

Ben Sidran, *The Ballad of Tommy LaPuma*

April 20, 2020

*And hello again friends, and welcome to Madison BookBeat, your listener-sponsored community radio home for Madison authors, Madison topics, Madison book events, and Madison publishers. I'm your host, Stu Levitan, very happy to welcome to today's show a friend of us all, Ben Sidran, to talk about his latest book, *The Ballad of Tommy LaPuma*, coming in early May from Nardus Books, a division of Unlimited Media that's based right here in Madison on the near west side.*

We talked a little bit about the book when Ben was on our inaugural show in January, and now that publication date is almost here, I am very happy to give it the full attention it deserves.

*When Tommy LaPuma was 16 years old, he was still in eighth grade and got an F in music, and his future was ordained. He would be a barber in Cleveland like his Sicilian immigrant father. When Tommy was not quite 40, he won the Grammy Award for producing the record of the year, George Benson's version of *This Masquerade* on his triple platinum album, *Breezin'*. By the time Tommy retired in 2013, he would win four more Grammys for albums he produced by Natalie Cole, Diana Krall, and Sir Paul McCartney. The 150 or so albums he produced would sell close to 80 million copies, with 35 albums going gold or platinum. Several of those albums are still in heavy rotation on my turntable, including works by Dan Hicks, Randy Newman, Dave Mason, and Dr. John. From cutting hair to cutting records as producer and top executive for half a dozen labels. Only in America.*

*One of the musicians who saw Tommy LaPuma up close in the studio, and even closer after hours, was Madison's own Ben Sidran. Although he was never produced by LaPuma, Ben did release three albums in the 70s on the record label Tommy helped co-found, that's *Blue Thumb*, and one on Tommy's own *Horizon* label.*

*It has been said of Ben Sidran that he makes your average renaissance man look like a slacker. Jazz pianist of international renown, lyricist of the rock classic *Space Cowboy*, award-winning national broadcaster, record and video producer, scholar, journalist, author, he is a music and media jack of all trades and master of them all. His previous books include:*

- *There Was a Fire, Jews, Music, and the American Dream (2012)*
- *A Life in the Music (2003)*
- *Jazz Talk, an illustrated oral history (1992), a collection of 50 directed conversations with such jazz luminaries as Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, and so on.*
- *Black Talk, how the music of Black America created a radical alternative to the values of Western cultural tradition (1971).*

And if you think that subtitle has a slightly academic tone, you are right. Before it was a book, it was Ben's doctoral thesis for his PhD in American Studies from the University of Sussex in England. That's right. He really is Dr. Jazz.

And in addition to producing albums by Diana Ross, Mose Allison, and of course his own son Leo, Ben has released more than 30 albums under his own name. The most recent, a three CD collection of live performances from 1975 to 2015 called Ben There, Done That. Among the songs included therein, Little Sherry, originally from the album Nick's Bump, which you heard at the top of the program because I've been using it as a theme song on my various shows for several years.

It is always a pleasure to visit with my friend Ben Sidran, and I am delighted to welcome him to Madison BookBeat so you out there in radio land can share the experience.

Ben, thanks for being with us.

Oh, Stuart, thank you again for a buildup which makes me want to go back to the woodshed and start practicing.

Well, now you've got a new book out. You can relax in that and enjoy the virtual book tour. The virtual fruits.

So Tommy LaPuma, legendary record producer. What exactly does a record producer do?

Well, that's a very good question. And the short answer is everything that needs to be done to take an idea for an album from conception to the market. And that includes budgeting and it includes casting the characters who are going to record and it includes the songs, the material, holding the artist's hand sometimes, any number of things.

For example, when I produced the Diana Ross record, I spent maybe a week or two before the actual recording, it was a live recording, going through the material with the musicians, how it was going, just technically, not where the microphones were going to be set up, but how large the orchestra was, all the technical stuff. And then when the recording was done, I went to a different city and mixed the record, which was combining the various tracks. So each project has an in and an out. And your job as a producer is to go through that on time, on budget, and hopefully with some financial success.

And why was Tommy LaPuma so good at it?

