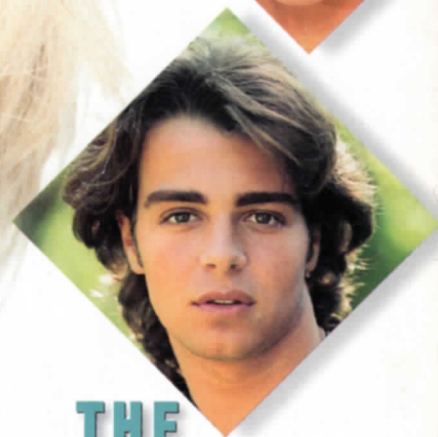


**SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE**

MAY 9, 1994 \$3.95

# People

weekly



**Meg Ryan**

Insets: Daniel Day-Lewis,  
Toni Braxton and  
Joey Lawrence

THE  
**50**  
MOST

**BEAUTIFUL  
PEOPLE**  
IN THE WORLD  
1994





# PANAMA'S FAVORITE SON

Salsa's Rubén Blades is a man with a plan—to be president • by Meg Grant

**T**HE TEMPERATURE IN CHEPO, AN IMPOVERISHED village an hour's drive from Panama City, is in the upper 90s, and a hot wind is kicking up dust along its narrow streets. Nevertheless, Rubén Blades, salsa singer, actor and, now, presidential aspirant, has chosen to make this campaign stop on foot—rather than waving to villagers from an air-conditioned car as his opponents are wont to do. Visiting from house to house, Blades accepts proffered half-eaten snow cones and kisses that leave his cheek smudged with lipstick.

His entourage swells as townspeople join the procession. Then, a small mishap. In the crush, Blades accidentally steps on a little girl's sandal, breaking its strap. He bends down until he is eye-to-eye with the crestfallen child. "I'm sorry," he says. "I will buy you another pair." When he reaches the town center, he ducks

into a drugstore and emerges with a brand-new pair of sandals.

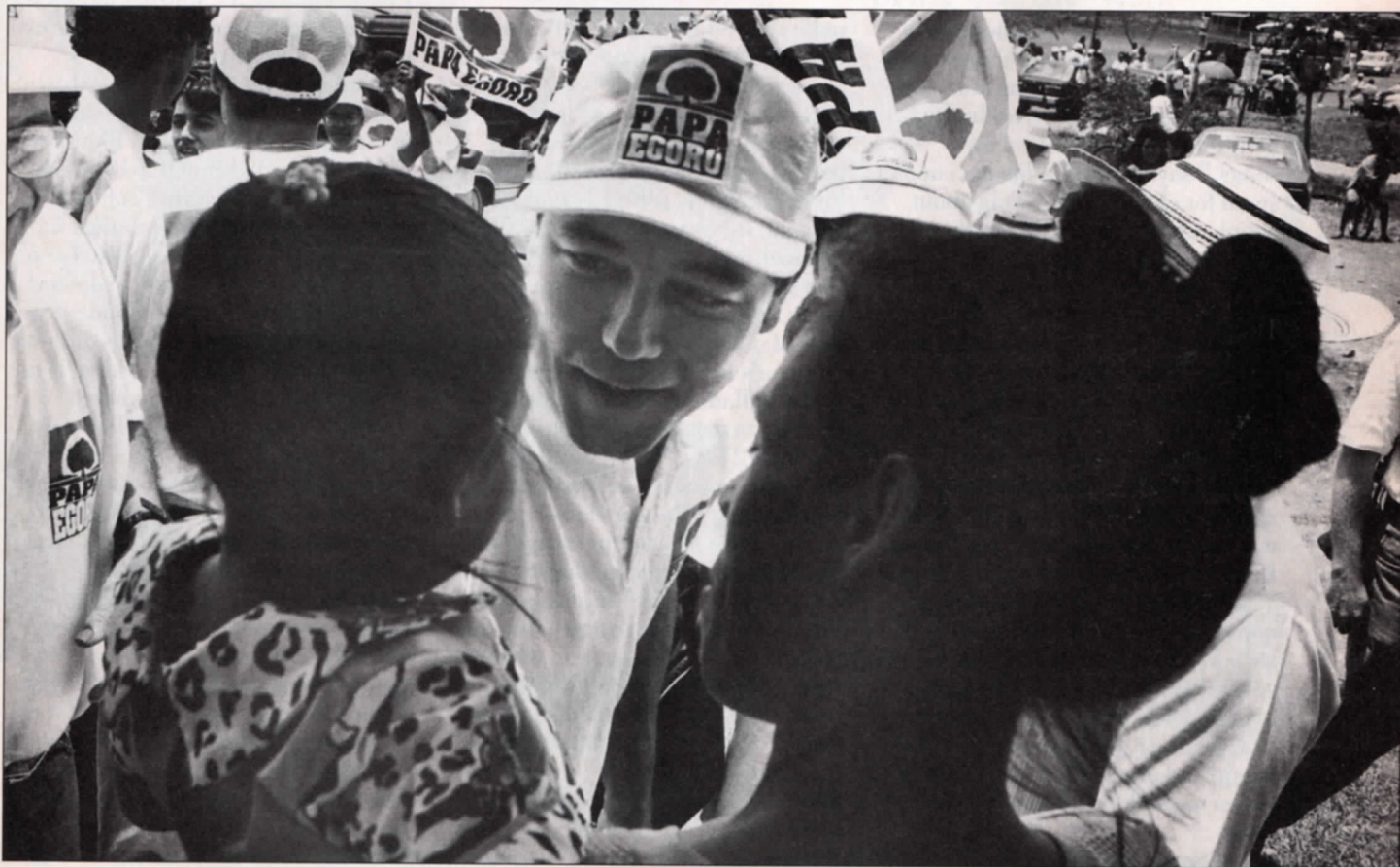
For much of his adult life, Rubén Blades, 45, has sung about downtrodden people. Now he is trying to do something for them; he was nominated by his party on Nov. 28 to run

