

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Ruben Blades Explores Movies, Music And Politics

By J.D. McCulley

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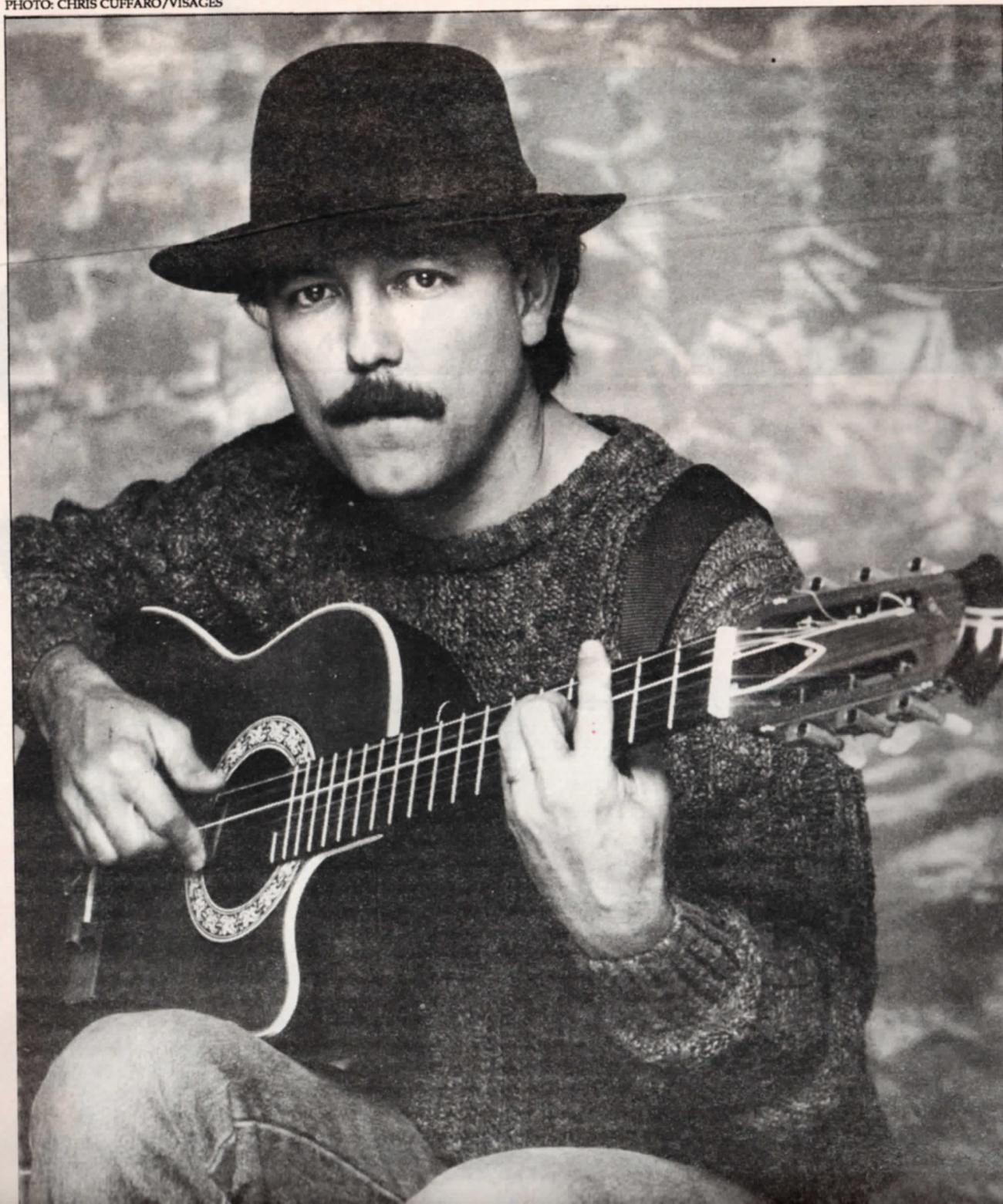
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manian-born Blades is an acknowledged musical superstar as well; 15 albums of accomplished, frequently politically charged Latin music attest to that fact. His mastery of Afro-Cuban rhythm pop gained him a contract with Elektra Records in the early '80s, a move that has gradually improved his American (read "Anglo") profile. Coincidentally, he began to pursue a career as an actor, starring in *Crossover Dreams* and appearing in curious supporting roles in the somewhat less than successful *Fatal Beauty* and *Critical Condition*.

