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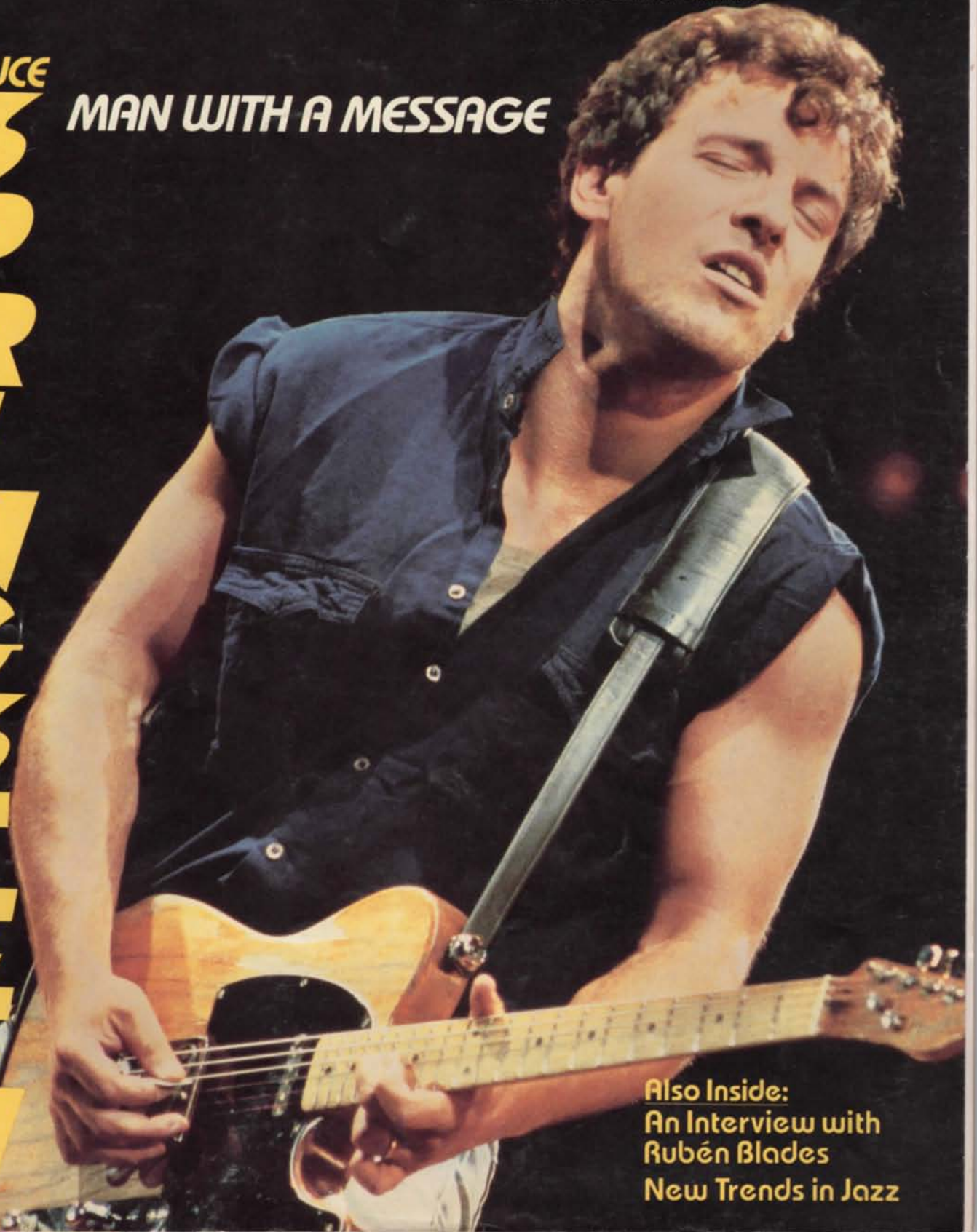
in ACTION

SPRING 1986 / A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF COMPOSERS, AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS

BRUCE

MAN WITH A MESSAGE

SPRINGSTEEN



Also Inside:
An Interview with
Rubén Blades
New Trends in Jazz

ASCAP

in ACTION

SPRING 1986

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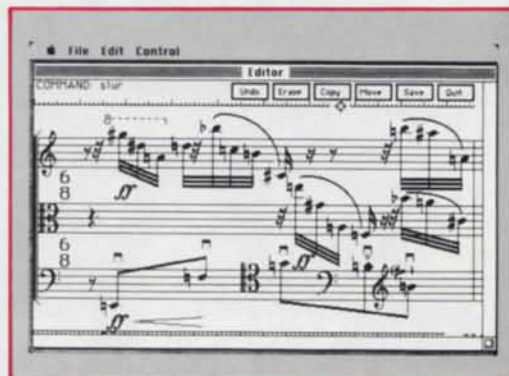
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IT'S RUBEN'S TIME!

