

The Salsa Party

By JUAN GONZALEZ

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FROM OPEN-AIR CONCERTS in pompous Buenos Aires to the sweat-filled darkness of Manhattan nightclubs, Willie Colon and Ruben Blades once made music to captivate a generation.

Their years in the same band marked the golden age of salsa, a fusion of music and poetry that stirred Latino youth to a new sense of common identity.

But now, in the prime of their lives, both have switched to a different

rhythm. They've traded in musical scores for electoral polls, the *clave* beat for the campaign sound truck.

Willie, the street-smart kid from 139th St. and St. Ann's Ave. in the South Bronx, and Ruben, the Harvard law graduate and Hollywood movie star from a lower middle-class family in Panama City, have become politicians.

For Blades, the transformation will climax next Sunday, when Panamanians go to the polls to decide whether they want him as their first elected president since the 1989 U.S. invasion that toppled Gen. Manuel Noriega.

For Colon, the change is just beginning. In the next few days he is likely to officially announce his candidacy for Congress against Bronx Rep. Eliot Engel.

Colon, 44, was already a world-known trombonist and singer when he met the young, unknown Blades at the Panama City Yacht Club in 1975.

"Ruben came over to me and said he had some songs," Colon recalled. "I was full of myself and ignored him. But he was a persistent guy. Later on I met him again at the New York Casino. He asked if he could sing a song. We kind of struck up a friendship."

Blades moved to New York and began working in the mailroom at Fania Records, the Latin Motown, all the while singing and composing and waiting for his big break. Sometime later, while the Fania All Stars were touring Africa, Colon found himself in need of a substitute singer. He bumped into Blades, who

The songs turned Blades and Colon into instant superstars of Latin American music. Already, you could see the political vision emerging.

In 1982, the two split up. Clashes over ego and money, according to Colon. "He (Ruben) was more concerned about getting into the movies," Colon said. "He has a knack for it."

Blades, of course, is more known among Anglo audiences for his parts in "The Milagro Beanfield War," "Crossover Dreams," "The Super" and a string of other films. But he kept up his music, cutting the classic "Buscando America" album, where he sings in haunting Spanish:

*"I'm searching for America
and I fear I won't find it -
Its traces have become lost
among the darkness."*

Colon, meanwhile, plunged into the problems of Latin life in the U.S. His 1990 song "El Gran Varon" was a bold and controversial chronicling of homosexuality and AIDS in the Latin community.

He also became a favorite of politicians courting the Latino community.

For Blades, the U.S. invasion of Panama was the final straw. He hated Noriega but opposed the Bush invasion of his homeland. Two years ago he formed a new political party, *Papa Egoro* - Mother Earth Party in the language of one of Panama's Indian tribes.

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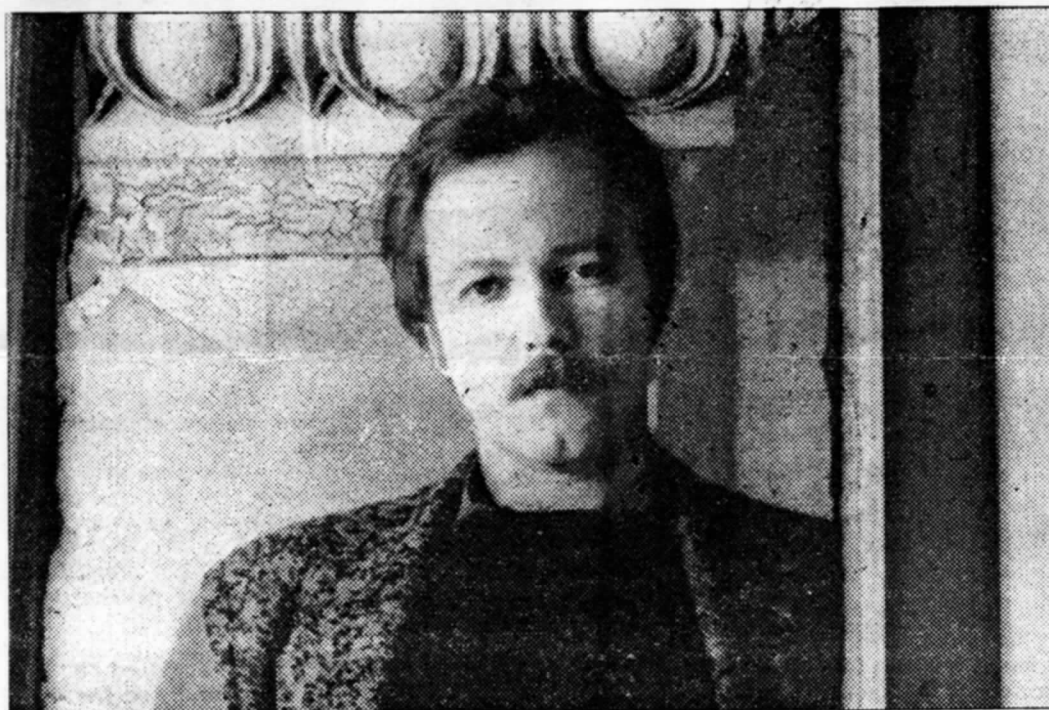


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KEEPS ON MOVING: Salsa star Ruben Blades is running for president of Panama.

Weary Sally Jessy resting

Sally Jessy Raphael has been working too hard.

The syndicated talk show host was hospitalized for exhaustion Friday in Arizona, a show spokeswoman said. The hospital said she was in good condition.



Bolton a love song loser

LOS ANGELES — A copyright infringement suit is going to cost pop singer Michael Bolton a fortune.

A jury decided on Friday he owes 66% of the profits from his 1991 hit song "Love Is a Wonderful Thing" to the Isley Brothers, the plaintiffs' lawyer said.



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"I asked him if he wanted to sing a song on my 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly' album," Colon recalled. "Soon, Ruben was doing the nightclub circuit with (Ray) Barretto and (Larry) Harlow, but he kept saying, 'Let's do an album together.'"

Their first album, "Me-tiendo Mano" was an instant hit, but nothing compared with "Siembra," the landmark album that became the fastest salsa seller in history — 200,000 in the first month.

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Blades believes he can change a country. Colon believes that Engel's congressional district, 75% black and Hispanic, is ripe for a new kind of song.

Politics, of course, costs money. Before he left for Panama, Blades cut half of a new album with Colon.

"We may call it 'Reunion,'" Colon said last week. "We'll have to wait till after the Panama election to finish it."

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