But if his acting career seems somewhat less than meteoric, Blades' music has been gaining remarkable new dimensions. 1987's *Agua De Luna* (*Moon Water*) took as its inspiration the short stories of Pulitzer Prize winning Columbian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and earned Blades widespread critical acclaim as well as some adventuresome new American fans. He also gained the respect and admiration of a number of pop music professionals. Among them: Reed, Michael Jackson, Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello.

And with the release of *Nothing But The Truth*, his first English language album, American listeners will now have very little reason *not* to know what Ruben Blades is all about: an unashamed and eloquently outspoken political passion and social conscience. If one approaches *Truth* expecting the grand philosophic vagueness that seems to permeate every other album being released these days (did someone mention *The Joshua Tree?*), they will be quickly rebuffed. Though multi-layered, Blades' concerns are often as pungent and precise, whether they be inner-city gang retribution ("The Hit") or bone-headed Washington imperialism ("Ollie's Doo-Wop"). Yet another Spanish album, *Antecedents*, follows in June.

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Chances are that the face of Ruben Blades is becoming more and more familiar to the American public. Closing this year's Grammy Awards, he was flanked by Lou Reed and Buster Poindexter as they formed a gleeful doo-wop chorus behind the legendary Dion Di Mucci. A recent PBS special on AIDS teamed him memorably with a banana. And he's currently gracing theater screens as Sheriff Montoya in director Robert Redford's *The Milagro Beanfield War*.

But large segments of that public are probably unaware that the Pana-

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Even more remarkably, Blades recently earned his second university degree (in international law from Harvard, no less), and insists that he will soon enter the political arena of his homeland, strife-torn Panama. Given the breadth of his talent and ambitions, a conversation with Blades must of necessity weave its way through art, politics and sociology. Accordingly, our afternoon meeting at Elektra's West Hollywood offices led to a late morning phone chat following one of Blades' promotional stints for *Milagro*, a conversation that was punctuated by his periodic checking of television news bulletins concerning the latest developments in the efforts to oust General Manuel Noriega from Panama.

"In Latin America you do a lot of different things," the singer says, gently downplaying his multifaceted artistic achievements and political ambitions. "Economic and social conditions act on the situation." It would seem that professional diversity is something of a Blades family trait.

