

LATIN BEAT

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Latin Jazz, Afro-Caribbean & More... June/July 1997 Volume 7, Number 5
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TITO NIEVES - HE LIKES IT LIKE THAT!

**JOSE CURBELO, PATATO VALDES,
HILTON RUIZ, RUBEN BLADES**

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LATIN BEAT MAGAZINE

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RUBÉN BLADES AND HIS CAST OF CHARAC- TERS

By
Frank M.
Figueroa



There is a long tradition in Hispanic culture about telling stories in song. In Spain, during medieval times, the *cantares de gesta* or geste songs told about the daring adventures of fabled characters. Eventually many of these were collected in *Cancioneros*, or collections of verse. This tradition was brought to America by the Spaniards. In due time, the *payadores*, or minstrels of the pampas in Argentina and the troubadours of other Latin American countries began composing and singing their narrative songs. Much of the *tango* music of Argentina, the *guajira* music of Cuba, the *plenas* of Puerto Rico, and the Mexican *corridos* and *huapangos* also grew out of those early roots. These folk ballads of the early troubadours had long lyrics and told complete stories about famous folk heroes and historical events. Frequently, the characters were easily identifiable and at other times they were symbolic figures incorporating traits taken from several real-life individuals. These characters immortalized in song were not always models of virtue. Some of them were bandits, rebels, and fugitives. Invariably, they had a redeeming quality that endeared them to the people. Names such as: Martín Fierro, Agüeybana, Juan Charrasqueado, Pancho Villa, and Hatuey quickly come to mind.

In recent times, a composer/singer from Panamá, Rubén Blades, has popularized the narrative *salsa*. Breaking away from the strictly repetitive lyrics of the modality known as *salsa*, he chose to tell complete stories in his songs. Empowered by a good education and an inquiring mind, Blades set out to write songs that made a difference. He is convinced that you can respect your conscience and the *clave* rhythm in the same song. He was born and brought up in the middle-class neighborhoods of Panamá. In a small country such as his native land, one is never too far removed from the slums. In fact, it is not rare to find ramshackle

homes next to mansions in the city. Rubén, therefore, internalized early in his life the sorrows, frus-

trations, and dreams of the poor and destitute in his country. Blades despised the attitude of the rich toward the poor that glossed over their miserable living conditions by saying: "They are used to living that way." He had come face to face with the picaresque characters that marauded the streets of the *barrio*. These encounters left an indelible mark in his memory. The writings of Franz Kafka, Kurt Weill, Gabriel García Márquez, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, as well as existentialist and *tremendista* authors provided him with more raw material for his songs.

Speaking about the entities in his songs, Blades says: "That entire series of characters is exactly the same in all Latin America. I have had them near me since infancy." In the creation of his characters, Blades draws from his personal experience. In addition, he has the ability to symbolize very profoundly events from outside his own experience. The result is characters that truly represent what man has suffered in Latin America throughout the centuries. The composer establishes a strong link with the listener immediately. Those living in the *barrios* anywhere in the Hispanic world need no introduction since they are personally acquainted with the characters. The rest of us view the action and the characters as in a movie or television screen with all the realism it can convey and yet, having unreal, weird, and nightmarish overtones.

The cast of characters in his songs include: *campesino* rebel leaders, *barrio* bullies, pariahs, prostitutes, parish priests, and plain poor folk. Following the model of the *tremendista* novels, the characters in Blades' songs are victims of society. Their fate is set at birth and are programmed for failure. It is possible, therefore, to view them with some sympathy instead of being repelled by them. Rubén blames society, not God, for man's plight. The God-created

paradise he gave us was lost and now we must live in a man-made hell.

Perhaps the best portrayed character in the composer's songs is Pedro Navaja. It is ironic that the last name "Navaja" can be translated into English as "switch blade," and that the author's last name is Blades." If one translates "navaja" as "knife," the similarities between the characters Pedro Navaja and Kurt Weill's Mack the Knife from his *Three Penny Opera* become apparent. There is also some parallelism in the storyline of both songs. Although the setting for this episode is a Puerto Rican ghetto in New York City in the 1960s and '70s, this *guapo* or *matón* (bully) is a familiar figure in the *barrios* anywhere in the Hispanic world. Driven to the streets into a life of crime by an inexorable fate he is like a predator with inborn instincts to prey upon the weak. As such he cruises the streets of the barrio ready to strike at the first sign of weakness of any of his victims. Blades supplies Pedro Navaja with all the necessary conditions and equipment for the hunt. The environment is the crime-infested streets of a New York barrio where the residents have grown callused and indifferent to what happens around them. Criminals are free to commit their felonies, protected by the anonymity and indifference of the slums. In addition, the action is set in the darkness of night, making detection much more difficult. Pedro Navaja wears a broad-brimmed hat tilted to one side to shield his face, dark glasses, and a coat with deep pockets to keep his knife and hands out of sight. For a fast getaway, he is equipped with lightweight shoes and a gold tooth whose gleam sheds light on his path.