You know, that's a very interesting question, because when you watched him work, when you were in the studio just watching him, it really looked like he wasn't doing much. You know, he was ordering a nice lunch for the musicians, and he was just chatting with them in between takes and commenting. But it turns out that what his skill was was very much a people skill. He found ways to make people feel very comfortable in the midst of the tension of making a record, because every musician, when that red recording light goes on, tends to clench inside. And so the first thing that Tommy did was provide some comfort and some

sense that he'd been there before, he'd done that, he'd been successful. And so it was, in some ways, number one, his presence in the room. That's one of the reasons he was successful. But number two was he was absolutely dedicated. He was fastidious about picking the songs, casting the musicians, the tempo. He worked very hard on the correct tempo. Tommy was a throwback to a time when music meant everything personally, not just financially. And so he worked from the point of view of the artist, the songs, and the listeners, and that connection, as opposed to the bottom line, which came along with it.

Did he have a distinctive sound? Can you tell a Tommy LaPuma album the way you could tell a Phil Spector Wall of Sound production?

Yeah, absolutely, for different reasons. I mean, Tommy, early on, developed a style of orchestration with a jazz premise, a jazz rhythm section. And by jazz rhythm section, I mean, generally speaking, it was a drummer, a bass player, a keyboard player, a guitar player, something like that. And the vocalist, who was always singing live when it was recorded, as opposed to overdubbed later on, which is the way most people started to do it by the 70s. Tommy maintained the old school thing of we're going into a room together and we're going to make something that feels great. And then he would almost invariably orchestrate it. And he had a stable of arrangers that he liked. There was Klaus Ogerman. There was Johnny Mandel. There was an old pal of his named Nick DiCaro. These were gorgeous string writers.

And so a Tommy LaPuma album feels great. The tempos are great. The musicians are relaxed. They're invariably the finest players of the day. And they're couched in this beautiful harmonic bed, in a way, to make it possible to make the record successful. I mean, he went that extra step. But you can tell when you listen to a Diana Krall record or a George Benson record or so many of the other artists that he produced that they came from a particular aesthetic.

It seems he did have one unique mannerism or trick in his quiver that he would sit in the room, not behind the glass partition, and have a more immediate contact with the musicians.

Well, and I think that this was a key to understanding who he was, and also how his music came out feeling so relaxed. First of all, who he was: he's somebody at age 10, had an accident in a sandlot baseball game where he developed a bad infection in his bones, in his hips, and was subsequently in a hospital for two years. And during that period, he was in an isolation situation where his parents had to visit him on the other side of a glass wall. And my speculation is, later on when he became a producer, and traditionally there's a glass wall that separates the engineer and the producer from the musicians in the recording room, mostly for sound discretion, he couldn't stand to be separated from this thing that he loved so much. It went back to a fundamental part of who he was as a musician, and he was a good musician, and who he was as a person. So this became a particular quirk in his production style that I think was a significant factor in the music he made.

As that very smart cat Billy Wordsworth once said, the child is father to the man. Yeah, yeah. And especially in Tommy's case, because although he was raised in a very typical first generation Sicilian-American household, where there was some music around, and he loved the popular music of the day, he was really taken with it, and he had a natural proclivity to understand music. Still, it was those two years where he was isolated at home or in a hospital with a portable radio as his best friend that determined exactly who he would become and the music that he would be destined to make.

So what is he listening to while he's lying there, either in his bed or in the day room back in his house in Cleveland on that little transistor radio? What is it that captures him and propels him into a life in the music?

It was black music. It was rhythm and blues. It was:

- Big Maybel.
- Louis Jordan.
- Nat King Cole.
- Doo-wop groups.

He had discovered the black radio station in Cleveland where he grew up, and he had discovered that late at night a DJ named Alan Freed, who later became kind of a rock and roll impresario, and who, in fact, came up with the name or the term rock and roll for this music, at the time back in Cleveland, he was playing more hardcore rhythm and blues. And so Tommy discovered this radio station as a kid and became a dedicated listener through his entire teen years.

So we explained why Tommy was still in eighth grade when he was 16 because he got left behind a couple years due to the injury, but explain how it was that he failed music, which is really very difficult to do.

He failed music because he was a professional musician, which is classic, which is classic. Most of the people in music programs back then, well, not most of them, many of them would probably be there for an easy A or because they were disciplinary problems, and so you put them in a music program and just keep them out of the way of the real students. Tommy was there because he loved music, and by then he was playing saxophone, and he was playing pretty well. He was playing so well, in fact, that he was actually starting to get gigs when he was 15, 16 years old. He was out in the community working, and he was also kind of the featured soloist for the high school band. And they had concerts, and the music teacher booked a concert on a weekend when Tommy had a gig. And, of course, Tommy had to play the gig. He was a professional, and the music teacher was so irate that his student went against his wishes that he flunked him. And he flunked him because he was too good as a musician. He was a professional, which is classic. I mean, that kind of logic

kind of underpins the entire music business in the end. You know, everything comes from a very jaded point of view, and Tommy learned early on how to surf those waves.