By Pete Hamill

SUDDENLY IT'S RUBEN'S TIME. At 35, after 17 years of writing, performing, recording, and too many years of cultural isolation on the so-called cuchifrito circuit, Rubén Blades has broken big. His records are reviewed and praised in the mainstream media; he has collected raves from *Time* and the *New York Times* and a cover story (by your

reporter) in *New York* magazine. Morley Safer of *60 Minutes* has been following him around with a crew. His film, *Crossover Dreams*, received superb reviews and did good business in its two-month run in New York City. His second album, for Asylum-Elektra, *Escenas*, is in the stores and features a duet in Spanish with Linda Ronstadt. He's a featured performer on the *Sun City* (Artists United Against Apartheid) album and

video. Scripts pile up in his Manhattan apartment as producers offer him deals, contracts, the world. The three major talent agencies are courting him with great energy. And now, on the streets of New York or when he makes an entrance into a restaurant, he turns heads. It's Rubén's time.

Blades was trained as a lawyer in Panama and graduated last year with an M.A. in international law from Harvard. There is

much talk (which he doesn't discourage) that he will someday go back and run for president of Panama. Certainly, he devotes a lot of passion and conversation to social issues, but he is equally passionate about literature—he is close with Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez and is preparing an album based on short stories by the great Colombian writer. On his shelves the books range from Hemingway and

Camus to a special section dedicated to the Marx Brothers. But at the heart of his passion is the music that he makes with style, ingenuity, and intelligence. One recent afternoon, we talked about his songs at New York City's Lone Star Cafe.

Q: What are the sources of the songs you write?

RB: Most of them come from experience. Either something that I've gone through personally, something I've seen happen, or even something I've read about and felt deeply. For example, on my album *Buscando America* there's a song

trying to do something about things, in spite of all that, the idea continues. And the idea will continue to live as long as people continue to hope.

And that's the meaning of the bells you keep hearing on the record. The bells still ring.

Q: How did you choose the bells as the symbol of hope?

RB: I remembered that in Panama, whenever something extraordinary was going on in our political life, the bells would ring. The bells would announce a new government, or its fall. The bells were a sign of

So I wanted to outline the horror of it all by inventing the kid. And also, when I presented the shooting, nobody knew to what faction the gunman belongs. I didn't want to be accused of siding with this or that faction, because we have terrorism from both sides and it's reprehensible from both sides.

Q: When you imagine these stories, these characters, do you see them on the street, realistically, or on a stage?

RB: I see them as if the street were a stage.

Q: And then you edit out all the superfluous elements?

RB: Exactly. But I see it all. I see every little thing.

Q: It sounds as if you subscribe to the Hemingway theory, that the dignity of an iceberg is related to the fact that seven eighths of its bulk is below the surface.

RB: I do subscribe to the less-is-more theory. And my characters—the dignity of these people comes from their silent awareness. The quiet force of their actions. They don't make a lot of noise. They just move according to a reality that does not have to be proven. They don't have to examine their own motivations; they

AN INTERVIEW WITH RUBEN BLADES

called "Father Antonio and the Altar Boy, Andrés" [translated from the Spanish]. This was inspired by the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero on the steps of the cathedral in San Salvador five years ago. At the time I was so angry, not only because of the way he was murdered, but because his death seemed to be, at least temporarily, a victory for the forces of evil.

Well, I had a notion about it and knew I was going to write something about it. But then, in order not to write a bad biography, I decided to create a character—Padre Antonio—so that people couldn't say: "Oh, yeah, Romero, he was a good man, but he was political." So what I did was draw from life to create a character, and then—as I often do—I presented the character according to the intention of the piece. In the case of "Padre Antonio," the idea was that in spite of the way people murder such men, in spite of the way they try to scare them out of saying the truth, in spite of the risk of

mobilization, and at the same time, a celebration of sorts; they told us we had to do something about the issue before us, and we had to move on; and also the bells would signal the end of an emergency.

