

Episode 01: Rubén Blades

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Rubén Blades is one of the most successful artists in the history of Latin music. His Afro-Cuban albums touched with rock, jazz, pan-Latin, and other influences have won 17 Grammy and Latin Grammy Awards. As an actor, he has starred in the AMC television series *Fear the Walking Dead*, and has worked with directors including Robert Redford, Spike Lee, and Ridley Scott.

Away from the arts, Blades is equally active, holding degrees in political science and law from the University of Panama, and an LLM from Harvard Graduate Law School. In 1994, he ran for president of the Republic of Panama, coming in third place, and later served as Panama's minister of tourism from 2004–2009. Blades has been a UN World Ambassador Against Racism, and was recipient of ASCAP's Harry Chapin Humanitarian Award.

Full Transcript

Andy Hamilton Interviews Rubén Blades

Subway Conductor: [00:00:02] This is...this is West 8th Street, New York University.

Announcer: [00:00:14] From New York University, you're listening to *Conversations*, hosted by President Andy Hamilton. In each episode, Andy talks insight, inquiry, and imagination with a leading mind from the NYU community.

Andy Hamilton: [00:00:33] Today, we welcome Rubén Blades, one of the most successful artists in the history of Latin music. His landmark albums and Afro Cuban music have won 17 Grammy and Latin Grammy Awards. As an actor, he has starred in the AMC television series *Fear the Walking Dead* and he has appeared in numerous films with directors such as Robert Redford, our own Spike Lee, and Ridley Scott. Away from the arts, Rubén is equally accomplished, holding a master's degree in international law from Harvard University. In 1994, he ran for president of his native country Panama, coming in third place with 18 percent of the vote. He later served a five-year term beginning in 2004 as Panama's minister of tourism. This year, we have been proud to welcome him to NYU as the NYU Steinhardt School dean's inaugural scholar in residence.

Andy Hamilton: [00:01:47] Rubén, I'd love to start talking about you. And that's a hard thing to begin because there are so many different words, so many nouns that have been applied to you: actor, singer, songwriter, musician, activist, lawyer, politician—and those nouns of course are expressed both in English and in Spanish. How do you link among them; are there common themes?

Rubén Blades: [00:02:14] One of the things that I think allowed me to follow all these diverse directions is that I was never impeded. I was never told, "You can't do this." I had people who encouraged me to read. I think education was totally, totally paramount. Education was the most important reason to explain why I could go to all these different places on the one hand, and on the other hand it was a way that my family acted, the way that they conducted themselves, which kept me always with my feet on the ground and my eyes on the horizon.

Andy Hamilton: [00:03:03] Now were your parents, your grandparents, were they musically talented? Was music something that was ringing in your ears morning, noon, and night?

Rubén Blades: [00:03:14] My mother was a singer and at one point a radio actress. But in my house we really didn't have a piano. We did not have that constant sort of exposure to performances and what not, but we did listen a lot to the radio at the time. There was no television in those days.

Andy Hamilton: [00:03:41] I remember those days.

Rubén Blades: [00:03:42] Some people will be amazed that there were no credit cards either. You know you saved and then you bought things you needed.

Andy Hamilton: [00:03:51] I think that world of radio—because radio in a wonderful way stimulates the imagination in a sense that television doesn't do.

Rubén Blades: [00:04:01] Radio was like reading but through sound. You imagine all these things. And my grandmother was a teacher so she taught me how to read when I was about 5. And I think that that was very, very, very, like I said, pivotal. That was a very, very important moment. My father at one point was a percussionist, but also he didn't play in the house; I never saw him perform. So my family, they really were not encouraging me to be a musician. They wanted me to do better than them. Neither of them had finished school so they wanted me to finish school.

Andy Hamilton: [00:04:39] Hearing, as you've said, your grandmother was a teacher in many respects, and you know both of my parents were teachers and I think just something you said earlier about you know, living in a family where no barriers were set, no impediments to exploring the things that fascinate you, the things that excite you. And I think that's something, a very powerful message that education provides.

Rubén Blades: [00:05:06] Education! My grandmother was, I never will forget she said once, "You can be poor, physically. You can be poor materially, but never be poor spiritually, never be poor intellectually." And that was her position. Those who knew, those who were educated will never be poor. So that was very, very strong...