And so when he got into the business and all the craziness, he was able to make something of it. Experience of failing music as a teenager must have given him a great deal of satisfaction to endow the Tommy Lipuma Creative Arts Center after he retired back in Cleveland.

Yeah, I was there with him at the center at one point. And to see somebody who failed music to have an art center with his name on it was the ultimate reward. You know, he also received an honorary doctorate from the college there. And, you know, he had an education that money couldn't buy and it was recognized. And so often it's not recognized. It was really a wonderful payoff for Tom.

The fact that he was a working teenage musician and your son Leo was a working teenage musician must have given them some affinity for each other

. They became very good friends toward the end of Tommy's life. Tommy passed away in 2017. And their friendship, well, I mean, Leo grew up from infancy knowing Tommy. I mean, I started spending a lot of time hanging out with Tommy in 1972. Leo was born in 1976. So his whole life, Tommy was a part of it and a feature in it. But they really bonded.

I don't know the exact year. It probably was like 2014 or 15 when Tommy needed to go to Cuba to do some research on possibly not just recording Cuban musicians but having a huge event with American musicians and Cuban musicians, a live event that ultimately was pulled off by the Rolling Stones. And there's a video of it on YouTube. You can see how hungry the Cuban people were for rhythm and blues and rock and roll.

Before the Stones concert, Tommy went there and he spoke no Spanish. And because Leo is fluent in Spanish, Tommy decided to take him along to Cuba to work with him. And that started a relationship between Leo and Tommy that went on for a few years to the point where all through Tommy's career, he always had one or two key people who worked with him in the studio as his assistant, that sort of thing. And Leo became, at the end of Tommy's life, that person for him. And you can find on YouTube a seven or eight-minute tribute that Leo produced for Tommy.

Of Tommy?

Yes.

How important to Tommy's success as a producer was the fact that he started as a working musician?

Well, it was very important. And it was also not unusual back in the early 60s. The people attracted to the music business came from the music world and related worlds. Gangsters, people who had a business that injected plastics into forms. They started out making toilet

seats. They wound up pressing albums. It could be any number of ways into the record business.

Today, of course, there is no record business. The way into the music business is through Internet technology. But back then, it was guys driving around with, like, Jerry Wexler and, you know, I'm at it again with vinyl in the trunk of their car, slipping DJs 50 bucks to play it. So the fact that he was a musician, that he understood music from the inside out, made him very comfortable starting out in the business as a promotion man and then as a publishing man. All these aspects were part of the world he knew. I mean, he was home.

But before all that, his real entree into record business is packing records for shipment to record stores. Now, just a few years later, you were one of those guys unpacking those shipments when you worked at Discount Records on State Street. Did you and Tommy ever talk about that odd synchronicity in your careers?

We absolutely did. We both got into the music business on the ground floor. He put the records in a box and shipped them out, and I opened the box and took them out and sold them. And it taught you everything you needed to know. It taught you about who the buyers were, what music was selling, and then you'd kind of speculate on why. And pretty soon it led you to the idea that an artist has a voice and a sound, and I would sell records at discount by, you know, somebody walking in the store, and my love for Miles Davis or Coltrane or Horace Silver would immediately reach out to these people, and they would see that there was something here that wasn't just trivial, and I think that's exactly what Tommy saw when he was packing the boxes.

So then he becomes a promotions man first in L.A., then New York. What exactly does that job entail, and how did Tommy avoid getting crosswise either with the gangsters of the era or the law?

Well, his run-ins with the law happened earlier, before he left Cleveland, where he was playing in a deeply Sicilian band, and in Cleveland in the 40s, you know, there was a huge carryover from bootlegging. The bootlegging didn't end, you know, in the 30s. It continued on, and Tommy was close to the made men, and so he had a few brushes with the law. Fortunately, nothing that turned up on his permanent record. Well, first of all, when he's a musician, the gangsters owned almost every place he played. So he learned early on that the gangsters were good for business, traditionally. And that's true in the music business across the board. You know, Al Capone was a sponsor of Louis Armstrong. That's just a fact.