"My father was a bongo player, a musician to begin with who was also a

PHOTO: CHRIS CUFFARO/VISAGES

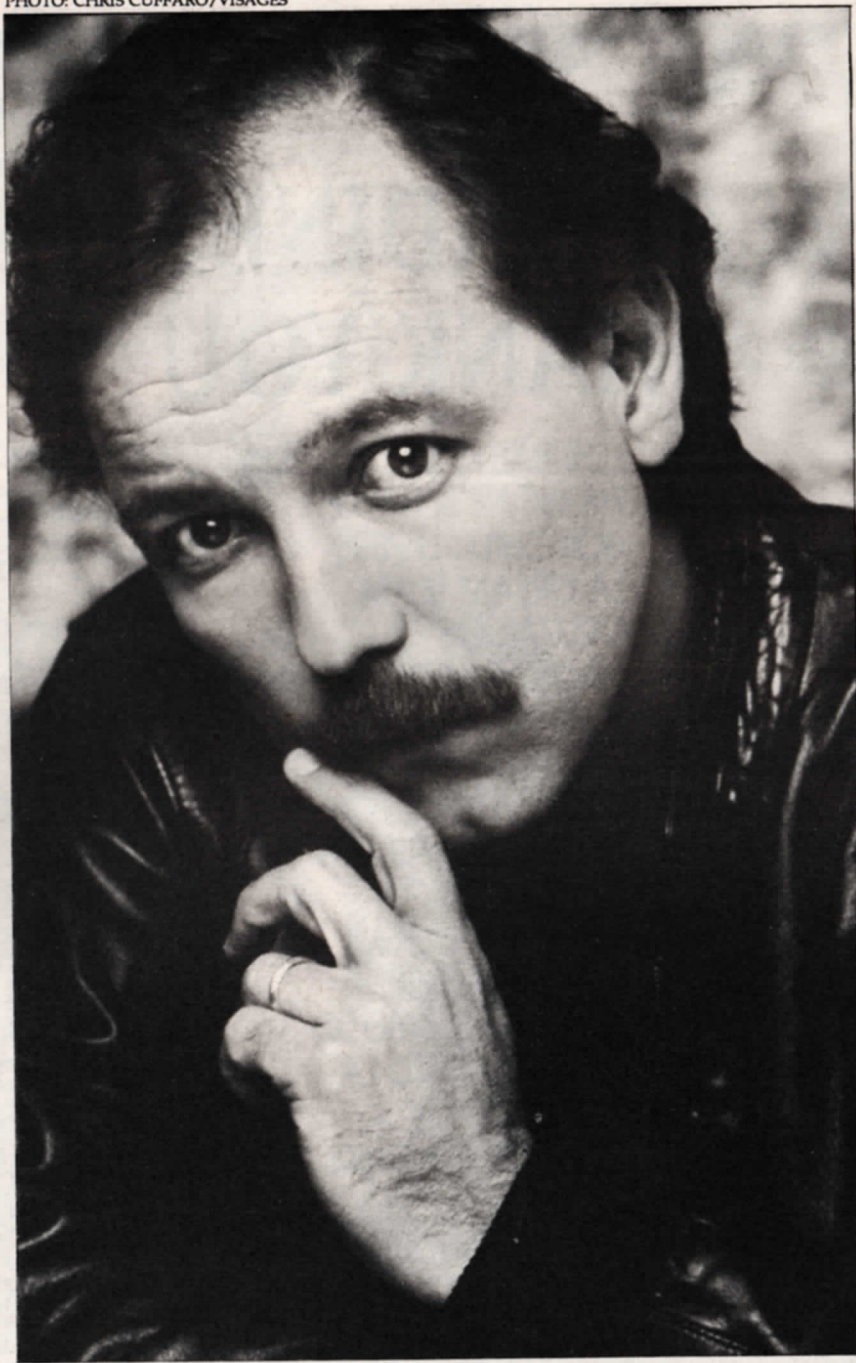
very skilled basketball player. The National Secret Police had a basketball team. To think of that now is funny, if you wanted to know who the National Secret Police were you went to a basketball game and saw them all there.

"My father was playing for a different team and then was recruited by the Secret Police to play on their team. And in order to play he had to become a detective. So my father went in and stayed for 23 years. It was wonderful in the sense that he didn't have to punch a clock and all his friends were there. My father was very well known in Panama, in the underworld and in the normal society. He never had any problems as there was then a mentality of 'fair play.'"

An avid radio listener, Blades fell in love with American rock 'n' roll at an early age and absorbed a great deal of it. "It's not like I had a crash course in Anglo music," he explains, "I know my stuff. I know Frankie Lyman's 'I Promise To Remember.' I heard it in '56 or '57 and I remember the lyrics today. I have an understanding of it that is part of my nature. Just as my understanding of North American culture and its nuances are part of my nature. It's just there inside; half of me is not Anglo and the other half Latin. It's one person who understands and reacts to whatever I'm presented with."

Blades readily admits that as a youth he yearned to become a rock star. But his allegiance to American pop was shattered in 1964 when US troops were called in to quell riots in his homeland.

