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# AVANCE

THE NEW LATIN ENTERTAINMENT MAGAZINE

**INTERVIEW**

**TRENE CARA-**

*Fame Before Fortune*

**RUBEN BLADES-**

*Looking for America*

**IS THERE LIFE  
AFTER MENUDO?**

**SPORTS**

**JOE KAPP-**

*Football's  
Most Macho Man*

**TV, MOVIES,  
BOOKS**



**FASHION**

**All New - Making Magic**





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTERVIEW

Ruben Blades .....	8
Irene Cara .....	10

## FEATURE

Joe Kapp is Macho .....	18
Is There Life After Menudo? .....	23

## FASHION

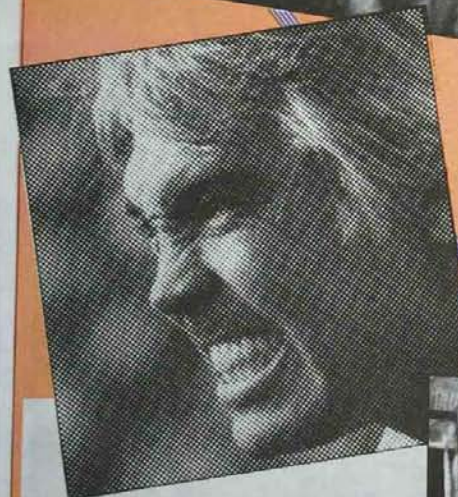
Melrose Magic .....	28
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Shopping on L.A.'s most trendy street will startle your fashion senses.

Accessorize! .....	34
The Illustrious Antonio Lopez .....	24

## DEPARTMENTS

Foco .....	7
Ahora, Backstage Pass .....	16
Reviews	
Cine .....	36
Books .....	40
Records .....	38
Avance at Night .....	47



Cover foto of Irene Cara by Majewski



# RUBEN BLADES

**R**uben Blades easily qualifies as one of the most controversial figures in the realm of Latin entertainment.

To his passionately loyal following Ruben Blades is a man of vision and compassion; an artist whose talent and sensitivity allow him to extricate and articulate in the language of *The City*, the Latin American reality. To many he is an honest and highly conscious man who has forfeited riches, a North American market, and his personal safety in order to express his hopes for the freedom of Latin America. He is truth, he is hope, he is our future.

To his detractors Ruben Blades is an irresponsible troublemaker, an artist whose gall is matched only by his ego. To these people Ruben Blades is a loud-mouthed, self-proclaimed messiah in a world running amuck in the hands of second-rate saviors. He is a Communist, he is a fool, he is dangerous.

Ruben Blades is a talented artist. His music has in profound ways changed the nature of the musical genre we know as salsa. Commercially successful in many Latin American countries, Ruben has written and recorded some of the most memorable Latin music in recent history. With his former partner Willie Colon, Ruben recorded *Siembra*, which is the biggest selling album in the history of salsa.

During one of his visits to California, Avance staff members Luis Medina and Phillip Rodriguez spoke at length with a brilliant, animated and charming Ruben Blades.

Avance: How about a little background?  
RB: I was born and raised in Panama. My family is a musician's family. My mother was a piano player and singer. My father was a percussionist. We came from a poor, working family. I cannot tell you, really, whether they influenced me musically because, although my family was a musical family, I never saw them perform because I was too small; I was in and out of clubs. I never really did see them that much. I saw more of my grandmother who

was the one who raised me, practically. I used to listen to a lot of radio. In Panama the radio was very important. You could listen to anything from Sinatra to Benny More all played indiscriminately because the DJ's taste was the one that ruled; not a format like that which unfortunately exists today. There was a lot of calypso influence in Panama in my early age. I would call it calypso. I listened to a lot of calypso, a lot of boleros, and some up-tempo music but not enough to really say that any was an influence. Then in the fifties when I was around seven or eight years old, rock n' roll hit with a spark. I remember that rock n' roll made a big impression on me because the songs also used the medium of the movies; much the same way MTV does today in reaching the young. We saw young people as opposed to the older generation which was a postwar generation with their big bands and all that stuff. All of a sudden we saw kids making music. They weren't Latin kids; they were North American kids but we didn't mind because we saw them as young, period. Also, rock presented a possibility for us, in the sense that other musical formats made us dependent on learning to play an instrument, like a saxophone or a trumpet or a piano, which was very difficult. Rock had the guitar which was very easy to buy, was very economical for people like me who had no money, and at the same time was easier to play. You could pick up three or four chords and you could sing songs that were on the radio. So understandably my first big influence was rock. In addition, my parents loved many kinds of music and we had the opportunity to hear what they liked as well. We were always exposed to all kinds of influences from everywhere. So in my house I heard everything from Mozart to Los Papines. You heard all kinds of music in my house. So I grew up not having a definite style but was more sponge-like, absorbing calypso and rock and that music that wasn't called salsa then because we didn't have to sell it to anybody. It was just Afro-Cuban music.