So there's that. There's the other aspect that all the jukeboxes where fortunes were made for record companies were owned by the gangs, the mafia. And so the business was very much propped up by illegal activities. And to this day is, although in a much more subtle and diffuse way.

So the direct answer is that Tommy did not avoid it, but he did not become of it. Because one didn't need to become of it in order to live the life back then.

So he goes back to Los Angeles, gets a job in publishing, and then Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss hire him as the first staff producer at their brand new A&M Records. How did they know he could do that job?

Well, because they had just started out. A&M Records, which wound up a billion dollar company, I'm sure, started out with four employees. Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss, the A and M in A&M Records. Herb made a record called Tijuana Brass. He couldn't find a label to put it out. He started his own label. He put it out. It sold platinum and boom, they were in the record business.

And so they realized that Herb Alpert couldn't produce all the product for A&M. They needed somebody there to do it. And Tommy before that had been a promotion man and a publisher for Liberty Records. That's what took him to New York originally, where he really had, there's some wonderful stories in the book about his experiences with Alan Freed and the gangsters and the mobs.

So when he came back to LA, he came back on the terms that he could be a record producer. And so he wound up producing a group called the OJs, which eventually had big records, but he had a kind of a minor hit with them. And he had another kind of a minor hit with a LA session guitar player named Tommy Tedesco. So he had a couple of successful records, enough that when you listen to these early records, you can see, oh yeah, he was making records that sounded like commercial records in the early 60s.

You can see why Herb and Jerry went, you know, first of all, they knew Tommy. Jerry Moss and Tommy used to split gas money. They were both promotion men. They would drive to San Diego and split gas money and pitch their records to the local radio stations. They were friends. And the record business back then really, really and truly was a people's business. I mean, you had to get yourself a rabbi, somebody who looked after you, somebody whose congregation you were part of. It was a people business in the old fashioned sense where it was almost an apprenticeship kind of business. So Tommy's becoming their first step A&R person was really just a natural.

One of the things I'm struck in his career is how many opportunities he gets because somebody likes him and gives him a chance. And he does well at that and he gets another chance. And it all comes back to those personal relationships and the ability to hang.

Yeah, and Tommy was a master at that. He didn't do it out of any sense of business. He did it because that's exactly who he was. And when you were hanging out with Tommy, he was in part because of the illness he suffered as a child. He was very gregarious. As a kid, he went out of his way to prove that he could do anything anybody else could do, even though one of his legs was two inches shorter than the other. He had a profound limp and he had surgeries throughout his whole life. He was gregarious. He was outgoing. He loved to laugh. He loved jazz comedians like Lenny Bruce and Lord Buckley. He loved the humor of being in the music business because the bottom line is, especially from a jazz point of view, it is

such a difficult business. I mean, 1% of 1% of the population cares at all about jazz. And so to try to make a living as a jazz saxophone player, as he did initially, you had to be in it for the fun aspect of it. You couldn't be in it for the job security or the benefits because there was none.

So Tommy was sitting in the right place at the right time when the 60s happened, when the youth explosion happened, when LA happened. He was a perfect psychological study for somebody who could thrive in that environment.

Did he have any enemies?

You know, that's interesting. There was one guy that he fought with, a guy named David Foster, who Tommy always thought was an opportunist and took credit for some of Tommy's work. But aside from a little professional jealousy like that, no, he really didn't. People loved Tommy. The businessmen loved Tommy because he was successful. The musicians loved Tommy because he was on their side of the glass. And later on, you know, when he became really successful, everybody wanted to come to Tommy's parties because he had the best wine collection and he had the best music and the best musicians. And there was Joe Sample of the Crusaders running the barbecue grill. I mean, everybody, by and large, loved spending time with Tommy.

So in addition to being a huge producer, he becomes a top executive at:

- *Blue Thumb*
- *Warner Brothers*
- *A&M Horizon*
- *back to Warner Brothers*
- *Elektra*
- *GRP*
- *Verve*

Was he as successful and as fulfilled as an executive as he was as a producer?