Q: How long did it take you to write the song?

RB: "Padre Antonio" took eight, nine months to write. Because what I do is—once I have that notion, that idea—I make a mental sketch of where I want to go. There are certain elements I immediately define.

The main thing was inventing the child, the altar boy called Andrés, who in my song also dies. Again, I wanted to invent a circumstance. In all this random, wanton killing, grown-ups are dying and children are dying. They aren't just killed with a bullet. They are condemned to a life of difficulty; either their parents are going to be killed or they are going to be killed or their immediate families are going to die. They're not going to have school or going to have normal lives.



just are.

Q: Is it one of your tasks to allow these people in your songs—the ordinary citizens of the street—the chance to speak?

RB: Totally. That's exactly it. That's why when I write a song like "Padre Antonio" I leave it alone. I want the whole character to express himself and each self. Without my help. To naturally develop each self. That's why it takes so long to write. Not because I can't sit down and write quickly, but because it's not going to be natural that way. I leave the people, the situation, the idea in my mind, allow it to take life, and then.... I'm using the same process on the album I'm making from the Garcia Marquez stories. Two and a half years ago I began. And it's all here in my head, it's like my brain is pregnant. All of a sudden one day, I'll sit down and that's it! Done. And I say to myself sometimes, How did I think of this? The answer is, I'm not thinking. The character is thinking for me.

Q: How does your music differ from traditional Spanish folk music?

RB: In this sense: I'm giving it an urban approach, not a folkloric approach. I don't speak much about going back to the roots of a country. I'm talking about the city—the cement and dirt and fear, the kind of rules we make here every damn day. Songs from the interior of a country are almost always fantastical, almost mythic. I think what has made me different is that I was a person raised in the street, of the streets, but I also had an education in school. What I learned very quickly in the street was that most of my friends had a very limited vision of what their surroundings were; they could only think in terms of The Corner and

two, three blocks around them. That was it. And one reason was that they didn't have the perspective or hopes that I had, mainly because I had read since I was seven years old and my mind just started looking to the horizon and beyond it. And these guys, from whom I learned many things, were just thinking, The Corner, The Corner, The Corner.

What I did was to bring the song off The Corner, bring that raw power, honesty, guts and address the city as a whole. And the country as a whole. And the world as a whole. I was trying to make these themes comprehensible not only as a reality of the street, but of all of us as people. When we began doing that in salsa music, if you sold 40,000 records worldwide you had a tremendous hit. And then all of a sudden I was selling 250,000 records in one country. There was massive support from everybody: the worker, the guy on the street, the guy that drives a cab, the lawyer, the cop, the judge, the murderer. Young and old, men and women. Everybody.

Q: Was there a precise moment when you said: "Oh, that's what I can do"?

RB: When I first heard Piero. He's an Argentinian singer who has always been politically, socially involved. He had to leave Argentina at one point, go into exile in Spain. Before I heard him, I always had the city in me, these kinds of songs, as a premonition, an undirected realization. But then came Piero. And when I say this in South America, they say, "Piero? But he's a balladeer!" Yes, but this guy wrote a song called "Mi Viejo," which was about his father, and another one called "Juan Boliche," about an old drunken guy who dreams of his youth. And Piero used

FATHER ANTONIO AND THE ALTAR BOY, ANDRÉS

Father Antonio Xejreira arrived from Spain, searching for new promises in this land. He came to the jungle without the hope of becoming a Bishop, (and) in the midst of the heat and the mosquitoes he spoke of Christ.

The priest didn't function at the Vatican, in the midst of paper work and air conditioned dreams; and he left for a town, in the middle of nowhere, to preach every week, for those seeking salvation.

The boy Andrés Eloy Perez is 10 years old.

He studies in an elementary school named "Simón Bolívar."

He still doesn't know his prayers by heart; he likes the river, to play soccer and be absent.

He has been given the post of altar boy at Church in the hopes the position will straighten him out; his family is very proud because they assume that with God connecting one, he connects them all.

Father Antonio and altar boy Andrés's bells ring one, two, three times.

The priest condemns violence.

He knows from experience it is not the solution.