He cruises the streets and is ready for action, a despicable figure and yet, the way Blades portrays him, we cannot really hate this monster. We surmise that he has no marketable skills to earn an honest living. It is evident that Pedro Navaja is a holdup man and may even be a pimp. Why didn't he break out of the stranglehold of the barrio and lead a law-abiding life? Perhaps, as the protagonists of the novels of the naturalism period in literature, his parents passed on to him this legacy of crime and violence through their genes. Was it society that denied him the skills and the opportunity to lead a decent life? Was it the ravages of a love betrayal that turned him into a negative being seeking revenge at any cost? We get subtle indications that some of this happened. The woman in the song, who is not even worthy of a name, is called *esa mujer* (that woman). She is capable of sending him into a wild rage. Was it the final affront of seeing the woman he loved dearly and who betrayed

him now turned into a common prostitute? We don't really know, but Pedro Navaja laughs while he stabs her repeatedly and without mercy. *Esa mujer* shoots Pedro Navaja almost simultaneously and has the last laugh when she manages to say: "I thought this wasn't my day, that I was cursed. But you're worse, your nothing, you're nobody." In an ironic final act of mutual charity, these despondent

beings take each other out of their misery. The continuity of the cycle of misery is assured by the drunken bum who comes by, stumbles into the bodies, and picks up the revolver, the knife, two dollars, and like in a Kafka novel disappears into an alley. The song ends with a radio news broadcast reporting the crime in the typical monotone of newscasts.

Ah, but like the phoenix from Egyptian mythology, Pedro Navaja manages to rise again from his ashes. In a sequel song entitled *Sorpresas*, Rubén Blades tells of how the drunken bum who picked up the gun, the money and the knife was eventually robbed by another predator. The victim is forced to give information about the location of the bodies. The robber finds the bodies and is stabbed to death by Pedro Navaja, who apparently had not been mortally wounded. Pedro puts his own

identification papers in the back pocket of the robber in order to foil the investigation. He leaves apparently free to continue his miserable life.

Another member of Rubén Blades' cast of characters is Juan Pachanga. The composer takes him from the rogue's gallery of every Hispanic barrio, and gives him a symbolic name. Pachanga means

"partying, a time of drinking and dancing." Juan is the neighborhood's *mamito* or playboy. As is frequently the case in the urban slums, no one knows him well enough to determine how he makes a living, or where and how he lives. Juan Pachanga is, nevertheless, a very familiar figure in the streets. Everyone who goes by greets him with a "Hey men," but that is the extent of their contact with him. As far as they know, he is a perfectly happy-go-lucky man. They don't know that in his heart he is carrying the severe pain of a betrayed love. We know that Pachanga is a *mamito* and by definition, he is living off some woman he doesn't really love. Blades contrasts Juan's strange behavior against that of the other members of the barrio. In the early hours of the morning, while the rest of the community sleeps, Pachanga is still out in the street. He is the consummate pariah.

One gets the impression that Rubén Blades is acting as a movie-writer-director when he writes his songs. Before writing his script, he calls Central Casting and gets the character he needs from their large stock of types. The Wardrobe Department supplies him with the appropriate clothing for his character and the Music and Or-



chestration Division completes the project. Juan Pachanga has been well outfitted by Wardrobe. He wears the most fashionable clothes, colorful well-polished shoes, and gentlemen's cologne. Our character is ready for the cameras and all Rubén has to do is say: Ready, camera, action!

The composer sees a ray of hope for the people of the barrios. However dim it may be, it is still there and can light the way to a better life. It is only fair to say that many potential leaders and heroes live in the squalor of the inner cities of the world. In Pablo Pueblo, Rubén Blades presents us a composite portrait of those humble hard-working family men who haven't given up in spite of all the frustrations and failures. These are not the *abúlicos* (men who have given up due to a long history of failure) of the Unamuno novels. The surname Pueblo is symbolic, as is the case with the two characters previously discussed. *Pueblo* in Spanish means "people" and that is what he typifies. The composer does not give us a physical description of the character. He leaves it for us to fill in the traits and typical worker's garments he wears, drawing on our own life experiences.