No, not at all. As a matter of fact, because he was so successful as a producer and also because he was good at hanging out with businessmen. Businessmen liked him and he respected businessmen. You know, he wasn't critical of the business side like so many musicians are because you get jaded very quickly. When you see that you're just an integer, if you're a musician, you spend your whole life practicing and refining your craft, and it turns out you're just reduced to how many units you managed to move. But Tommy wasn't like that. He respected, I mean, for example, he didn't have a warm relationship with Clive Davis, the famous executive. But he respected Clive's success. And so he treated Clive with

respect, even though he didn't respect Clive's taste particularly. He respected his success. And that was the key to Tommy's success in the business, which eventually got him to be the president and the chairman of the board of Verve at a time when Verve owned the largest jazz catalog, including Impulse, including Prestige, including GRP, including all these labels. Tommy was actually at one point sitting on top of the jazz throne, which if you can imagine this kid just hoping to get a gig playing a saxophone, that had to be a dream come true. And at the same time, he was miserable in the corporate boardroom. He hated it. He just wanted to be in the studio.

So, you know, there's no success like failure and failure is no success at all. A very wise man once said that we're talking with Ben Sidran. His new book is The Ballad of Tommy LiPuma, out in a couple of weeks from our friends at Nardis Books, a division of Unlimited Media. The other day, somebody posted on Twitter, you have the job of the main character in the most recent book you read. So I replied, I'm record producer Tommy LaPuma. And within seconds, literally seconds, someone replied to my reply, so what was Miles Davis like? Which shows, A, how knowledgeable my Twitter friends are about the music business, and B, gives me the prompt to ask you, Miles had a very prickly, had a reputation of being somewhat prickly, but it seems his relationship with Tommy was pretty smooth and lighthearted. Tell me about their personal and professional relationship.

Well, Tommy had some misgivings about working with Miles because of the same stories that everybody in the business has heard. He was prickly. He could be mercurial, to say the least. Tommy came to Miles' career at a time when Miles wanted off of Columbia Records because of Wynton Marsalis. Wynton was winning the Grammys. Wynton was getting all the attention. And truth be told, Wynton is not half the artist that Miles Davis is, and Miles was feeling, as they say, out of joint. So Tommy had a meeting with him in Montreux at the jazz festival, and they arranged to meet up at Tommy's apartment in New York when Miles came back from Europe.

And Miles shows up, and Tommy was an art collector, an avid art collector. He had discovered early American modernism painters like Stuart Davis, Alfred Moore. Tommy stumbled into the art world just by coincidence. He had some money. He was in London. He saw a picture he kind of liked. He bought it. One thing led to another, and he fell down this rabbit hole of collecting paintings. Well, at the time, Miles had become completely taken with art as well and was drawing all the time. Miles always carried a pad and colored pens with him to draw. And so when Miles walked into Tommy's house and he saw these works of art, he immediately recognized that there was some compatibility between the two of them.

But the other thing was, and Miles said to Tommy at one point, it wasn't until he went to Paris in the 50s that he felt that he was no longer the freak in the room because being an African-American in Paris at the time was not something that people stared at in fear. Yes, there was this kind of romanticism of a primitive culture, which was a lie, but it wasn't the

kind of racism that was in America. And Tommy, because of his physical condition, also talked about what it was like being a freak in the room because he said when he would meet a girl in high school, the first thing he would see is the girl would look down at what Tommy referred to as the damaged goods. So I think both Tommy and Miles had this closeness about being an outsider and being somebody who turned to music for sustenance. But then it also turns out, and this is the bottom line, that they both loved to hang out. They both loved food.

The one time I went to Miles' house with Tommy, and this story is not in the book, Miles was living in Malibu, and I went with Tommy to Miles' house, and Tommy knocks on the door, and the door opens, and there's Miles Davis. What can I tell you? It was like the Buddha was there, and he throws his arms around Tommy and gives him a big hug, and how you doing, man? And Tommy says, Miles, this is my friend Ben. And Tommy and Miles inexplicably throws his arms around me, gives me a big hug, which tells radio. Oh, can you still not say that word? There hasn't the president used that word? Moving on. Oh, sorry, sorry. We'll fix it in post. Sorry about that.

But in fact, Miles' relationship with you is he would do the drawing that would become the logo for Nardis Records. Yeah, he was drawing nonstop, and when we did an interview for public radio, he was drawing through the whole thing. And when the conversation ended, he ripped it off and handed me the drawing.

What was Tommy's biggest regret?