in the May 8 presidential election. For the last four months he has campaigned throughout the country, exhorting crowds to restore "decent government" and occasionally performing his own songs. "Adam Garcia," for example, tells the tale of



◀ Blades (at a 1987 benefit for the homeless in New York City) sings in Spanish but has large followings among both Anglos and Latinos.

▼ "If there were a kids' vote, we'd win for sure," says Blades (campaigning in Chepo).





► "Before we married, I brought her to Panama to meet her country. She's a person with a great sensibility; she loved it. She loved it," says Blades of Lisa Lebenzon, his wife of seven years.



JAMES SNEAL/GALIELLA, LTD.

a man who loses his job and tries to rob a bank using his son's squirt gun. "I made money by singing about social issues, and I ended up living better than the subjects of my songs," says Blades of his decision to stand for election. "If I sang about people who needed a break, then why not try to give them that break?"

Blades began laying the groundwork for this race in 1992, when he returned to Panama briefly after an 18-year absence to launch a new populist political party that he promised would offer an alternative to the country's business-dominated, votes-for-sale political tradition. He named his party Papa Egoro, a Panamanian Indian term meaning Mother Earth, and when no one else emerged as its candidate, he accepted the nomination himself—reluctantly, he says, because it meant putting aside several Hollywood projects. Party members felt that Blades's popularity as a singer would win votes. "The music had created a relationship between me and the people," Blades says.

Two weeks before the election

polls showed Blades running second in a field of seven candidates—and closing the gap (with a boost, perhaps, from a free concert that attracted a huge crowd to a Panama City park a day before the latest poll). But his campaign is seriously underfinanced. It has spent just \$100,000, a pittance compared with the \$2 million war chest of front-runner Ernesto Pérez Balladares, the candidate of deposed strongman Manuel Noriega's Democratic Revolutionary Party. Balladares has the support of 28.4 percent of voters compared with Blades's 24.8 percent. Says Fernando Nuñez, owner of five Panama radio stations: "Rubén Blades just doesn't have a powerful enough political machine, and he doesn't have the money to run it." Blades's other liability is his long absence from his country—which doesn't sit well with voters who pride themselves on having endured the Noriega regime and the U.S. invasion in '89 to oust him.

By then, Blades was laying plans for his return. The son of a bongo player turned police detective and a mother who taught piano, Blades

grew up with music but studied law at the University of Panama. In 1974, at 26, he landed in New York City with just \$100 in his pocket and a dream to make it as a singer. Two years later he joined the Willie Colon Combo as a songwriter and vocalist and began to record the songs that were to make him famous.

But by 1984, when his album *Buscando America* was named one of the Top 10 albums of the year, Blades decided "to take a break from all of this." He spent a year at Harvard Law School earning a master's degree. Then he turned his attention to a third career—as an actor. Blades moved from the East Coast to Los Angeles and costarred in such films as *The Milagro Beanfield War* and *The Two Jakes*. He was being considered for the lead in *Chico*, an HBO movie now in production, about Chico Mendes, martyred defender of the Brazilian rain forest, when Panamanian politics beckoned.

Being so much in the public eye during the campaign has been difficult. "You can't have it both ways, but I miss my privacy," he says. More than that, he misses his wife, actress Lisa Lebenzon, 31, who has mostly remained in Southern California, overseeing the repair of the couple's earthquake-damaged home. "My wife and I understand each other's needs and spaces and silences," Blades says. "It's very difficult to be here by myself. We used to drink coffee together, work crossword puzzles, walk. I miss our routine." It has also been painful for Blades to have to defend Lebenzon, a strawberry-blonde gringa, to an electorate that is dubious about a foreign first lady. "Love is international," he said in a recent speech. "Hearts don't ask for visas."

The candidate has been in Chepo for three hours when he takes to the stage at a local dance hall. "We have made history here," he shouts. "We didn't pull this meeting off with the promise of political positions or by paying for your presence. My only promise to you is that I'm going to be a good president." Then Rubén Blades, the balladeer of the oppressed, launches into a rousing rendition of "The Good Seed," his campaign song. "Papa Egoro," he sings as his listeners join in. "Change is coming." ■