

In his own field of modern Latin music, RUBEN BLADES has always been a star. But for his new record he's teamed up with Lou Reed, Elvis Costello and Sting, and is set for widespread success in America. He talks to RICHARD GRABEL

# OTHER VOICES

## WHIRLING BLADES

By the time his first major label album came out in 1984, Ruben Blades was already a major salsa star and a unique figure in that music's world.

The conventions of Latin music had called for lyrics written to strict formulaic rules. Idealized romanticism, self-pitying melancholy, or party-party-party were the marching orders of Latin pop. Blades arrived on the New York salsa scene, fresh from the University of Panama, and proceeded to throw out those rules.

In place of the old cliches he wrote narratives peopled with characters drawn from life, charged with deep emotions. He wrote of street murders, of generations of barrio families, of topics ranging from the pointedly political to the touchingly personal.

His records on the Fania label, by himself or in collaboration with Willie Colon, were wildly popular with a generation of salsa fans — Ruben's generation — that had grown tired of the old lyrical limits.

The old-line salsa stars spoke to an older generation's nostalgia for a romanticised Latin paradise that would never be regained. Blades' new salsa spoke to a generation proud to be Latin but struggling to find its place in the Anglo world. He raised an angry voice to confront the problems they faced, and a hopeful voice to give encouragement to their dreams.

When Elektra released his ground-breaking

'Buscando America' many rock critics found their first salsa album in their mail packages, and Ruben Blades for the first time found himself the object of the attention of the pop press.

"Yeah", he recalls, "because they read the lyrics. I provided translations, so they went, oh, this is interesting. It's not like, 'arriva arriva, oye oye'. It was, this guy's really saying things. There was a lot of attention. And at one point I said, wait a minute, this is getting out of hand, all this attention, I think I better go back to school."

So Blades followed up on an application he had filed for a dare and went off to Harvard to take a graduate degree in International Law. Not a very careerist move for a rising young salsa star, but completely in keeping with Blades' character.

As a young law student in Panama City, Blades undertook a research project to study local prison conditions, thinking of working to organize for prisoner's right, but was finally dissuaded by the deadly looks and constant threats he got from the authorities.

Upon graduation with a law degree, rather than resign himself to a job in a bank, he took off for New York to play music. He is not afraid of career changes. After Harvard, he went back to recording albums for Elektra — 'Escenas' ('Scenes') and the introspective and subtle 'Agua De Luna'.

He also began a film career. He co-wrote the script for Leon Ichaso's excellent *Crossover Dreams*, and starred as Rudy Veloz, a New York salsa singer who makes the kind of mistakes — turning his back on his identity in an attempt to go mainstream — that Blades in his own life has been conscious to avoid.

He also had a part, with Richard Pryor, in a mediocre comedy called *Critical Condition*. Likely to be much more noteworthy is his major role in Robert Redford's new film *The Milagro Beanfield War*, a study of development and displacement among the Mexican-American inhabitants of a small New Mexico town.

To this multi-faceted career, Blades has just added a new dimension, with the release of 'Nothing But The Truth', his first English language album.

The album was recorded in LA with producers Tommy LiPuma and Carlos Rios, except for two songs produced in New York by Blades and Lou Reed. The songs include collaborations between Blades and Reed, Blades and Elvis Costello and a contribution from Sting. With all of this heavy name-recognition factor in the project, you might think that Blades was trying to 'crossover' himself.

But remember that Blades was a star a long time ago. He had, he says, another agenda in mind. And as you talk with this very bright, very appealing man, the sincerity in his words is apparent.

"I didn't do this English album thinking, this is my way to greener pastures", he says. "I've always thought I was already in a place where the grass was green."

"I never felt that in order to get some here I

bars, barrio murders, Central American death squads, friends dying of AIDS or lovers reviewing a romance, Blades and his collaborators come up with startlingly fluid and evocative language. No one else is writing songs quite like this.

This English language pop/rock project brings Ruben Blades back full circle. When he started playing music, as a boy in Panama, it was in local bands that played covers of the current pop hits.

Then, as now, American culture exercised an all too pervasive influence on the pop culture of the world and in Latin America this influence was heightened by geographical proximity.

Blades: "I grew up with radio that had no format. You would hear a ranchera by Jorge Negrita, for instance, and then a Frank Sinatra song, then Elvis Presley and then a Peruvian waltz."

"The other thing that was important in creating an affinity with rock was that, when we were young, the only people we had as role models as singers were guys that were much older. Guys with moustaches, singing boleros or salsa or whatever."

