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Salsa

Rubén Blades

by

Guy D. Garcia

Rubén Blades is speechless. This is not typical for the 37-year-old Panamanian who is variously described as the most popular salsa singer in Latin America, the charismatic star of the film *Crossover Dreams* and a politically ambitious attorney who recently earned a master's degree from Harvard. But as Blades waits for a small army of technicians to finish setting up his equipment on the mammoth stage of Radio City Music Hall, someone has asked him how he came to be involved in the New York segment of the star-studded national tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr. that will take place two days later, and the six-foot-tall, brown-eyed Latin Boy Wonder is momentarily stumped. "I think Stevie Wonder called me," he says with a shrug. "I can't always remember how these things get started. Sometimes they call, sometimes I call. Nobody does more benefits than me."

Despite the delay in getting things going, Blades is affable, relaxed, warm. Dressed in blue jeans, white sneakers, a T-shirt and blue down parka, his dark beard is weeks beyond anything that could be

But just now, Blades is not thinking about the disturbing changes in his neighborhood, or about how they may even reflect the temptations and pitfalls of his own success. He is trying to explain how salsa music in the United States lost its soul. "The Latins who did not know Latin America simply repeated the Afro-Cuban pattern as a way to protect their national identities," Blades explains with an accent that alternately lapses into Spanish and oftentimes vanishes altogether. "What they missed was that they did not create new, original music based not only on their background but also drawing on their reality of being an immigrant here. They stayed behind, and the music became stagnant."

Until Rubén Blades. More than any other single person, he has managed to both revitalize Latin music and bring it to the attention of the non-Spanish-speaking public at a time when the permutations of polyglot culture are not only tolerated but considered chic. His 1984 album, *Buscando America* ("Searching for America"), was hailed by the national press,

during the '50s and '60s to the sounds of Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and the Comets, the Platters and the Beatles. "The thing about rock 'n' roll was that it was played by young people," he recalls. "When we saw that, we went, 'Wow,' because all the other music at the time was done by people whom we considered our elders. Rock 'n' roll was *our* music. The fact that it was produced in a different country, in a different language, didn't mean anything."

But even as Blades was absorbing American influences such as singer Frankie Lymon, whom he idolized, he started following in the footsteps of his conga-playing father, playing with local Afro-Cuban bands. To please his parents, he enrolled in law school at the University of Panama. Then, between law and music, Blades came to the United States in 1970, and returned to Panama a year later to practice as an attorney. By 1974, he was back in New York for good. "This was the place to be," Blades remembers. "There was a strong Latin musical movement led by Ricardo Rey and Bobby Cruz. All the best singers and players were in New York. Everything was here."

construed as "fashionable stubble." While his band, Seis del Solar (Six from the Tenement)—Oscar Hernandez and Ricardo Marrero on pianos and synthesizers, Bobby Allende on congas, Ralph Irizarry on timbales, Louis Rivera on bongos, Robby Ameen on drums and Mike Viñas on bass—starts to warm up with the theme from *The Addams Family*, Blades plays baseball with a paper cup, jumping in place, psyched up like an athlete before the big game. His microphone finally ready, Blades launches into two songs from his new album, *Escenas* ("Scenes"). The first is "Tierra Dura" ("Hard Land"), a plaintive song about Ethiopia, followed by "Muévete" ("Move On"), an infectious calypso-and-reggae-flavored number. The buoyant melody floats over the snap, crackle and pop of the rhythm section with a spicy swing that is undeniably, exuberantly Latin. But there is something else going on here too: the bouncy funk in the bass, the hint of a rock backbeat in the drums as shimmering synthesizers and percussion whip it all into an intoxicating concoction that transcends musical and national boundaries. As the percolating pulse of the music fills the cavernous auditorium, dancing breaks out among the technicians and sound people.

By the time the song winds down to an a cappella ending, even those who do not speak Spanish have gotten the message.

Columbus Avenue is a long way from the streets of Panama City, but walking toward his Upper West Side apartment on an unseasonably warm New York winter day, Rubén Blades is obviously in his element. He is at home in the city. He makes his way through Manhattan's jammed intersections with the wily instinct of an urban animal, and the people who say "hi" and wave actually seem to know him. This is, after all, his turf, the place where he has lived and thrived for the past twelve years. It is where he intends to remain for the foreseeable future, even if that means watching more street-corner bodegas succumb to upscale cafeterias, like the one with a milk-white mannequin motif that "would even make Liberace recoil in disgust."

who called him a cross between Randy Newman and Bruce Springsteen. He has appeared on *The Tonight Show* and *Late Night with David Letterman* and has been interviewed for a segment on *60 Minutes*. His album *Escenas* features Joe Jackson and Linda Ronstadt in a rare case of what could only be called reverse crossover.