Andy Hamilton: [00:05:30] So when did you know, what was the moment or what was the set of circumstances that you realized that you had a passion for music and also were good?

Rubén Blades: [00:05:43] I think when I was about, I saw when I was probably around, let me see...maybe I was 9 or 10 years old. I saw a young man singing in a movie. The movie was I think *Rock Rock Rock*. And the young man was Frankie Lyman. And he was doing doo-wop with a group called the Teenagers. And I had never seen someone so young singing. I always saw older, what I would consider older people that are probably in their 20s, but to me they were older people. And when I saw him singing and having so much fun I thought, "Oh, I'd love to do that." So in that moment...

Andy Hamilton: [00:06:31] And that was someone not that much older than you so you could see it as possible.

Rubén Blades: [00:06:39] Absolutely. And I thought, "Oh, that's a wonderful thing." In that moment I thought, "Oh, this is something that I could do." And then later on, when I was 16, for the first time I really sang with a professional group. I thought, "I could probably do this." Because people seem to like it and the band accepted me. And then after that, that was interrupted for a while because I went to law school. And the dean of the law school, Dulio Arroyo, who was also the contracts professor when I was studying law. He brought me to an office just like yours and sat me down and asked me...

Andy Hamilton: [00:07:27] I bet he didn't have a hawk's nest on the, on the ledge outside.

Rubén Blades: [00:07:32] No, he didn't. He had it in his head. And he said to me, are you going to be a musician or are you going to be a lawyer? And that was the end of my music. At that time, that was the end of my music possibility, possible career. I just dedicated myself to school.

Andy Hamilton: [00:07:51] But then later you realized that you could be both?

Rubén Blades: [00:07:54] No, actually later I left Panama because of the military coup. There was a military dictatorship. My family left in '73, and I decided that I was not gonna be a lawyer under a dictatorship and left in '74. I followed them to Florida, they were having a lot of trouble. My diploma meant nothing there. So I thought of music again. I called a company in New York that was the biggest company in Afro Latin music, Fania Records, and I got a job in the mailroom and then from the mailroom I went to an audition by Ray Barretto and then my life began as a musician again.

Andy Hamilton: [00:08:37] It's wonderful to hear that story, so many people get a great start in the mailroom. It seems to be something...

Rubén Blades: [00:08:43] It's not a fun job.

Andy Hamilton: [00:08:45] Exactly. It makes you want to get out and onto the next step.

Rubén Blades: [00:08:51] The most difficult thing was that because I was mailing records, the US Post Office refused to pick up the mail because it was so heavy. So I had to get all the stuff in in a wagon that was at the bottom of the building and push that from Fifty-Seventh and Seventh Avenue all the way to Fifty-Second and Eighth [Avenue], which is where the post office was. And it was no fun to do that in New York traffic.

Andy Hamilton: [00:09:19] So it stimulated your creativity but also your muscles.

Rubén Blades: [00:09:23] Absolutely. It was a great experience.

Andy Hamilton: [00:09:26] Rubén, just coming back to your early life, you mentioned Frankie Lyman. I was fascinated to hear you say in an interview the influence that the Beatles had on you. You're listening to the Beatles and just this, you know a child growing up in Panama, the different global influences. For me, obviously myself growing up in the UK, to think of a group of Liverpool lads having the role and the influence that they had on you all those thousands of miles away.

Rubén Blades: [00:09:57] I guess the fact that they were from Liverpool, which is also a port city, and the fact that Panama has coasts on both sides, I think that all types of ideas went. And actually when the Beatles went from Liverpool to Hamburg, they also went to a port city. So you have all these ideas early in their career very early. They have all these different influences. If you pay attention you can learn. And with the Beatles, the thing that helped us as well was that the DJs in Panama played all types of music. So we were listening to all types of music. I knew of them but I didn't know who they were because they weren't identified. I heard "She Loves You" and I didn't know who was playing it because I didn't have a record player. And if you hear it on the radio and they don't identify who it was, then you don't know who it was. And then the US had the Canal Zone. They had a TV station there, Channel 8 armed forces television system. And some friends of ours had a television set and they said that on Sunday, every Sunday the television in the Canal Zone would show the Ed Sullivan Theater a week later. And the Beatles played at *The Ed Sullivan Show*. So a week later we saw it in Panama. I went over and I saw them and I said, "What strange haircuts!" And I had never seen that before. And then they sang "She Loves You" and I thought, "Oh! These are the guys! So they're called the Beatles." And then we started sort of following. The thing with the Beatles that I found always was first of all, the vocal harmonies. And secondly, the structure of their melodies. I mean it was just like nothing I've ever heard so they were a huge influence.