1. That he gave up playing saxophone.
2. He really, toward the very end of his life, and I never, you know, I was hanging out with him pretty nonstop for 50 years, and I never saw him take a horn out.
3. I never saw him put a horn in his mouth until the very end of his life. He had it. I was at his house in upstate New York, and I don't know what prompted it, but he took this horn out, and it turned out it was his horn from when he was a kid, and he put the mouthpiece in it, and he still had a pretty good sound. He had a quality to the sound that he got out of the horn, and he said that his biggest regret is he said, yes, there's a lot of satisfaction with being successful, with being successful as a producer, by being involved in the arts and everything. He said, but there's no satisfaction like knowing you can express yourself personally through music, and that was his main regret. He still had the embouchure. Amazing. And he had, yeah, he had the embouchure, and he had practiced. I mean, it must be on some level muscle memory that goes back. He sounded pretty good. He didn't sound like a beginner. You know, he had a quality.

I've still got my tenor down in the basement. Every so often I go down and honk a little bit.

What was Tommy proudest of?

You know, I think he was most proud of the records that came out boosting the careers or making the careers of people that he loves. Diana Krall is one. Little Jimmy Scott is another. Diana Krall sold millions of records. Little Jimmy Scott sold hundreds of records. But in both cases, he was very proud of the work because he loved those people and he was able to bring something to them and help them at a time. Or Dr. John. He loved the stuff he did with Dr. John because he loved Dr. John. And he just loved him as a guy.

Tommy was, to the very end, an extraordinary example of a people person, of somebody whose main thing in life, and the reason he loved hanging out and having dinners, man, having dinner with Tommy was legendary. Everybody who had dinner with him would immediately call up their friends and say, you won't believe the wine. You won't believe the food. You won't believe the hang, the stories.

There was a party after Tommy's 80th birthday, which was kind of a concert that was held in Cleveland. It was held at a restaurant. And Tommy had a huge wine cellar, and he flew out cases of some of the finest wine that exists on the planet. I mean, he was a collector. And there was a moment when Tommy was going from table to table decanting and pouring this wine for all these musicians and all these old friends of his from high school days. It was beautiful, and you could see that's, I would say, when he was happiest, being that guy.

Tell us about the first time you met Tommy LaPuma.

So Blue Thumb Records back in the 70s was a case of the inmates taking over the asylum. I mean, it was nuts. These were a couple of successful guys who started their own label at a time when substance abuse was a big part of the business, and psychedelics were there, and these guys were deep into that, and yet they said, we can be successful living the life we want to live. We don't have to be corporate.

And so I had made my first record for Capitol Records, which was very corporate, and I assumed that's how my life was going to be, when I got a phone call from Tommy's partner, a guy named Bob Krasnow, who said, I'm sitting in the house of a guy, he was sitting in Michael Koscuna's house, who was a DJ at the time. Michael was playing on my record. Krasnow fell in love with my record. He called me at three in the morning. He said, what do I have to do to sign you to my label? I said, quite simply, call me tomorrow morning, and we'll talk it through. He called me the next day. We talked it through, and within a month or two, I had signed to Blue Thumb Records.

I didn't know Tommy. I only knew Krasnow, and I went out to California. He had this quirky office in Beverly Hills where you had to ride up in an outside elevator. It looked like a New Orleans French Quarter elevator. You walked down this hallway, and there was Bob Krasnow in one office. He had a huge mural of Jimi Hendrix on the wall. He had a disco

ball. If you were there, he was sitting in a leather chair with this huge jufro on his head, and you had to sit in a barber's chair, which I think might have been kind of a tip of the hat to Tommy's previous career.

And so I went there to sign my contract, and that day I met his partner, Tommy LaPuma. And Tommy was on his way to a recording session that he was producing for Phil Upchurch, the great guitar player, with Harvey Mason and Joe Sample and Chuck Rainey and all these guys. He said, come on, man, come on down to the studio. And he's just, you know, the hang was on. The hang was on. I went to the studio with him, and within an hour, I was in the studio with Tommy and these guys playing Hammond organ on Phil Upchurch's record. It was amazing. And the entire experience of 50 years with Tommy LaPuma was various facets and aspects of that experience. You were in music business history when you were walking down the street with Tommy. You just didn't know where it was going.

Now, did you have any relationship with Phil Upchurch prior to that?