"I was 15, 16 years old and I started looking inside. I stopped thinking that I was going to be a rock 'n' roll kind of guy. 'Cause I had just had my ass kicked by the US troops. I thought 'They don't want me, why do I want to do this?' But there wasn't a hatred towards everybody. I never had that. That's why I could come here. And I



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trouble him and inspire the pop competitiveness of *Nothing But The Truth*. "You come here and you do your music, but you have the problem of communication and you're immediately labeled: 'He's the Panamanian so-and-so.' And then you have the reaction of the establishment. They say 'This guy's not bad ... in his department.' And that creates a problem. As an artist it is something I can't accept. I cannot accept it as a human being. Why? Because I'm a Panamanian or Latin American, then I can't [release an English language pop album] because of the cultural differences?"

"Also the personal, selfish, pride, ego thing said that I wanted to do something that can compete on an equal basis with the best of whomever here. This is for me now. *Me*."

Blades didn't have to look far for help in realizing his dream. "Because I'm not constantly on the pages of *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, I know a lot of people as friends. When I was writing I wanted to establish that collaboration between musicians with different backgrounds." Ruben doesn't mind dropping a few names. "I called Miles Davis and Wynton Marsalis to play on *Moon Water* but neither of them could."

But Blades had little trouble finding collaborators for *Truth*. Lou Reed and Elvis Costello both co-wrote a pair of songs with Blades for the album. "Lou is very intelligent. He is also very funny. He has an incredibly tuned sense of humor. And he is a very honest man. Elvis Costello I met through T Bone Burnett when Elvis was here recording *King Of America*. We had a long talk about music, politics and the world at large. I said it would be interesting to see what would happen if we wrote together. And he said 'Let me know.'"

One of the collaborations with Costello was "The Miranda Syndrome," a whimsical yet biting commentary on cultural stereotypes that

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Blades completed his first university degree in Panama and soon realized that he needed to broaden his horizons, both socially and musically. "I've always been interested in the world at large. But I think that I realized at the time that what I knew was not enough, that I had to learn more. And in order to learn more I had to leave. I had to somehow be in contact with people from all different backgrounds and make my own future, my own background, and then I could return to Panama with experience and understanding." Hence, in 1974 Blades found himself in New York City. He relocated to Los Angeles last year.

In his dozen years in the States, Blades evolved into a salsa superstar. But that very labeling seems to both



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One of the collaborations with Costello was "The Miranda Syndrome," a whimsical yet biting commentary on cultural stereotypes that uses Hollywood Latin semi-icon Carmen Miranda as its foil.

"The bottom line was that we both felt that people who are entertained by stereotypes end up becoming their victims as well. So we took the specific situation of Miranda, since I'm Latin American as well. When they would ask me how come I don't have fruit on my head or speak the way she spoke, then I in turn would ask 'You're not John Wayne, are you? I don't see your spurs. Where's your oil well? Where's your car, the house and the blonde little girl with no defects?' You end up also being swallowed by this monster that these people created."

Blades worked with yet another fabled collaborator whose work didn't make it onto the album. "There was a song I was working on with Bob Dylan that we never finished. Hopefully we'll have it done by next year," he says with a chuckle. Ironically, "Bob was the first guy I met that said yes. He physically came to my house in December of '85, but I haven't seen

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him since . . . I sent him a letter with half a song and waited. Then I found out he was in Israel. But I know we'll finish it."

Blades found Dylan not to be the enigma of legend. "I found him to be very articulate, aware and comfortable. I think that people tend to behave differently according to the pressures they feel at the time." By way of example, Blades cites another superstar who recently sought out his help. "I worked with Michael Jackson. I wrote some Spanish lyrics for an adaptation of one of his songs and coached him singing in Spanish.