Andy Hamilton: [00:11:57] Yeah, yeah. It's fascinating as you compare that: the Beatles and your own journey through developing your musical talent and recognizing it there. But there is a fundamental step that the Beatles certainly went through dramatically. But you did yourself as well, and that's from developing your musical talent to then playing in front of thousands, tens of thousands, and ultimately millions of people. How did you, how does one make that transition? I'm a scientist and so I've never talked about science in front of millions. I can assure you. But for a musician there must be a very special sort of mental transition that you have to make to do that.

Rubén Blades: [00:12:44] I had panic. My original memory is...

Andy Hamilton: [00:12:49] Panic can be quite useful sometimes.

Rubén Blades: [00:12:51] We're going to make you run faster than you think you're able to. My first show in New York City, I was working in a mailroom of the record label. One of its stars had an album and was beginning a new band, Ray Barretto. My first show in New York City. My first show after coming from Panama and all that was at Madison Square Garden.

Andy Hamilton: [00:13:18] Wow!

Rubén Blades: [00:13:19] And it was 20,000 people. And I went out and I was supposed to sing, not supposed, I did sing this song that was very popular. And I sang the first verse and forgot the second verse. I mean I was overwhelmed. And then I repeated the first verse and it just...

Andy Hamilton: [00:13:38] And it came?

Rubén Blades: [00:13:39] No, no it never did. No, I just repeated that first verse and I don't think anyone...

Andy Hamilton: [00:13:44] No one noticed!

Rubén Blades: [00:13:45] I hope not! Anyway, they have ample time to get over it. But then, I never wanted to be in front of many people. I never wanted to be that exposed, but I was a writer and I did not like the way that my songs were being sung. I thought that I could sing them better. But I didn't really. This is one of the biggest mysteries of my life. How did I end up, as you say, exposed? I never wanted to do that. I was very, very shy, and I still am to a degree. But how did I ended up being a musician? I don't know. But the thing is, when you go out, one thing that helped me is that I write my own material. So when I go out, I see people and I find myself as if I were in front of their home or with them. I don't, I don't, I don't. The numbers never really got to me except for that one time.

Music from the song "Plastico": [00:14:41]

Andy Hamilton: [00:15:11] But another transition happened in your career, and that transition from playing music for entertainment, for fun, for the audience is entertainment and fun to that transition of music and your own involvement in social change, in politics, in influencing the direction of society. How did that transition occur? Was it deliberate? Was it accidental?

Rubén Blades: [00:15:43] It was a product of observation and experience. There was a Brazilian group in 1965 called Jungle Trio. I heard them sing a song called "El Niño con las Naranjas" — "The Child with the Oranges." In another song called "La Tierra de Nadie," which is "No One's Land," and they were a jazz vocal group, three part harmony. The fact that they were doing popular music with themes that had to do, that had political implications, social implications was a discovery for me. And another guy from Argentina, Piero wrote a song about his father and he sang it as a ballad. And at that moment I said I want to start writing songs about what's around us either as a protagonist experience or as a witness. But that's what I'm going to start doing because I've found everyone else was just writing escapist songs and basically songs about love. They weren't writing about what was happening around us. That also took me into making political comments. I was never considered, I never considered myself a political singer because I am not an ideological singer. I'm not into propaganda. But the songs are, it's impossible to escape the political implications, consequences when you live in an environment that is so affected by politics. So I didn't shy away from that. And because I started writing about things that no one else wrote, then I got tagged like a protest singer, which I never quite liked because the moment that they put the tag on you, then they say, well this is what you are. And I refuse to be tagged or labeled as if I was in a sort of National Geographic safari.