That's when I met him. So Phil Upchurch trusted Tommy enough to bring in this organ player whom he didn't know to play on his album. Well, on my first record on Capitol Records, I played some Hammond B3 organ, and Tommy heard it. And Tommy knew I could do it. And yeah, Phil absolutely trusted Tommy because Tommy put together that band of those cats. This was before Phil was instrumental in making the George Benson record happen, the breezing record. And Tommy had used him on a Gabor Zabo record. So, I mean, Phil and Tommy had gone through the initial stages of the romance dance of being in a recording studio, which is what it is.

Why did Tommy never produce you?

This is interesting because I wanted to produce myself. You know, I produced everything I ever did for better and for worse, really. I produced myself. Every book I wrote without an editor. I mean, it was copy edited after the fact, but nobody told me, hey, why don't you do this or that? Every record I made, every record I produced, everything was me for better and for worse, just flying out on the edge of the wing.

And at one point when I signed to Arista after Blue Thumb crashed and burned, I was making my first Arista record. And Tommy was in between labels. It was after Blue Thumb. It was after Warner's. I don't know exactly what it was, but he flew out to Chicago where I was recording. And I had invited him out. I said, Tommy, come on, sit in the studio. I was kind of inviting him to produce it. And I might have even said to him, man, why don't you produce this with me? He came out there. He listened to one day of sessions. He said, you got this. You don't need me in this room. The only other time he suggested producing me, and he didn't, I suggested it to him. Suggested producing me. And he didn't. I suggested it to him. It was just at the end of his life, like 2016. I was sitting in his house playing his piano

waiting for him to get ready for us to go out to dinner. And he came out and he said, man, you should make an instrumental record, man. You'd be surprised. It'll do good. I said, okay, if you produce it. Well, he didn't live long enough for that to happen.

There are two pictures of you and Tommy in the book, but you are not in the book. Explain how the book came about and why you wrote it the way you did.

Well, I kept myself out of it on purpose, obviously, because I didn't want even the faintest hint that I was using Tommy's story to further my career. That's the main reason. Because I have a lot of great Tommy stories that I didn't put in there because they would have to have been about me and I didn't want to do that.

I started about five years ago before Tommy passed away saying to him, man, your stories are incredible. You have to write a book. And Tommy, you know, was fumbling around. I said, okay. Every time I hang out with you, I'm bringing a tape recorder. I'm going to record our conversation. So I started doing that. And I wound up with a huge pile of tapes. Some of them you couldn't even hear because we're in a restaurant, we're in the middle of a concert, who knows. But I taped all of my hangs with Tommy and he knew it. And then I said to him, I'm going to write this in your voice. I'm going to ghost it for you, Tommy.

Tommy has a friend who he introduced me to. I became friends with a guy named David Ritz, who was a very famous ghostwriter of music business books, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin. And I had no luck at all being Tommy's ghostwriter. And I called David up. I said, you know, how do I do this? He said, maybe you don't do it. It's not for everybody. It's a particular thing where you have to insinuate yourself into the head of a person and surrender a lot of your personal relationships with them to make this thing work and blah, blah, blah. Well, the long and the short of it has turned out to be the case. I couldn't write it in Tommy's voice.

The first thing I did is I transcribed our conversations and I put together a manuscript of Tommy talking. And I gave it to Tommy and he came back. He said, I hate it. I don't sound like that. I said, that's exactly how you sound, man. I transcribed you. He said, I don't like what you did. First thing. And, you know, so ironic because the first thing that happens when a singer goes in to make their first record, they hear themselves through earphones as opposed to out in a room. The first thing they say is, I don't sound like that. And that's exactly how they sound. So I said, Tommy, you know this thing happens. He said, I don't care.

So one thing led to another and I went to him and this was literally a month before he died. I said, Tommy, I can't do it. I want to write your story. I want to write my version of your story. He said, God bless you. Go do it. That's fine. And that's how the book came out to be what it was.

One of the interesting stylistic elements is you keep those quotations in the present tense. You use the verb, Tommy recalls instead of Tommy recalled, even though the book has come out after he passed. What was the editorial debate about what tense to use in that context?

I started writing while Tommy was still alive and I liked it and it kind of kept him alive for me. You know, to me, quite honestly, oh, it's Tommy's biography only in passing. It's not an authorized biography at all. It literally is kind of a love song to Tommy. That's why I called it *The Ballad of Tommy LaPuma*. It's a love song that I wrote for him because I loved the guy. The guy was amazing and he really changed my life, man. He gave me some of the greatest opportunities, some of the greatest times, some of the greatest hangs. And he gave me the courage, really, on several occasions to step up and be who I could be. I mean, this was me trying to light a *yahrzeit* candle for the guy.