It is things like that, along with a habit of writing trenchant political essays for the newspaper *La Estrella de Panama* and *The Village Voice*, that have made Blades the Great Brown Hope, slugging it out with the forces of racial discrimination and musical regression. And unlike the crossover contenders who have preceded him, he stands an excellent chance of winning the fight. "In the States right now I have a good opportunity to dispel some of the myths about Latin Americans in this country," says Blades — "the stereotypes that were really created by the entertainment industry. The woman with the fruit on her head, the bum, the drug addict and the lowlife. All of that I can help change because I don't fit any of those categories."

At the same time, Blades remains acutely aware that the heady combination of commercial viability and media visibility requires a precarious balancing act. The very last thing he wants is to be accused of "selling out," like Rudy Veloz, the singer who sacrifices love and friendship for a hit record in *Crossover Dreams*. Whatever path he takes, it is important to Blades that he remain true to his past. In musical terms, that means being careful to expand the parameters of Afro-Cuban music without watering it down or pulling out its roots. "I am trying to rejuvenate the music, but not at the expense of my background," he insists. "All I have really done is replace the horns with synthesizers and tried to write from a different perspective than just 'shake your booty.' What we're doing could still be identified—although I don't like the term—as salsa music. Popular street music. Culturally speaking, it can touch a Peruvian, an Argentine, a Bolivian, a Colombian, a Puerto Rican—so there's a link that's never been erased."

The first chain in that link was formed in Panama, where he remembers growing up

everything was here."

Blades soon joined the hot roster of young Latin musicians at Fania records and, along with popular trombonist Willie Colon, recorded *Siembra*, which became the biggest-selling salsa album of all time. While the refined sophistication of his music continued to attract an ever-growing audience, his lyrics were, by Latin American standards, innovative, and sometimes downright controversial. "Tiburón," a song that was considered to be a critique of United States military interests in Latin America, was banned in 1980 by Miami radio stations, and Blades' *Buscando America* was banned by Panama's censorship committee because it makes allusions to menstruation.

Probably the most radical aspect of Blades' music, however, is the vividly poetic images that draw on the innovative, free-flowing styles of Latin American authors like Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Carlos Fuentes. "Most Latin songs are always about the guy who betrayed his best friend or the woman who left him," he observes. "Or 'fate gets me down.' Or 'let's party.' I write songs about the same things and situations once. Then I go on to something else."

One of the loftier outcomes of Blades' proclivity for literate song lyrics is his plan to write an album based on the early short stories of the Nobel Prize-winning author, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. "I felt it would be interesting to bring together two forms of culture that have been traditionally perceived as opposites," explains Blades.

"The intellectual form of literature to many cannot in any way reconcile itself with drum music. And I always thought that was a bunch of crap because even intellectuals need to dance.

Gabriel being the kind of person he is, I talked to him and he was very interested."

Suggest to Blades that he is a superstar and he will steadfastly deny it. In fact, he hates the word. It connotes for him all that is wrong with the entertainment industry: Hype. Greed. Style over substance. Fame. Blades maintains, does not have to be an ego trip. That's why he continues the very un-pop-star policy of printing his home phone number on his albums. "This guy from the Chicago Tribune called the other day," he says, "and I said hello, and he said, 'You know, I can't believe you answered the phone!' Well, I understand why he thinks that, but I'm not going to live



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RUBEN BLADES. PHOTOGRAPH BY BARRY ROSENTHAL.

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Which raises a much bigger question. "You get your money, you get your name, then what do you do with your life?"

Sipping a Foster's lager in his rather spartan Upper West Side digs, Blades seems to have at least part of the answer. The furnishings are simple and comfortable. Books by authors as diverse as

Camus, Hunter S. Thompson and Marx (Groucho) line one wall. A modest all-in-one stereo plays a collection of reggae songs. "The most rewarding aspect of all this attention," he offers, "is that it proves that if you are doing something with honesty you can go anywhere." With that end in mind, Blades will be having dinner with Paul Simon that evening to talk about collaborating on Blades' next album. He has also been discussing the project with Lou Reed, Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello. There is a strong possibility that the outcome will be at least partly in English. "This is not going to be the crossover dreck of some drug-crazed record ex-

ecutive," warns Blades, unable to conceal his excitement. "This is music by serious musicians that is going to stay around and mean something. Nothing like it has ever been done before. In a year, this record is going to come out and people are going to wonder how in the hell it was even made."

It is precisely that combination of professional savvy and social responsibility that motivated Blades to put his career on hold and return to school after eleven years to earn a master's degree in international law from Harvard. For a man who wants to improve the image of Hispanics in this country and eventually lead the government in his own, nothing less than an

Ivy League education would suffice.

Someday, Blades hopes, that prestige will help him return to Panama and "bring people together" as a politician. "When somebody asks me whether I consider myself worthy to be the president of the republic, I say, 'Of course, why not?' I have the qualifications. I am over 35 years old and I have a certain academic preparation. In Panama, I am perceived as someone who has had his success at the expense of the people. You can spend your life with a little guitar singing about how we're gonna do this and how this can be done and then not do any of it. There comes a time when you have to move." □