Andy Hamilton: [00:17:44] And you clearly demonstrated that in your career because then another transition occurred from a musician making social commentary to a politician, to a minister of government—minister for tourism, and then eventually someone running for president. Was, again, was that natural or was it something that you foresaw as your political involvement increased?

Rubén Blades: [00:18:17] I sort of thought of it when I went into law, that one day I was gonna be in public and have a public office. I wanted to be, I considered being an architect but I'm not very good at math, and a doctor—I can't stand blood. Law, I'm interested in social change, my grandmother was also. So that and reading, I remember I read a book by Samuel Liebowitz, who is a Jewish lawyer from New York who defended the Scottsboro Boys, and that book had a big influence on me. And so I wanted to learn, I figured this is what I would do if I want to be involved in public office, everyone seems to be a lawyer. So I was interested in social change obviously and I went into that but I

became involved in politics as an act of self-defense, basically. I just, there was so much mediocrity and corruption that I felt that I had to be a part of whatever opposed that. And that's why we created a political movement in 1990, Papa Ergo. And I ran for president in '84, and it was an interesting example of what we can do, grassroots, if we organized. We came third out of 27 political parties, I came third out of seven candidates, and it was proof that you can successfully do something, not just write and complain but actually do something, and we did.

Andy Hamilton: [00:19:55] And you also experienced that responsibility of politicians of running things, running a ministry of tourism, one that people's jobs depended upon, the economy of the country was dependent upon. And how did you find that? Was it something you warmed to? Was it the running of a department?

Rubén Blades: [00:20:18] It was wonderful. I went in, I became a lawyer for five years again. I had 444 people that I had to oversee, an industry that I had produced when I walked, when I incorporated myself to the job it was a half a million—I'm sorry, 500 million, 560 million dollars to the gross national product. And when I left five years later with a billion, 200 million. So it was an interesting experience also to go to the Senate and defend a budget, to have to fire and appoint people, to actually travel through the country trying to create new impresarios and to teach people that they can aspire to be employees but they could actually have their own enterprises. I mean that was very, very—for me, very rewarding because I grew up in a family where we were taught that we should study to get a good job. No one ever taught me to study to become an impresario. And we were doing that and that was wonderful. I really enjoyed it, and actually I left government knowing that, in fact, you can change things from government. I wasn't sure when I walked in if that was possible, but it is possible. So I am still, in spite of everything that we see and hear every day, especially nowadays, I'm still very, very confident that we can turn the corner.

Andy Hamilton: [00:21:53] Well I'm going to ask you that question that I know everyone is going to want me to ask you, and are you going to run again?

Rubén Blades: [00:21:59] I was thinking about it and not in this particular occasion in 2019, but this is something that I find I never will discard it. I think that I can participate in many ways, but I would not shy away from participating in public life again because, like I said, when I left I was not disappointed. I felt that things can be done. We just need to work as a hand, not as fingers, which is the problem that we encounter in politics.
Music from the song "Todos Vuelven": [00:22:32]

Andy Hamilton: [00:23:16] Let's come back to NYU, as time moves on and you know you've described your career, you've described the different stages and influences on it. Now as you talk to NYU students at Steinhardt and beyond, as you talk to them, as they talk to you about their careers. What are you telling them? What's your experience of their worries, their concerns, their opportunities, and particularly as they seek to balance musical and artistic careers with also the desire to affect change?

Rubén Blades: [00:23:55] They, as I remember myself, are in transition. These are minds that are being molded, they're developing. And the one thing I always tell them is that it's okay to make mistakes. And the pressure they feel, they feel a lot of pressure many of them from their parents and from the environment itself, that it's okay, that it's not unusual—they are not less because they have doubts. I had doubts, and we all have doubts. What I ask them is to keep focused and to not lose faith and I place myself—I put myself as an example. I mean I failed music in school. I failed music in school, I failed artistic education in school. I also failed math. That's understandable, given the fact that I'm not good at math still. But so I tell them that and to keep their focus on what's probable, not to expect more than what they know at the time to experience, not to be afraid of experiences, not to be afraid of failure, not to doubt themselves, not to doubt what they know, and to just instill in them the notion that it is possible to be successful, without having to succumb to what others consider that they should do in order to be successful. That they should follow their instincts, follow their heart, follow their dream, but be always, always—keep your feet on the earth and the eye on the horizon, which is what I have always done.