"At the time, before I saw Michael, I read that same week that he wanted to buy the Elephant Man's bones, that he slept with a giraffe and that he had a monkey as his best friend. And then you go into the studio and I see Quincy Jones in the booth and I would be one-on-one with Michael. No entourage, no mask, no anything. Here's one of the most talented singers I've ever worked with who's doing something very difficult, which was to sing in Spanish, and who insisted on doing it not just acceptably but to my satisfaction. I never had anything negative coming from the guy or any bizarre need to be treated differently. Then you come out and hear all these things."

Blades is unashamed to admit that he hopes his own work could reach the sort of commercial success that Jackson's has, though for certainly wholly different reasons. Blades' might be the first international political career financed by pop record sales.

"I'm not a hypocrite, if this hits then you get a lot of money out of it. It buys me freedom in societies that are controlled economically. And since I'm going back to Panama eventually, I'll have to bring with me everything that I have. I'm not going to make deals there. I want to make sure that my family is all right."

to hell. I'm not an adventurer and I'm not an idiot. They don't want any theories; they want a solution. I don't have an infrastructure. I don't have any sympathies within the military groups. What the hell do I have? Popular appeal? I'm not coming in with some magical solutions. I'm not going to ask people to go into the street and get shot for nothing."

For his part, Blades seems confident in what he can offer his countrymen. "I've always perceived myself as an independent, as a person that can present to people in Panama a third choice, a third possibility. The young people in Panama don't believe in any of these guys, no matter who they supposedly represented. I think that I could appeal to that group because my words would not be colored by ideology or party lines.

"I know that sounds very lofty and very naive, but it's a fact. I'm probably the only one who could go address a crowd and explain everything from A to Z without trying to hide something."

In the meantime, Blades seems content to fight his battles of conscience in the recording studio. "One would have to deal with the record in terms of its total position," emphasizes Blades, "which is of analyzing violence, both physical and intellectual, and the need for and fear of love that we all have." It is clear that his music goes far beyond hollow rhetoric.

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With the cultural breakthrough of *Nothing But The Truth* under his belt, one would expect Blades to hit the club circuit soon. But the question of when is compounded by the singer's cross-cultural consciousness.

"That's a question that is valid and should be answered in a very simple way. But as you'll see, nothing in my life is simple. As a consequence I have

find the money to pay for transportation and the band or bands?

"It's really a tough one because it hasn't been done before. Los Lobos has done it, but they've pretty much been limited to a Mexican-American and Anglo background. Their music is Tex-Mex and rock 'n' roll so there's a certain connection there. There's a big difference between a Tex-Mex tune and some Afro-Cuban song. It's a totally different approach that attracts a totally different audience. All those things I've got to consider and then I'll decide if I'll tour."

Blades does hold out one option that he insists he is pursuing in earnest:

"I'm buying Lotto. It's up to \$9 million now. Who knows? It's like 'God, show me. Whatta ya say?'"

"Last year when I did the tour of the States, some gigs I was making minus \$300. I can't do that. I'm not selling five million albums. I live modestly, thank God. But on the other hand I have concrete obligations that extend from Panama to the States. I take care of my mother, my father and my brothers."

Blades admits to entertaining offers from commercial sponsors, but that notion has produced its own crises of conscience. He is fully aware that the capital of corporate America could quickly solve his touring finances. "But then again, *who?*" he puzzles. "I was approached by some car people. They wanted to sell their car to a certain audience. I don't even drive. Even if I did drive, I would not drive *that* car. I'm not going to go to openings of car dealers to shake hands and give out balloons and that sort of nonsense.

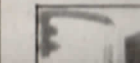
"I drink Pepsi occasionally. I drink Coca Cola as well. That's something I would consider provided certain conditions were met. My offer to corporate people is that I would consider sponsorship if they would return to the community some of the money that the community gives to them."

er, application of a condom. It was a segment that called into play a rather droll sense of humor. "It had to be done in a way where kids would not feel that you were preaching to them. It's a very uncomfortable thing to do, to use a condom. It breaks the entire notion of what romantic moments are. Can you picture Cary Grant saying 'Excuse me dear while I put on a condom?' It really doesn't work. So at the same time you were trying to be serious about this, you couldn't be *too* serious."

