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NEW CHALLENGES FOR CHAVEZ

**Rubén Blades:
The Sharpest Salsero**

**Report Card
On Our Schooling**

**Soccer's
Emerging Star**



Salsero With A Message

By Rubén Rosario

*Regresa un hombre en silencio,
de su trabajo cansado.
Su paso no lleva prisa,
su sombra nunca lo alcanza.
Le espera el barrio de siempre,
con el farol de la esquina,
con los tinacos enfrente,
y el ruido de la cantina. . . .*

*. . . toma sus sueños ráidos,
los parcha con esperanzas.
Hace del hambre una al-
mohada,
y se acuesta,
triste de alma.**

—Pablo Pueblo

Rubén Blades is a rarity in latin music. He not only has a fine voice, but writes socially relevant, meaningful lyrics to music that makes the hips sway and the feet move. Ever since "Pablo Pueblo" became a huge salsa hit several years back, Ruben Blades has become one of the hottest singers on the scene today.

Blades is a man of apparent contradictions. *Maracas* in hand, dressed in a black suit, open shirt and long white neck scarf, the handsome 31-year-old Panamanian gives off the image of the ultra-cool male sex symbol. But one night stands do not appeal to him, and love songs are not his forte. With his sensuous, clear-pitched voice, he could be another Sandro, another Camilo Sesto, another Cheo Feliciano. Yet he performs in the club-oriented world of salsa music, where rhythm—not voice—is king and *la clave* its fulcrum. Blades seems, to the outsider, a poised, seasoned musician who has paid his dues. In fact, however, he is a lawyer by profession, with a degree from the National University of Panama, and has been performing professionally in music for less than five years.

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Ruben Blades: his music has a lot to say.

During that short span, he has played and recorded with the Fania All Stars, recorded two block-buster albums with long-time friend Willie Colón (*Metiendo Mano* and *Siembra*), and seen several of his tunes become hits for the likes of Ricardo Rey ("*Guaguanco Raro*"), Ismael Miranda ("*Amor Pa' Que*," "*Las Esquinas Son*") and Bobby Rodriguez y la Compañía ("*Numero 6*"). While several music observers credit his rise to popularity to his singing and work with Willie Colón, it is his compositions and their themes that separate him from the crowd.

*Por la esquina
del viejo barrio
lo vi pasar.
Con el tumbao que tienen
los guapos al caminar.
Las manos siempre en
los bolsillos de su
gavan,
Pa' que no sepan
en cual de ellas
lleva el puña.
Usa un sombrero de
ala ancha, de medio lao.
Y zapatillas por si hay prob-
lemas,
salir volao.***

—Pedro Navaja

Vividly descriptive and perceptive, Blades' lyrics are vignettes, narrated in songs that breathe life into characters everybody has encountered. Several of his songs comment on social and political situations Latinos as a group have experienced and understand. He writes about a subway train many Latinos take in New York City ("*Numero 6*"); the true feelings of a local macho image ("*Juan Pachanga*"); the shallowness of maintaining images and keeping up with trends ("*Plástico*"); the fatal encounter between a *barrio guapo* and a hooker ("*Pedro Navaja*"). It is not so much what he says with his music but how he says it that makes him the premier lyricist in his field.

He takes his composing seriously. "What you have in latin music today is constant repetitions of the same themes," Rubén explains. "I feel that I am presenting a different variety of themes, themes based on street life. There is a revival of escapism today, which is fine. We need escapism, whether it be in a movie or a song. But when I write a 'Pablo Pueblo,' a 'Plástico,' a 'Pedro Navaja' . . . those are situations that are products of reality that surrounds us. They make people aware of that reality."

Rubén himself encountered a harsh reality when he first arrived in New York City. He had left the prestigious position of attorney for the National Bank of Panama because, as he says, "I felt that I could have a greater impact on people, especially the youths, through music than through the legal profession." But the only job he could land in New York's music business was as a mailroom clerk for Fania records, salsa's biggest selling record company. A bit disappointed but not discouraged, Rubén hung on. His big break came when he auditioned for conguero Ray Barretto, who at that time was looking for a singer for his band. Barretto hired him on the spot. Rubén's first live performance, believe it or not, was in front of

20,000 people at Madison Square Garden, singing *coro* with the Fania All Stars.