What was the most fun you ever had with him?

Oh, God, that would be so difficult to pinpoint. Certainly, it would be at his house listening to records and hanging out. Certainly, it would be in a recording studio with Steve Gadd and all these great guys just having lunch. Certainly, it would be at a restaurant with a bunch of businessmen and seeing the glint in Tommy's eye and feeling a kind of like we were compatriots. Going for rides, we used to take long drives in his car listening to CDs and telling stories. It was the hang.

What are some of the important lessons you learned from him?

That if you try to be anybody else, you're going to be second best because they're already that person. You've got to be yourself. You've got to believe in yourself and you've got to take your time and don't feel under the pressure of a clock ticking. Don't believe in a clock. Do your work at the pace you can trust your work and trust that it's the best work you can do. He changed the way I produce records. After I saw Tommy work, I started becoming a record producer because I knew I could do it.

We don't know how long this crisis is going to last and whether there's going to be a record industry afterwards, but could somebody have a career like his either as a producer or an executive in the modern music business?

No, no, absolutely not. That business is over. That business will never come back. Even before the pandemic, CD sales had evaporated into nothing and all the business was based on streaming. And the thing with the business based on streaming is it's based on market share because that's how the companies make money. Sony has a 30% market share. Spotify gives Sony 30% of the revenues. So there's no CD manufacturer anymore. Companies don't care about hits. They care about market share. So there won't be a business like that.

And second of all, with the pandemic, for the first time in history, musicians aren't getting it together in a room to play. They're doing it virtually using various platforms, the equivalent

of Zoom or whatever. So music is being made long distance and just a whole infrastructure, not just of the music business, but of the music itself is gone now. And so, no, there will not be another Tommy Lipuma. There will not be another business like that.

So the musical future belongs to people like your son Leo, who can play all the instruments and do the engineering by themselves.

That's right. That's right. That's the future. And also by great musicians. I mean, there's a group called Vulfpeck that I really love, V-U-L-F-P-E-C-K, which is like Yiddish for wolf pack. And these guys are brilliant and they do everything online and streaming. They're in the room together playing, but they're very 21st century. It's not that it's not going to happen. It's that the only way it's going to happen is through a virtual medium. There's not going to be a guy driving to a record store with albums in the trunk of his car or slipping a DJ 50 bucks. That's over.

Well, if you want to know the way it used to be and some of the great stories of musicians of that time, the Ballad of Tommy Lipuma by our friend Ben Sidran. And it will soon be out from our good friends at Nardis Books. Ben, thank you again so much for taking the time to talk with us. We are about out of time. Before we go, some book events to tell you about. As you just heard about on Patti Paltanko's installment of A Public Affair, two online events from our friends at the Wisconsin Book Festival to tell you about:

- 1. Tonight, Kate Elizabeth Russell will present her novel about trauma and memory, My Dark Vanessa.*
- 2. On Wednesday, Tequila Benton and Jen Rubin will host Inside Stories, Madison Storytellers with Narratives of Life in the Time of COVID-19.*

Both those events online from 7 to 9. You can find out more at wisconsinbookfestival.org or the festival's page on the Book of Faces. Also on Wednesday, the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. Our friends at the Wisconsin Historical Society Press will present Sheila Cohen Turman, Gaylord Nelson, Champion of the Earth. That's a biography for young readers. She will read an excerpt about the founding of Earth Day. You can find that on the WHS Press Facebook page as well.

So on behalf of engineer Liz Stottleman, public and news affair director Chali Pittman, and all of us here at Madison BookBeat, I'm Stu Levitan. Thank you for joining us. Now, please, stay tuned for Alex Wilding White and All Around Jazz. You're listening to WORT 89.9 FM Madison, listener-sponsored community radio. radio.

WORT is committed to bringing you continual programming during the coronavirus crisis, and we thank the community for your continued support and listenership.

The majority of our on-air content is assembled and presented by our mighty volunteers, many of whom are exercising caution and social distancing during this time, which means that what you hear on the air might be pre-recorded either by those hosts or others. Please bear with us as there might be varying degrees of sound quality and fidelity between shows.

If you call WORT, you may not reach a live person, but there are voicemail and call-forwarding options for urgent information. Please stay tuned to WORT 89.9