He preaches about love and justice.

Of God he gives the news, vibrant his sermon.

But war found him one Sunday, at mass, giving communion, his shirt rolled at the sleeves.

In the middle of the Holy Father prayer the killer entered, and without confessing his guilt, shot him.

Antonio fell, host in hand and, without knowing why Andrés died beside him, never having met Pelé; surrounded by surprise and the screaming, once more agonizing was the wooden effigy of Christ, nailed to the wall.

The identity of the criminal was never known.

The bells ring one, two, three times for Father Antonio and his altar boy, Andrés.

Chorus: The bells ring

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poetry in a noncorny, nonintellectual way. He used the words for what they meant. Without pompousness or arrogance. And he made his songs very accessible.

Q: Have you ever met Piero?

RB: Yes. In 1968 or '69, he came to play in Panama, and I went with a friend of mine to see him in his hotel. I had written a song called "Pablo Pueblo." I went with my guitar, the folkie's instrument, and I played the song for him, hoping he'd

record it. He enjoyed the song, but then he said to me, "I can't record this." And I said, "Why?" And he said it was because it was a good song, and "I want you to record it. That way there will be two of us."

Q: You've also written short stories. What's the difference between a short story and one of your songs?

RB: I'll give you an example, a song called "GDBD," which is on the *Buscando America* album. Originally, I wrote it as a short story

and it had several elements. It's a story about the disappeared people, in Argentina, all over Latin America. The title means "Gente Despertando bajo Dictaduras": People Awakening Under Dictatorships. In the short story, I wrote from the point of view of the guy who arrests the people and makes them disappear, and then from the point of view of the guy who's going to be arrested.

Well, I had been talking to some friends of mine who are writers, and I'd discovered that many of them have a very patronizing attitude to anyone they don't consider to be their equals. These guys have an Olympian contempt for anybody they don't judge to be literate.

Anyway, I was talking to these writer friends, and I said, Look, you might scorn my work, but you don't seem to understand that what I'm doing in terms of cultural impact or value is just as important as those little odes you're writing to yourselves. And today, I said, an album is almost the same as a book of short stories in terms of communicating, reaching the people. So I said to them that I was going to take a short story and sing it, and they all laughed.

Now, there are some problems here. [Laughter.] If you're gonna sing a short story, it's not easy to get a chart made! And a story is long. I knew I would have to edit the story, because of the time element. So first I decided to focus only on the guy from the death squad. Then I began to improvise. Now, on 46th Street and Broadway there's a musical sculpture, a thing that goes uuuuuuummmmmmeerrrrrrrrraaaaaaaahhhhhhh. You can't really hear it during the day because of

the traffic noise, but you can hear it at night. So I went over there at three in the morning and recorded the sound. Then I went into the studio and started humming whatever melody entered my head, while that sound played, and I asked the bandleader to play some street riffs. And the guys in the band were mesmerized: What the hell is this? And I said, Don't worry about it. They were worried, again because of that barrio influence thinking people would laugh because it has

200,000 in Latin America, in spite of the album being banned in a lot of places, and 100,000 elsewhere. So I went to see my writer friends and I said, "Hey, I have the most widely read story this year in Latin America!" And they said, "Yeah, yeah, but you sang it!" And I said, "True, but it's printed too, in the liner notes, and people have read it, and now you have a guy on a corner somewhere in Latin America who can deliver a whole goddamned monologue, who has

memorized a whole piece of literature! And he's reflected on it. And most probably he has added on to it." My friends were not convinced. But in this sense, I think that the songwriter is as important—maybe more important—than many of the literary writers we have today.

Q: Are there any North American songwriters who have inspired you?

RB: Bob Dylan is, of course, the obligatory image. And then you must go back to the blues. But again, because of the country background of the bluesman, when it was transported to the city, the blues remained limited in some respects by the neighborhood. The blues do talk about universal things, of course. But there wasn't any conscious effort on the part of most bluesmen to go beyond an immediate reaction to something that had happened to them.

There are others: Simon & Garfunkel, Joni Mitchell, Carole Sayer, Rickie Lee Jones, Tom Waits. But Springsteen is the clearest example right now. He never seems to be afraid to express the feeling of the working class, the kid with the car.... He took the risk of returning rock 'n' roll to a kind of social commentary



Blades performing with his band in the film *Crossover Dreams*

Blades recording "Silencios" with Linda Ronstadt

no beat. And I said, The beat doesn't matter, because this is a story. At first, I said, it's going to be difficult to get people to listen, because this kind of piece has no antecedent. But believe me, it's a story and it's poignant, and it will appeal to people the way all stories appeal to people.