Blades' career blossomed, however, with his association with Willie Colón, another music innovator. Their collaboration resulted in *Metiendo Mano*, an album recorded in 1976 which has recently been awarded a #1 Award from *Billboard Magazine* for leading regional sales in New York.

Rubén credits Colón for much of his success: "Before we got together, Willie had somewhat retired from music," he says. "He had certain ideas and concepts that he wanted to realize. But he felt something lacking. I came into the picture and acted as an incentive for Willie. Without Willie's help, my development as an artist would not have come so quickly."

Blades is a firm believer in salsa becoming a true folk idiom, surpassing national boundaries. "Salsa is much more important than people and critics think," he states. "What the Ranchera, merengue and bossa nova haven't done, salsa has done. Salsa is not limited exclusively to Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Latin countries are like different rooms in the same house. There could even come a time when the rhythms could successfully mesh with English lyrics. But the music as we Latinos know and understand it—*jamás*."

*Era una ciudad de plástico,
de esas que no quiero ver.
De edificios cancerosos,
Y un corazón de oropel.
Donde de vez de un sol,
amanece un dólar.
Donde nadie ríe,
donde nadie llora.
Con gente de rostros de polyester,
que escuchan sin oír,
y miran sin ver
Gente que vendió
por comodidad,
su razón de ser y su libertad.**
—Plástico*

Now that Rubén Blades has made his impact on the music world, he plans to leave it. "I have done most of what I aimed to do," he explains. "I hope it will inspire or motivate newcomers in the music. I arrived in this city alone, and I have learned 10,000 things. My experiences have given me confidence in



Metiendo Mano earned Blades a #1 Award from *Billboard Magazine* for regional sales.

my capabilities. What is left for me to do now is practice what I preach—to retire from music and dedicate myself to the public life. A musician passes through a lot of injustices, is more discriminated against, in regards to other professions, is the most abused—by record companies, club owners, promoters. I do not know any rich Latin musician. Johnny Pacheco comes close, but that is because he is also a co-founder of a record company (Fania). Tito Puente has been in the music business a very long time and I don't see him loaded with money.

"Another aspect is the stereotyping. People have a bad misconception about musicians. They say to themselves, 'Este tipo no sabe nada, por eso es que se metió a músico.' Also, let's say you meet a girl, court her, plan to marry her. Her parents ask you what you do for a living and you say 'musician' and right away the problems flare up. They think, 'Oh, this guy is a drug addict, this guy is a woman-chaser, an ignoramus. That's discrimination. At this point in my life,' he adds, "I want a family of my own and the domestic life. I spend too much time traveling, staying in hotels. I miss having children. But things will change. I don't think that I will be performing for more than two or three years."

One message Blades would like to pass on to young Latinos is the need for an education. "My parents were musicians," he says, "and because of the difficult lifestyle they

had, they pushed me to have an education—become a carpenter, plumber, anything. It gives you a weapon to defend yourself."

Although Blades' music days may be numbered, he is preoccupied with completing his first solo effort, a concept album that will be released sometime in September. The first side, Rubén explains, will deal with the courtship and marriage of a man and a woman, and the joys they share. Side two will detail the twilight years, the hardships and sorrows they encounter, and the mourning by the woman for the mate she loved and lived with for so long. "It'll include many customs and outlooks all Latinos have in common," he asserts.

He plans to renew law practice in Panama after his retirement. "There is too much self-interest, too much competition and negative feelings in a city like New York," he says. "I'm going back to my homeland, where I feel they need me the most."

*Oye latino,
oye hermano, oye amigo.
Nunca vendas tu destino
por el oro ni la comodidad.
Nunca descanses,
pues nos falta andar bastante.*

*Estudia, trabaja,
y se gente primero,
allí está la salvación.*

*. . . se ven las caras orgullosas,
que trabajan por una latino
americana unida,
y por un mañana de esperanza
y de libertad.*

*Se ven las caras de trabajo,
y de sudor de gente
de carne y hueso que no se vendió.
De gente trabajando, buscando
el nuevo camino,
orgullosa de su herencia
y de ser latino, de una raza unida,
la que Bolívar soñó . . . Siembra.***

—Plástico

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