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# RUBEN BLADES

## CROSSOVER DREAMING

LATIN MUSIC'S PRIMER  
SALSERO FINDS A NEW  
BEAT IN HOLLYWOOD—  
WITH RICHARD PRYOR  
AND ROBERT REDFORD.

**A**n artist *can* make a difference," insists Rubén Blades. "Look at Richard Pryor. When he said that he was going to stop using the word 'nigger,' many other blacks stopped using it as well." A star composer and singer of Latin music, a Harvard-trained lawyer, and now an actor, Blades thinks he can make a difference. After his acting in *Crossover Dreams* received critical acclaim, the Panamanian-born artist was deluged with movie and TV offers for stereotypical Latin roles, mostly drug dealers and drug addicts. Blades, who consumes nothing harder than beer and is known in the party-all-night world of Latin music for his firm anti-drug stance, would have no truck with such crossover dreams. Not until he was offered a costarring role in the Richard Pryor hospital comedy *Critical Condition*, due out this month.

He plays a Hispanic orderly who wants to do something better and is discouraged with how the hospital is run. "It's the Pryor character, an escaped mental patient pretending he's a doctor, who gives him hope." The role was originally written as a white punk, but Paramount reshaped it for Blades, who in turn, played it as straight as he could. "There already was an all-out comic character—Pryor—and the two of us are constantly getting into ridiculous situations, so I felt no need to clown around. Not that I can't be funny. People think that because some of my songs are about serious issues that I have no sense of humor. On the contrary, it's my sense of humor that has kept me going."

Blades has been going places since his youth, when he decided to be a musician *and* a lawyer. Salsa is the



KEN PROBST/OUTLINE

Hispanic Caribbean's down-home music, and its artists, who like Blades usually come from modest backgrounds, are seldom educated. Blades finished his law degree at the University of Panama while he was becoming his country's hottest music star. After graduation he put his law career on the back burner and headed for New York, where salsa was booming. He made it to the top of the salsa pyramid, penning and singing the biggest hits in the genre. But he was disappointed with the New York Latin music scene, its exploitative practices, its ghetto mentality. Salsa's hottest star became its most explosive critic. He wrote political songs, organized musicians, and sued his record company. Then he went to Harvard, where he got a master's degree in international law as a prelude to a political career. Somehow he found time to make movies: First, he played the hero in a grade-B, inner-city exploitation flick called *The Last Fight*, then the acclaimed *Crossover Dreams*, and finally a gig as costar with blockbuster artist Pryor. At long last, crossover, richly earned.

After shooting for *Critical Condition* wrapped in North Carolina, Blades moved to Santa Fe to work on *The Milagro Beanfield War* (due out in the fall of 1987), based on the John Nichols novel and directed by Robert Redford with a mostly Latin cast. Blades plays a Mexican-American sheriff, a pivotal role in this repertory-style ensemble including Christopher Walken and Sonia Braga. Aware of how American movies tend to portray Latinos in an undifferentiated manner,

BY ENRIQUE FERNANDEZ

Blades aimed for authenticity in his characterization. "Most people would think that because these characters are of Mexican origin they must talk like *thees*. While, in fact, they talk like Americans, except with a certain cadence, and a way of rolling the r's that is similar to Costa Ricans'. I picked up on the sound right away. After all, I'm a musician, so I have a good ear.

"From the start Redford told me, 'This is not the Caribbean or New York, so watch the hands, the facial expressions, and above all, the speed.'" Caribbean Hispanics speak and move fast. Caribbean Hispanics from New York, where Blades has lived for the past 12 years, move and speak twice as fast. "Redford's direction was: '250 pounds.' I move so heavy now that even my breathing has slowed down. My character, Bernabé, is a very slow, deliberate man." Blades also modeled his sheriff after his own father, who for 24 years was a Panamanian cop.

But what about the salsa superstar? The driven Blades has found time within the past few months to finish his third album for Elektra Records, by flying to New York whenever there was a lull in the filming, then heading back to New Mexico. The album is titled *Agua de Luna* (Moon Water) and it's his long-awaited adaptation of the short stories of Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian Nobel laureate, who is an acknowledged admirer of Blades' work. "Just because I was working with literary material didn't mean I had to do elitist music and bring in a symphony orchestra."

The Afro-Cuban dance beat of salsa is there, as well as the innovative changes that have distinguished Blades within salsa music. The lyrics are poetic evocations of García Márquez's work. A bit more literate than the usual salsa "Mama, let's dance," but Blades thinks his public will go the distance with him. "It's popular music," he insists.

His next album will be his first in English, a Latin American's reading of rock and roll. "I don't want to give the impression that I'm jumping on that bandwagon that says: 'Everything I've done up to now is no good and here's where I'm going to get famous and make the big bucks.' My point is that until Latin Americans make it in the mainstream American market and look Americans in the face as equals, we won't be taken seriously. We'll merely be a folkloric novelty. What we'll do, or be encouraged to do, is a

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## RUBEN BLADES

bad copy of Anglo-Saxon music. And this comes not just from our urge to imitate, but from record-company people who decide that what's needed is a band in ruffled shirts with all that Tropicana-nightclub-Cuba-circa-1954 sort of thing."

Like many Latin Americans his age—he's 38—Blades was won over by rock and roll in the Fifties and Sixties. It was the music of *m-m-m-mi generación*. "It was young people's music everywhere in the world. It was played for kids by kids." But eventually, Rubén Blades the *rockero* singer realized that "I wasn't about to become the Panamanian Fabian; it would've been too ridiculous." So he switched to Latin music: salsa. But the urge to rock out is still hot.

"We Latin Americans have a need to enter this field that has been declared an Anglo-Saxon preserve. We must prove that we can do it as well or better. And why not? Rock is like jazz; it's universal." Elvis Costello, Bob Dylan, and Paul Simon are expected to collaborate on the album.

For the actor and the musician things are going swimmingly. But what about Blades the Central American with political ambitions? "I know there are people in Panama who smile condescendingly when they read that I could be a political force in my country." These were the people who never believed a pop singer, particularly a singer of such common man's music as salsa, would ever finish a law degree. He's going back to Panama, he says, to make a difference in his country's political life. In an article he wrote for *The Village Voice* on Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos, Blades pointed out how the late General had started making politics work for Panama's poor. Torrijos, known for his tough renegotiation of the Panama Canal Treaty with the U.S., forced his country's politicians to confront Panama's social inequities—the typically Latin American gap between the forgotten lower classes and the privileged oligarchs. Blades feels that artists have a responsibility to Latin America's youth: They must be role models, and fill the void left by the failure of political institutions. This political drive fuels all of Blades' moves, including his crossover success.

In music as in politics, Rubén Blades' explanation of himself and his work is the same: "I know that what I have to offer is an alternative." □