"So the big thing was then I went to the movies and saw Frankie Lymon in *Rock Rock Rock* or something, and he was like 12-years-old and I was probably around six, but I could see him for the kid he was. And I had never seen a kid sing, let alone in the movies, with such an impact when you have it coming from the screen, larger than life. And they were doing that kind of music that was just coming out of doo-wop. You could sing that, you didn't even need a band."

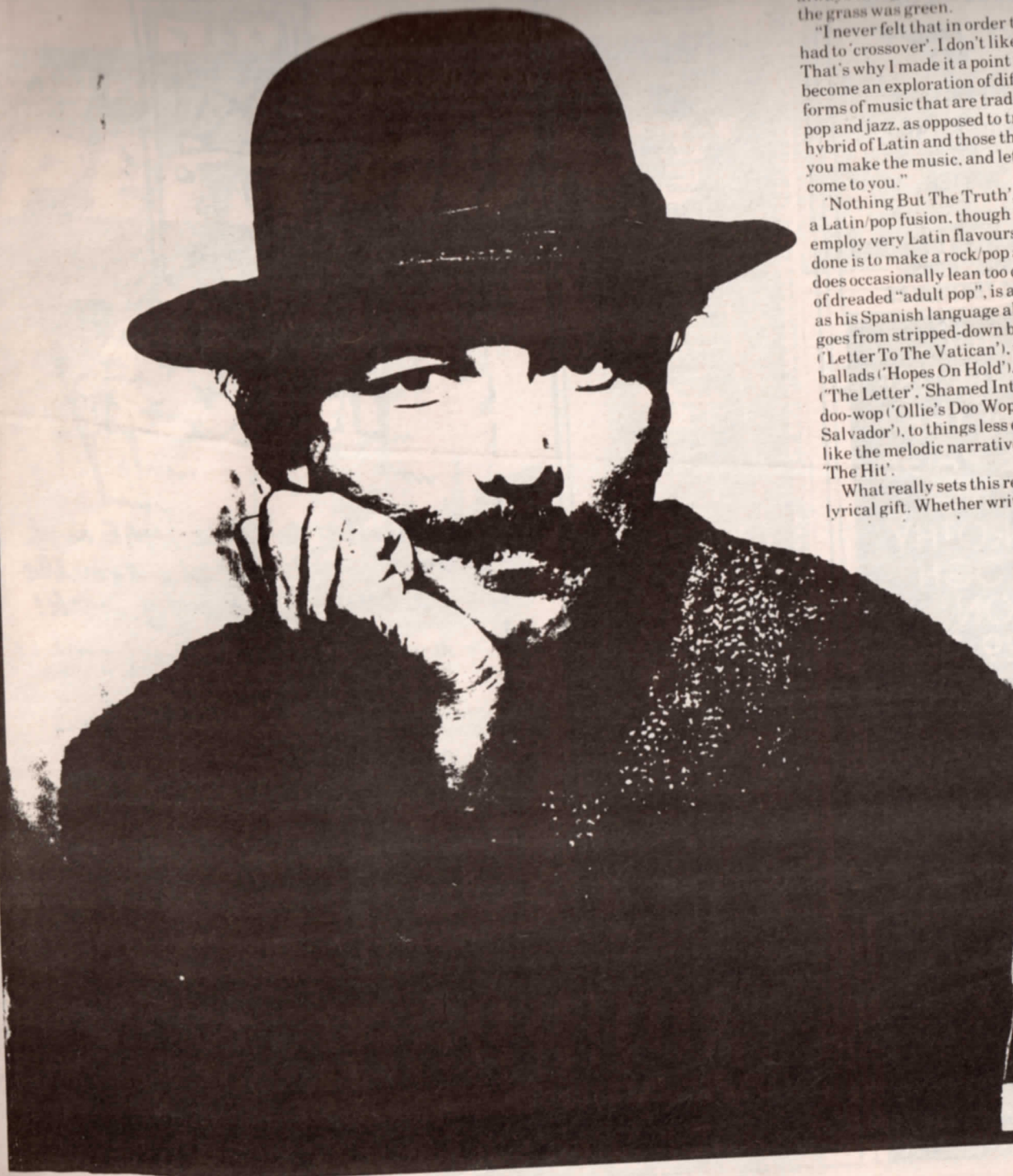
"The fact that it was in English didn't bother us because we were listening to the melodies, and we would mimic the lyrics and do it phonetically, the way we heard it."