Avance: We have read that you were a

lawyer. What inspired you to become a lawyer?

RB: My grandmother. Well, two things, my family—my mother and my father really didn't finish school. So getting a diploma became an obsession with me. I needed to validate the intelligence of our family; the father didn't get one and the son's going to get it and he's going to prove that he's not a dumb person. I think that's the reason behind a lot of one's quests for titles. Another thing that I recognize as an influence on me was my grandmother's passion for justice. My grandmother was a unique woman in many ways. She was a very individualistic woman. She inspired in me the same desire for justice that was an important part of her own individuality. And as a woman in a society that was dominated by men, that passion for justice intense. My grandmother was a person who lived her life as she saw fit. She was a vegetarian. She practiced yoga. She was one of the few women who graduated from high school in Panama. She sent her daughters to school but not her sons because she felt there was not enough money for everyone and figured that the women needed education more than the men. She was a poet, a writer and a medium. She painted. She did sculptures. She was a very, very unique woman. And she was the one who guided my education. I think it was her drive for justice that made me want to be—of all the professions—a lawyer, a defender of the law.

Avance: How long did you practice law?

RB: In Panama, well, unofficially about two years because I couldn't sign legal documents. I was in school, and taking cases but I couldn't sign. Somebody else would have to sign for me. Two years unofficially and something like three or four months officially.

Avance: What influenced you away from being a lawyer into being a singer?

RB: Well, at the time I was studying I was in school, and taking cases but I couldn't sign. Somebody else would have to sign for me. Two years unofficially and something like three or four months officially.

Avance: What influenced you away from being a lawyer into being a singer?

RB: Well, at the time I was studying, I was aware of the need to get a law degree and the need to be somebody in society because I knew that a licenciado was respected. If you made it, good, if you didn't, get lost. At the same time, I loved music and I was beginning to see the importance of music to me at the time.

Avance: In what sense?  
RB: As a way of...a communicator. It wasn't just a thing that made you dance but it also communicated things. I started to think...things about the city, the neighborhood and then the city. I started writing and all of a sudden I said, "This is what should be played on the radio and not the crap they're playing because that's not representative of us." There was a singer by the name of Piero, an Argentinian who came out with a couple of ballads that were urban in theme. One ballad was called "Mi Viejo" and the other was called "Juan Bolleche." And when I heard them, I said, "Ah, this is not about the guy that... the women that left me or the guy that cheated me. These are two stories about two people and they have moved me. It could be my father or that guy I've seen in bars." There were certain words that were not very familiar to me because they were Argentinian slang but I got the picture. That's when I wrote "Pablo Pueblo."

Avance: Now, what year was this?

RB: 1970.

Avance: Was this before you made the move to New York or when you were still in Panama?