So anyway, when the record came out we sold



that was, for a long time, removed. I had a conversation with him when we were making the "Sun City" video. I asked him how he felt when people didn't seem to understand or reflect upon what he was writing, the case in point being *Born in the USA*, which some conservatives insist is a big nationalistic anthem, which it isn't at all. And Springsteen said, "Once you finish a song, once you've written it and recorded it and made the statement, you really don't have any control over it anymore. The most you can do is be very clear all the time about what you do and where you're going and not be influenced by anything else." In other words, you gotta be totally clear within yourself about what you're doing and why. The bottom line is that you never know how a song will affect anyone else except you. You just make the statement and hope that it will be understood and that it'll do some good at some point.

Q: What do you tell a young songwriter when he comes to you for advice?

RB: The first thing I ask, out of my experience, is, Did you register your song? If not, I tell him how to do it. I might show him how to fix a line or a word. I tell him over and over: It's a long trip, it's a long trip. I tell them not to think about an easy success, you know, write a song, have a hit, sell a million. If that's what you're thinking you might as well write comic books or soap operas. You have to write because you have something to say. And I tell them to read. Read as much as they can. I tell them I'm still learning to write, every day.

Q: Do you think a songwriter needs a musical education?

RB: I don't think that's absolutely necessary. But I



Blades in a scene from *Crossover Dreams*

do think they must have some musical knowledge. In my own case, I never went to music school. But after my initial success, I went to a music teacher, so he could explain certain things. That helped me in my conversations with musicians. I didn't want them to disrespect me or think I was a fluke. Also, a writer should learn an instrument. In my case, it was the guitar. Certainly, talent is enhanced by the academic understanding of the theory of music. But a general education is also important. I'm sure that if I hadn't read as much as I have done, if I didn't have my education, I wouldn't write the way I do today.

Q: Music in the second half of the '80s seems to be going through a sea change. Do you agree, and where do you think it's going?

RB: I agree. I personally think the signs are very encouraging right now. For one thing, the music industry has overdosed on inanity. There's been so much bad stuff produced that I think there's a natural reaction to it. Now there's a chance for musicians and writers who have not been paid much attention because their lyrics and attitudes did not adjust to

the industry's idea of what sells. These voices are going to be heard. Not because the industry has a plan. But because life is funny, and moves in cycles.

Right now, the political situation all over the world has become more and more difficult, so it's more and more urgent to address issues. Some are hesitant, careful, like Band Aid, and USA for Africa. Then you get something more serious, like *Sun City*, and then you have Farm Aid. And as musicians become more concerned about politics, the music will become a very important expression of their concerns. The attitudes will begin to change. But how are the record companies, the managers, promoters, the station managers going to react? That's the question. Traditionally, they would take anything that sells. But if the music begins to address their personal interests—their money, for example—then I don't know. They have shown in the past that they have the power to be a neutralizing force, to make music less dangerous, while pretending to retain the essence of what the music was about. If it can become noncontroversial, that's fine.

"Most of my songs come from experience. Either something I've seen happen, or even something I've read about and felt deeply."

Q: How will you avoid the dangers of being fashionable?

RB: By doing what I've always done. When I first chose this path, I knew I would have initial problems and future problems. They looked at my songs and said, "These songs are too long. Where's the hook? And there are too many lyrics and the people aren't interested in this, they just want to dance." So I prepared myself to accept rejection. Not from an emotional point of view, because I was so sure what I was doing was correct that I never took rejection personally. But from a practical point of view, I had to survive. And rejection can cause economic problems. So I took a job. I saved my money. That's the only way to save the integrity of your work and your self.

But the new movement in music? How successful will it be? That's gonna depend on the artist. The artist will have to insist on his own artistic integrity. And he will also have to be strong in the sense of responsibility. Only the artist can protect popular music from becoming a parody of itself.

Pete Hamill is the author of six novels and a columnist for the *Village Voice*. He won a Grammy in 1975 for his liner notes on Bob Dylan's album *Blood on the Tracks*.