"The other thing was seeing guys like Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, jumping around with those guitars. In those days, if you wanted to be a musician you were supposed to learn to play the piano, or the conga. But the guitar... every house, no matter how poor, had an old guitar somewhere that some uncle would pull out at parties and sing old Spanish standards. So you just had to borrow one of those old guitars and get three chords happening and already you could play a song."

"So most of us began singing in small rock bands. When I was 12, 13, I was playing in these little bands. You'd get to go to parties, you'd get paid a dollar, you'd get to sing and shake a tambourine, a couple of girls are looking at you, and all of a sudden you're a musician."



When Elektra released his ground-breaking De Luna



"I didn't do this English album thinking, this is my way to greener pastures", he says. "I've always thought I was already in a place where the grass was green."

"I never felt that in order to get somewhere I had to 'crossover'. I don't like that connotation. That's why I made it a point to have the album become an exploration of different moods and forms of music that are traditional to rock and pop and jazz, as opposed to trying just to make a hybrid of Latin and those things. My position is, you make the music, and let those who like it come to you."

"Nothing But The Truth", is not an attempt at a Latin/pop fusion, though many of its songs employ very Latin flavours. What Blades has done is to make a rock/pop album that, even if it does occasionally lean too close toward the side of dreaded "adult pop", is as stylistically diverse as his Spanish language albums, a record that goes from stripped-down bar-band rockers ('Letter To The Vatican'), to romantic pop ballads ('Hopes On Hold'), plaintive ballads ('The Letter', 'Shamed Into Love'), political doo-wop ('Ollie's Doo Wop') and reggae/rock ('In Salvador'), to things less easily categorizable, like the melodic narrative and killer chorus of 'The Hit'.

What really sets this record apart is Blades' lyrical gift. Whether writing of bag ladies in

little bands. You'd get to go to parties, you'd get paid a dollar, you'd get to sing and shake a tambourine, a couple of girls are looking at you, and all of a sudden you're a musician."

But in 1964, major rioting in Panama's Canal Zone, then controlled by the US Army, left 21 people dead and 500 wounded. For 15-year-old Blades, it was the beginning of a political awareness and the end of singing America's songs.

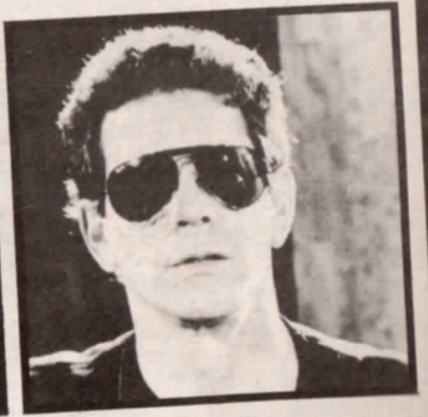
Blades: "That love affair with rock 'n' roll had an abrupt end for many Panamanians when we had the riots with the US Army. We had the US Army in the streets shooting at unarmed people. The only thing we were demanding was the right to see our flag flown in the Canal Zone. So when we saw the US Army turned on us, many of us who had unconditionally accepted everything about the US began to ask some real hard questions. And many of us stopped playing rock 'n' roll and singing in English."

"I felt very angry. It felt like finding out the person you thought was your friend was your enemy. And I blamed myself for not having paid more attention."

"It shocked us into growing up, and realizing that we were not all going to go to California and have rock 'n' roll bands and surf, none of that stuff."

"We might have held onto the music a little bit more. The Beatles came out and they were from England. So I was listening to the Beatles and still keeping up with what was going on. I knew the music was not guilty for this. But as far as performing, it felt ridiculous for us at the

**Ruben Blades (left) and collaborators Elvis Costello and Lou Reed.**



**CONTINUES PAGE 49**





## RECORDS WANTED

**ABSOLUTELY ALL YOUR** Records, Cassettes, and C.D.s Bought or Exchanged **NONE REFUSED!** Bring ANY Quantity in ANY Condition to Record Tape & Video Exchange, 38 Nighting Hill Gate, London W.11 (Open 7 days 10a.m.-8p.m. - 01-243 8573) or **SEND** any quantity by post with S.A.E. for cash - none returned once sent. We decide fair price. (Quantities collected ANYWHERE).

**APPLE-APPLE** A Day LP. £175 paid. 0752 229588.

**BATH FESTIVAL** 69, 70 programmes inc Zeppelin, £15 paid each. 0752 229588.

**BBC TRANSCRIPTION** services LPs wanted. Top prices. 0752 229588.

**BEATLES AUTOGRAPHS** genuine wanted. 0752 229588.

**BEATLES TOUR** programmes £15 each paid. 0752 229588.

**BEATLES XMAS FAN CLUB** Flexis. Please state condition, year and price required. Box No. 7505.

**BEN 'BEN'** LP £80 paid. 0752 229588.

**CASSETTES WANTED** S.A.E. for quote or tel: 0272 564122. Large quantities collected **FREE**. The Tape Store, 43 Westbourne Road, Downend, Bristol.