And thus Blades proceeded to apply a latex sheath to a banana. And of course it stirred some minor controversy. "Some guy from the Banana Association of America sent PBS a very snippy letter claiming that we were giving the banana a bad name at a time when the fruit was, I quote, '*rising*.' When I saw the letter I didn't know how to take it. It was like something out of *National Lampoon*. It turned out that he seemed to be serious."

Given the opportunity, Blades would've had ample reply. "I would have asked him if he had sent any letters to the growers of the bananas throughout Latin America encouraging them to give their employees insurance, health benefits and better living conditions. That is what can give the banana a bad name. Most likely he hasn't done that."

Though the trend in popular music of late has been to invoke social issues with broad generalities that offer precious little in the way of solutions or true advocacy, Blades is only too aware that most pop music still rings distressingly hollow. And though he attempts to downplay his dismay at the musical status quo, his passion betrays his true feelings. "Some people feel that music, and art in general, should only address escapism. Music and art should be used to mitigate the pain of everyday life and its problems. They resent political images in music and art because we're



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And Blades' political goals are no less modest than his musical ones. "I am working right now on a political theory," he explains. "I have to come out with a platform that will enable me to answer people who ask me 'Where are you? Are you a leftist? Are you this or that?'"

"It's unbelievable, but there hasn't been a new political theory presented in the last 50 years. I think that both the communists and the capitalists have learned that dogma is not enough to produce results. Neither early exponents of either theory, Smith or Marx, could've envisioned the advances of technology and the consequences those advances are going to have on people today. What we have is a bunch of people who are obsessed with 18th and 19th Century solutions to 20th Century problems."

Blades had originally planned to return to Panama late last year. But the social and political turmoil there forced him to reevaluate his campaign. "My idea of going back there, calling people from both sides, creating an infrastructure, all of that went

of my mother, my father and my brothers."

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"That's a question that is valid and should be answered in a very simple way. But as you'll see, nothing in my life is that simple. An example: I have an English language album out. I have a Spanish language album, *Antecedents*, out in June. Traditionally, when somebody records an English album the first thing everybody says is 'There the guy goes like the road-runner towards Las Vegas.' Money, the dollar, *boom!*

"But I have a public that has supported my work, in this country as well as Latin America and Europe, in Spanish. Now, am I going to tour *only* the English album? I'm not going to do that; sacrifice one audience for the other. So that means that we'll be going out and touring both albums. Now this is where it gets interesting. Since they're both *totally* different records; the English album is eclectic and the other is Afro-Cuban music, how are we going to do this? Are we going to play one hour in Spanish and one hour in English? Are we going to have two bands? Would Anglo audiences go to a Latin club for this? Should we play in a rock club, and would Latin audiences go there? Would promoters go for that? Where are we going to

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Being soberly aware of the economic hardships involved in bringing such a diverse musical palette before the public has likely spurred Blades' renaissance-man tendencies even further. "The other thing that has kept me going has to do with the film industry," he admits.

"When I did the films like *Critical Condition* and *Fatal Beauty*, I was getting some funds as well as learning about the movie-making process. Hopefully, through *Milagro*, I'll be in a position of getting better roles which would allow me to get money to back my own projects and maintain my integrity."

He muses about the public's perception of celebrity: "People tend to think that if you're in a movie and have an album and are in the press that your problems are solved. And they aren't. They are just magnified."

Another facet of Blades' talents (and conscience) was displayed in a recent PBS special on the prevention of AIDS. He was given the rather thankless task of detailing the proper,

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"There's nothing I can say other than I think the situation today has reached such proportions of emergency, internationally speaking, that every resource and every possibility that we have must be brought in to help. In order to be happy and sing happy songs we've got to be working at the same time to construct a better society. Otherwise art becomes a buffoon, a jester, a fool that is pretending that life is what it is not.

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