

Tommy
LiPuma
35th
Anniversary

The Billboard Interview

TOMMY LiPUMA

A “Thinking Cat Who Cares About Music First” Marks 35 Years In The Business He Loves. And The Feeling Is Mutual.

BY MICHAEL BOURNE

Naturally, there's gold on the walls. Also platinum. Records. Triumphs. The musical life of Tommy LiPuma. He's one of those names in album credits. He's one of the best of those names. “Produced by Tommy LiPuma” is a hallmark—like “Sterling” silver. And, really, even when a record he's produced *doesn't* sell a million, it's nonetheless golden.

Miles Davis. George Benson. Al Jarreau. Barbra Streisand. Bill Evans. Dave Sanborn. Dave Mason. Dan Hicks. Michael Franks. Randy Crawford. Anita Baker. Who can remember the Sandpipers? Who can forget “Guantanamera”? Or the “Unforgettable” sensation of Natalie Cole? They (and many, many, many more) all worked with Tommy—except that he would say that he worked with *them*.

“Bottom line,” says Tommy, “the *artists* have to be happy.”

They've been especially happy to earn more than 30 Grammy nominations and sell more than 45 million records when working with Tommy.

Billboard's tribute to Tommy LiPuma comes as he becomes the new president of GRP Records. According to the chairman of parent MCA Entertainment Group, Al Teller, “Tommy LiPuma is that truly rare individual—a creative force and award-winning producer who is at the same time a highly respected music executive and industry leader.”

Because he's always worked back and forth betwixt jazz and pop, he's a natural to helm GRP's continuing crossover success. Since he's hardcore for creative music beyond what's happening on the charts, he's resurrecting Impulse! and Blue Thumb as active labels.

And, for all that he's now a business executive, he'll still get down and dirty in the studio—where Tommy's heart is.

“I was a saxophone player,” says Tommy of his musical beginnings in Cleveland. “Early influences were Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins,

a million tenor players.” Stan Getz became a favorite. He also loved Bill Evans, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, Art Tatum, Horace Silver, John Coltrane and Miles Davis. “One of the first records that made me start thinking about how things were put together compositionally was ‘Birth Of The Cool.’ I'd never heard anything like it.”

LiPuma's first gig in the record business was working local promotion in 1960 in Cleveland for M.S. Distributors. He soon was working for Liberty Records, first in the Los Angeles promotion department, then in the New York publishing department. He plugged songs and supervised demos for the likes of Randy Newman, Leon Russell and Jackie DeShannon. He produced his first single (“Lipstick Traces”) and his first album (“Comin' Through”) with the O'Jays.

LiPuma became the first staff A&R producer of the new label A&M in 1966. “Guantanamera” by the Sandpipers was his first gold record. Claudine Longet—yes, really—also was a million-seller. Tommy joined friend Bob Krasnow at the new Blue Thumb label in 1970. He signed, among others, Tina Turner and the Pointer Sisters. He produced, among others, Dave Mason and Dan Hicks. Streisand's “The Way We Were” for Columbia in 1973 was a Tommy LiPuma platinum production. He went to Warner Bros. in 1974 and produced for Benson, Jarreau, Franks, Evans and arranger Claus Ogerman—with whom he created the exquisite “Amoroso” album of Joao Gilberto. Tommy's work on Benson's “Breezin'”—with the top-of-the-pop single “This Masquerade”—earned 1976 Grammy Awards for Record of the Year and Album of the Year.

He headed the new Horizon label for A&M in 1978 but, within a year, rejoined Warner Bros. as VP, jazz and progressive music. Jennifer Holliday, Patti Austin, Peabo Bryson, Al Jarreau, Earl Klugh, Dave Sanborn, Bob James, Joe Sample, Aztec Camera, Everything But The Girl and Miles Davis all worked with Tommy. Much gold. Much plat-

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