**COB RECORDS** High Street, Porthmadog, Gwynedd, Buy or Part-Exchange L.P.s, Tapes, C.D.s. List + S.A.E. For Valuation or Phone 0766 513185.

**CZAR 'CZAR'** LP £50 paid 0752 229588.

**DISCOMIX CLUB** records wanted. £10 each. 0752 229588.

**EYES 'ARRIVAL'** EP £45 paid. 0752 229588.

**GOLD & SILVER** discs wanted. 0752 229588.

**HELP! RECKLESS RECORDS** pay top prices for records/tapes/C.D.s. 01-359 0501.

**INCREDIBLE HOG** LP £25 paid. 0752 229588.

**MADONNA 'CRAZY'** pic disc £8 paid. 0752 229588.

**MAGIC CARPET** Mushroom label LP. £60 paid. 0752 229588.

**MONEY AVAILABLE** for records, tapes, C.D.s, S.A.E. for quote or tel: 0272 564122. Large quantities collected **FREE**. Alan's Records, 43 Westbourne Road, Downend, Bristol.

**PINNACLE 'ASSASSIN'** LP £30 paid. 0752 229588.



## RECORDS WANTED

**PRIMITIVES SINGLES** Stop Killing Me 7"/12", Really Stupid 7"/12", Thru The Flowers 12". 09274 29474.

**RIPOFF RECORDS**, Maesycoed Road, Lampeter, Dyfed SA48 7JE. Albums, cassettes, CDs, singles, videos wanted. Absolutely top prices paid! Send direct or S.A.E. for quote.

**ROULETTES 'STAKES 'n' Chips'** LP. £75 paid. 0752 229588.

**SAVILLE THEATRE** concert programmes wanted. Hendrix, Floyd etc. £25 each. 0752 229588.

**ZEPPELIN KNEBORTH** concert programme, £8 paid. 0752 229588.



## VIDEO

**DAVID BOWIE** (VHS) S.A.E. 6 Orache Drive, Maidstone ME14 5UG.

**DYLAN RARITIES** Inc. U.K. '87 tour. S.A.E. to 8 Beatrice Road, Norwich NR1 4BB.

**MICHAEL JACKSON** live! Full TV concert, Japan plus 1 hour tour documentary. £15. Steve, 35 Barnburgh Close, Washington, Tyne and Wear. NE38 0HN.

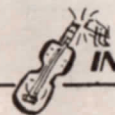
**MICHAEL JACKSON** Superb quality video of entire concert from Japanese TV (not Bootleg). Phone 021-475 6484.

**PETROL EMOTION** videos (0224) 722260.

**SISTERS, MISSION**, Eves, 1988 material. S.A.E. to Mark, 55 Silverleigh Road, Thornton Heath, Surrey CR4 6DZ.

**TODD RUNDGREN** - Venue 1982, OGW - Bearsville/studio 1970s. Peter Hammill HTV special. Zappa/Sylvian/Hammill promo B/W photos. 50 Exmath Street, Swindon.

**6" x 5" TELEVISION/VIDEO PICTURES** in your own home! Guaranteed lens costs £18.99 (refundable) from Bigtime Enterprises, 8 Stockwell Lane, Brandesburton, E Yorks YO25 8RP.



## INSURANCE

**MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**, equipment insurance. For the best deal. Phone Sandra 0423 330711.



## WANTED

**AVANTI!** Forthcoming tapezine requires contributors musical and journalistic. Independent/avant garde. Details, S.A.E. 6 Bedford Gardens, Leeds LS16 6DH. Tapes welcome.

**AVERAGE WHITE** Band. Wanted desperately, live tapes, concert photos, concert posters, tour programmes, videos. Michael Drucas, 17 Phillips Beach Ave, Swampscott, Mass 01907 U.S.A.

**BLONDIE/DEBBIE** Harry Photo. Pete, 5 Cromwell Street, Heywood, Lancs OL10 1BX.

**GENE LOVES** Jezebel articles, photos. Fans write to A Grandi, Via Fioravanti, 12 20154 Milano, Italy.

**JOHN CALE** videos wanted. I buy or swap every video. Please write in any case to Gerhard Lickleder, Yorkstrasse 7, 8400 Regensburg, West Germany.