Pablo Pueblo is a silent, tired man whose slow gait betrays his reluctance to go home to face the sad reality of his family life. His reward for a hard day's work is the return to the noisy, garbage-filled streets of the slum with its walls filthy by the politician's false promises. Pablo Pueblo is condemned by heredity and environment to a life of misery. He is: "the product of the streets and its screams, of misery and hunger, and of the alley way and sorrow. His only sustenance is hope." Those are the words with which Blades describes Pablo Pueblo's condition. In the *montuno* section of the song, Rubén Blades encourages Pueblo and his counterparts in all Latin America to keep on trying. Following Unamuno's existentialist principles, that man must act, no matter what that action is. Blades urges Pablo Pueblo to pray and have faith in God, try his luck with the horses, the lottery, and even playing dominoes. The important thing is not to be passive. The composer is sympathetic to Pablo Pueblo's plight, he even calls him "Pablito." One gets the feeling nevertheless, that Blades is not sure that Pablo Pueblo will find a solution to his problems. He wants him to keep struggling, to keep hoping and in so doing become "distracted," as Unamuno would say, from the fundamental problems of his existence.

The cast of characters in Rubén Blades' songs also include Ligia Elena, the upper class young girl who falls in love with a poor musician to the chagrin of her parents. In Panamá, young girls of this social status were called *rabiblanças* or white-tailed girls. Rubén's school chum, Roberto Cedeño, wrote the first sketch of the lyrics based on a much publicized tryst between a high society lady and a famous Panamanian singer. Blades added the music and finishing touches on the words. The composers used this opportunity to comment on social discrimination in Panamá. They took the name Ligia Elena from one of the small tankers used to deliver gasoline to the island of Tobago.



In the song *Cipriano Armenteros* and its sequel *Vuelve Cipriano*, Blades tells the story of a Panamanian bandit famous in 1806. After being ambushed, he escapes from the authorities and returns later to gain revenge on those who laughed at him when he was a prisoner. Unfortunately, he is captured once again and the song ends with his boast that he escaped once, and will escape again. Other characters of the same mold are: Juan González, a famed guerrilla fighter, Carmelo, Mederos, and Adán García.

The history of personal sacrifice of the Spanish priests who came to America ever since the days of Columbus is recalled in *El Padre Antonio y su monaguillo Andrés*. The song tells the story of the senseless murder of a humble parish priest by a Salvadoran death squad. Padre Antonio gave up his comfortable position at the Vatican and all hopes of becoming Bishop for a

dusty, obscure small town in El Salvador. Many of us have known similar Spanish priests serving unselfishly in Latin America. (In fact, at one time some of us assumed all catholic priests came from Spain.) Padre Antonio left his homeland to come preach the gospel in shirt-sleeves in the sweltering heat of the tropics. In addition to leading souls to Christ, he guided the lives of young men and women such as his altar boy Andrés. Padre Antonio paid the ultimate price for the nonpolitical crime of helping the poor. He and Andrés were murdered during Holy mass in front of the altar in his parish church. In one of his inspirations in the *montuno* Blades compares the death of Padre Antonio with the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero by the Salvadoran paramilitary in 1980.

While not exactly a cast of thousands, the characters in Rubén Blades' songs are indeed many. You may remember Los Plásticos, Manuela, Carla C, Rosa Bonilla, Madame Kalalú, Juana Mayo, and Doña Lelé. It is possible that in due time, inspired by one of his favorite authors, Gabriel García Márquez, Blades may populate his musical world with as many characters as there are in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Perhaps as in one of Unamuno's novels, the characters in Rubén Blades' songs may even rebel against him and insist on singing their own inspirations in his *montunos*. Come to think of it, that's a good idea. A song in which the characters sing to their creator, very much like all those tribute albums we have gotten to dislike in recent times. Juan Pachanga improvises a line to which the *coro* replies. The others follow suit until none of us, including Rubén, can take it any longer. On second thought, perhaps Rubén Blades wouldn't allow this to happen. His legally trained mind would demand that the order of creation, with the creator on top and his creatures below him, be respected.

Rubén Blades' most recent recording production, *La Rosa de los Vientos*, was awarded a Grammy in the Tropical Music category at the 1997 Grammy Awards.

The CD was recorded in Panamá with native musicians and focused on the music and folklore of Rubén's country. Through sixteen compositions and numerous characters, he gave us a taste of his homeland and more great music. **LB**