Andy Hamilton: [00:25:49] That message is so important, the message of taking risks and allowing artistic development to happen with mistakes. Do you worry, Rubén? You know I worry sometimes the nature of modern media, the nature of social media. This generation of students, perhaps differently from the '70s and the '80s, face a kind of you know constant barrage of commentary and criticism that almost makes it harder for them to fail and recover from that. But we've got to encourage them definitely to do so.

Rubén Blades: [00:26:26] Absolutely. And it's an interesting thing because I didn't grow up with that so I don't know at my age what the pressures are of having likes versus, I mean I never...

Andy Hamilton: [00:26:40] No, when we were young, you could fail and no one would hear about it. Now you fail and it's you know at the top of a Google search and those can be challenging.

Rubén Blades: [00:26:49] Yeah, I never went through that so I can only just tell in my experience. But I guess not at the level that they experience. But the fact is that, as you say, it's a different world, I mean right now the pressures that they are facing are a lot more daunting than the ones I had to go through.

Andy Hamilton: [00:27:14] Yeah, I have one last question to ask and it's one that I have to ask, of course, zombies, *The Walking Dead*, the apocalypse. Yeah, you starred, of course, in *Fear the Walking Dead*, and obviously there's this fun entertainment in those kinds of movies, but there's also a slight troubling side to them. They are a dystopian view of the world and in some of the political rhetoric we're hearing these days from Washington, DC, dystopian descriptions of goings-on in different cities in different parts of this country and beyond, what do you think in as you know that dimension of your career, it must have been fun but it also has a serious side to it too.

Rubén Blades: [00:28:08] It's an interesting scenario, and one has to be very careful not to think that there has been positive change. Many years ago, actually 19, let's say 74 of you had asked me would I think it possible for a black person to be president of the United States, I would have said no. I don't see it right now. And in 1950 if you were to ask, that question would have not even been asked because it was in the realm of science fiction. It did happen, in the last election you had a Jewish socialist who was elderly, running and creating enthusiasm, and I'm referring to Bernie Sanders.

Andy Hamilton: [00:28:57] And more energy than many young people.

Rubén Blades: [00:29:00] And then you had a woman running, which was unheard of. I mean 40 years ago you would have not thought it possible with a chance of winning or really winning. So there has been change. Then again, you have situations like the one that we are living in in the United States today but also in other countries, where it's not necessarily the brightest or the most let's say socially oriented minds are in charge of directing the destinies of a nation. I still continue to be optimistic because I do think that good will defeat evil. And evil is not just a person with horns and a trident and a tail...

Andy Hamilton: [00:29:54] Or a Twitter account.

Rubén Blades: [00:29:57] Or a Twitter account. Evil is the idea that goes against the grain of every single positive thing the world has to offer. And every single positive thing we have amongst ourselves and in our souls and our hearts and minds. So I do believe that these are times of trial. I think that everything is going to cost, everything has always cost and things that cost are the things that we appreciate the most. But I am optimistic. I mean I know this is just part of the way that we have to go to really achieve that golden millennium of perfection that I think that we will get to at some point.

Andy Hamilton: [00:30:43] That optimistic note is a great one to end on, and certainly that optimism, Rubén, comes through in your music, it comes through in your career of political activism and political change, and I hope that sense of optimism is coming through in your time at NYU. Universities are optimistic places because we are graduating those young people who will go out and make the world a better place. So let me thank you very much for participating in this podcast today, Rubén.

Rubén Blades: [00:31:15] Thank you, Mr. President, thank you.

Andy Hamilton: [00:31:16] Thank you very much.

Rubén Blades: [00:31:17] You're very good for the first time you do this. You have a career!

Andy Hamilton: [00:31:20] It's really fun and it's such a pleasure to talk to you.

Announcer: [00:31:26] Visit NYU [dot] edu [slash] conversations to subscribe to the podcast and learn more.