**MICHAEL JACKSON** two tickets for any concert date. Swap for 23rd July, Wembley. Tel: 0202 752459.

**MODS! BOOK** By Richard Barnes, Mark Baxter, 165 Elmington Road, Camberwell, London SE5 7QZ.

**WANTED VOX** or Meazzi echo unit, produced between 1960-1962, or information please, leading to purchase. Tel: 061-436 7078.



## FAN CLUBS

**MONTY PYTHON** Society. Send S.A.E. for details. Box No 7502.



## INSTRUMENTS FOR SALE

**ROLAND GR 700** G707 guitar synth and controller plus PG200 programmer. £1,600 o.n.o. Djon 01-937 5023 after 6.30pm.

**YAMAHA BX1** headless bass including case. As new £335 daytime 04427 2595, evenings 08444 6188.

## GOT SOMETHING TO SELL?

It's only 30p per word to advertise in NME Classifieds

# RUBEN BLADES

FROM PAGE 42

time to be singing in English when American soldiers were beating us up. At that point I said 'no, I have to know who I am first'."

So why sing in English now?

"Well, politically I feel much more knowledgeable. Now I have a character that is mine, I have an understanding of myself as a political being, as a person. And I also understand that part of the reason we had that conflict at that time was that North Americans really don't understand Latin Americans.

"And the way to create understanding is through communication. By making an album in English I hope I'm going to help dispel a lot of myths about Latin Americans, that we must sing 'La Cucharacha', all that nonsense. I want to show that music is not a privilege that is accorded in terms of racial background but that it is according to the soul, according to the heart.

"There are over 20 million Latins in this country. We're not going to go away. So you might as well begin to get to know us. And on our side, our responsibility is to present our culture in the most articulate way, so we can allow those who are not part of our culture by birth to understand what it is about."

Blades first met Lou Reed when they appeared in the 'Sun City' video together. Blades calls Reed a good friend, and says he's had a bum rap over the years for his "difficult personality".

"Lou and I, I think, are both writers who ended up singing. We have a lot of things in common. Lou is the ultimate New Yorker. He's a funny guy, a very compassionate guy, and he doesn't take any shit from anybody, which I really respect. It's kind of unusual in this business, where people usually become more and more bland. But he's not pretentious at all. Very down to earth."

Another collaborator with a 'difficult reputation' was Elvis Costello.

"He's a tremendous writer. You read all these things about Elvis, that he's the *enfant terrible* of rock. But I met him once at a recording session and he turned out to be intelligent, articulate, a low key person. We talked about music in general. We both disliked the formula thing, we both felt music should be allowed to breathe.

"So I invited him and he came to stay with my wife and I, and I was astonished at his facility to write. I would get up at 8.30 in the morning and I would hear the typewriter going and in the living room I would find Elvis writing.

"We would talk and talk about what we were going to do, and whatever he wrote, I would immediately try to put a melody to it, whatever I felt the first time I read the lyrics.

"I wanted to work with those people, not only because I didn't know if I could write in English with the same passion and quality as I can in Spanish, but also, I wanted to use the opportunity to establish a cultural connection between an established salsa songwriter and these established pop songwriters. And everybody said alright."

**In The Milagro Beanfield War**, Blades plays a smalltown Chicano sheriff who must mediate between the townspeople and the developers who will change their way of life.

"He's the guy in the middle. He understands the townspeople, and he's torn between his affection for them and his anger at their lack of resolution, their inability to make a decision."

Did it seem odd, considering how many times in your songs you have decried the crimes of various types of policemen, to be playing a Sheriff?

"No, I could identify with being the man caught in the middle. Because I'm always trying to educate, in one way or another. And I've always gone against the current."

For the future, Blades will be recording another Spanish language album, but his long-range plans, he says, definitely include a return to Panama to do political and organizational work. He shies away from saying so himself, but some who know him say that, should the current military dictatorship step aside, Blades would like someday to run for the Panamanian Presidency.

"I think my time here in the States is running out. I would just like to contribute to a better understanding of the Latin reality.

"Then I can go back to my country and make a difference there. Perhaps I had to first get out of my country and do all these things in order to become a better person and to really understand what the issues are."

Having met Blades, I would not put any achievement beyond his capacity. He is an extraordinary man and, I came to believe in two nights of speaking with him, a very good man as well.

"Finally, I want to show that, whatever success you have, the nature of your character does not have to change. You can be successful without that being the mortgage through which your soul is bought."

Ruben Blades, I'll venture, will not double-cross the ones he loves.