures at Hanson’s Amusement Park at Harvey’s Lake, drawing several hundred fans every weekend. During the off-season they played at the Starfire Ballroom in Wilkes-Barre. Often they’d share the stage with notable artists like Chubby Checker, Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons, the Shangri-Las and others.

The group made several recordings, and their song “You’ve Done Me Wrong” scored in the Top 10 on local record charts.

Drummer Richard “R. Jay” Gumbravich, along with bass player Roger “Griff” Griffith, is credited with founding the group. Other regulars included Charles McCuen, the consummate “tough guy” vocalist with lots of stage presence, and Steve Aquilina, the newest band member, on keyboards.

After graduating, the friends went their separate ways.
Pashinski remained the most involved in music, playing in bands and teaching music for 38 years at Greater Nanticoke Area School District.

“I was offered a job to go on the road with Gary U.S. Bonds, but my father offered a ‘second opinion,’” recalls saxophone player Gardner, who is now assistant professor of education at Wilkes University. He earned post-graduate degrees in education and was a teacher and administrator at Northwest Area School District in Luzerne County for 36 years.

Hall, who graduated with a liberal arts degree, worked for 34 years as a caseworker and program advocate for the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. He continued his interest in music, sometimes playing along with YouTube.

“I think we all missed performing—and we all missed playing together,” says Hall, a resident of Hummelstown, Pa.

In 2002, serendipity would help to reunite the musicians.

During a rainy summer afternoon, Starfires’ co-founder Griffith—by then an ordained Presbyterian minister—was driving near Harvey’s Lake and was overwhelmed by nostalgia. He turned toward the now-defunct Hanson’s Amusement Park to take a look at the old dance hall.

Griffith was approached by two strangers—reporters researching a story about defunct amusement parks. They asked Griffith if he knew anything about Hanson’s Park.

He smiled, saying, “I know what it used to be in its heyday!”

After they interviewed him, he contacted the band members he knew were still in the area to ask if they’d like to play again. Three of them wound up appearing later that summer at a benefit performance for the fire company at Harvey’s Lake.

It was, in ‘60s terminology, “a blast!” With the goal of reuniting all the Starfires, the Wilkes-Barre area musicians reached out to the others—except Hall, whom they couldn’t locate.

In yet another remarkable coincidence—he calls it his mother’s “last gift” to him—Hall traveled back to the Wyoming Valley for his mother’s memorial service. He mentioned to the presiding minister that he’d grown up in the area and played in a rock group.

The minister, a friend and colleague of Griffith, asked Hall the name of the group. When Hall answered “the Starfires,” the minister informed him that their mutual friend wanted to reunite the group.

Since then, the Starfires have been getting together several times a year to rehearse and perform.

“We’re all different now. We’ve had interesting careers in life, but there’s still a love for the era that was our era. We enjoy performing essentially the same music we did before,” Gardner says.

“Before, when we were in our early 20s, we thought we were hot stuff,” Hall says. “It was about being cool and getting the girl. Now it’s about the music. We’re even more focused on the songs now.”

Pashinski, now a Pennsylvania representative for the Wilkes-Barre area’s 121st District, reflects on the audience regulars who came to see the Starfires during their heyday. “That was the thing to do back then,” he says.

People today still love that genre of music—and some of them are now bringing the next generation to see the Starfires.

Pashinski says, “To be able to come back and relive those days is really special.”

More on the Web: More information and music clips can be found at www.starfiresforever.com.

Upcoming gigs for the Starfires include the Potentate’s Ball at the Irem Temple Country Club, Dallas, Pa. on July 24, a benefit for Harvey’s Lake Fire Co. at the Irem Temple Country Club in Dallas on July 31 , and a Generation to Generation Dance at the Genetti Ballroom in Wilkes-Barre on Sept. 26.

Alumni can catch up with the band at Wilkes Homecoming on Friday, Oct. 1, 2010.