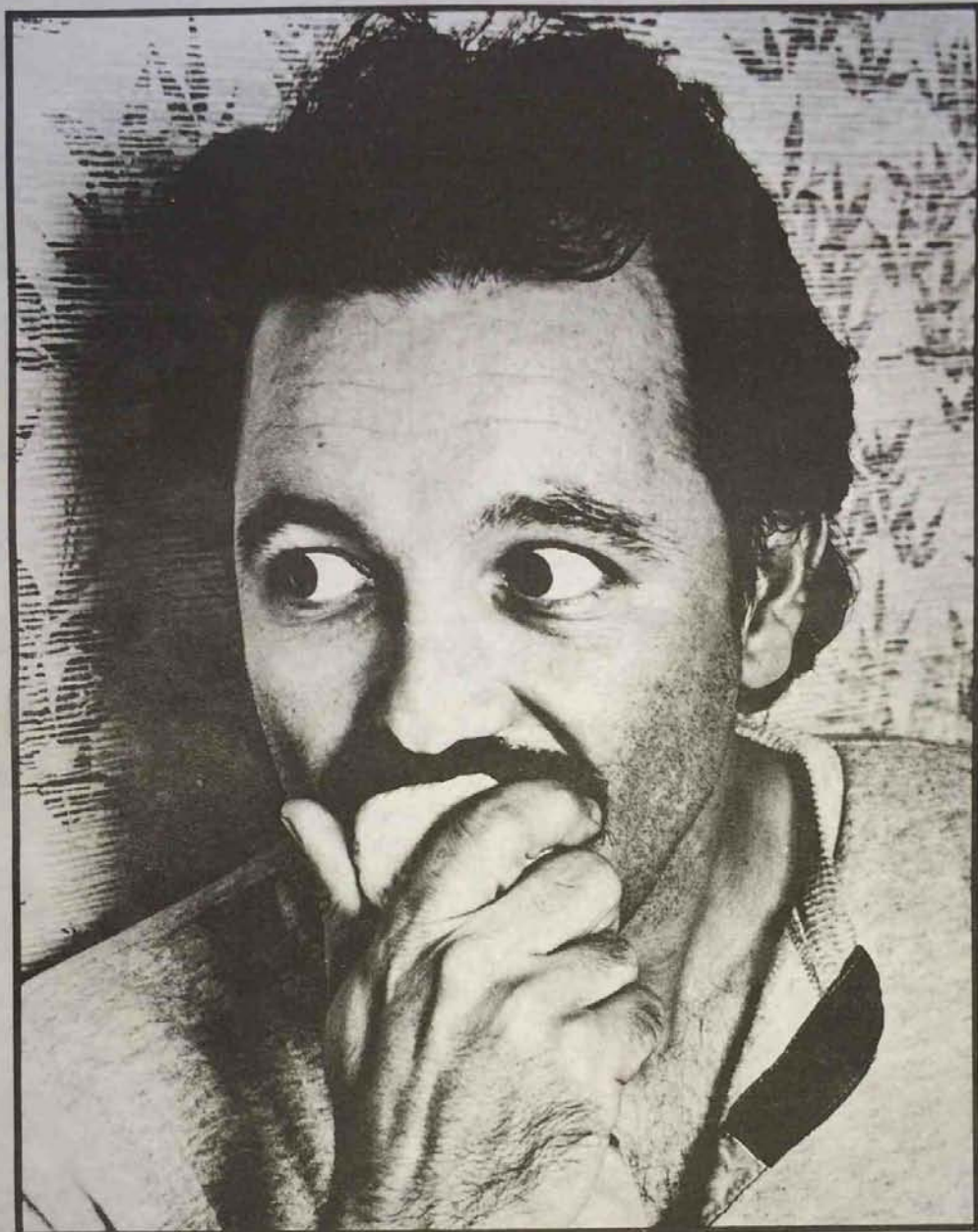
RB: I was still working in Panama. I had started working in '66 with different groups. I did go to New York in 1970 but just for a holiday, a month's holiday. I recorded an album there, *De Panama a Nueva York* during that period with the help of some connections I had made earlier. But I was just beginning to experiment on my own. I wrote eight of the nine songs that were on that album. When I went to New York I found out they didn't have the slightest idea where I was coming





Foto by Miki Guzman - Silkscreen by Majewski





from. Everybody said, "This is interesting, what nice chords." But nobody knew what I was doing and none thought it was a success.

Avance: Who did you first work with in New York?

RB: Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz in 1973 fought to have me signed by Fania which was at the time the number one company as far as salsa was concerned. Fania didn't want to sign me. Bobby and Richie told them, "this guy is important. This guy has got to be signed." And, boom, they signed me. But when I finally arrived in 1974 to record, they wouldn't have me because nobody knew me and they were busy at the time, which was the middle of the recording boom. They offered me a job in the mail room which I took because it was the only way I had to stay in New York and be connected with singing. I started working in the mail room. It happened

that two months after I began working there, Ray Barreto's singer, Tito Allen, who is an excellent singer, left the band. Ray heard about me through guys who had seen me in Panama, bands from New York who had seen me perform and they told him about me. He gave me an audition in Fania's mail room. I always had my guitar there just in case someone came by who wanted to hear me sing. I sang and he signed me. That's how I started in New York with Ray.

Avance: I remember that period well because I saw you when you first came out here with Ray Barreto in '74 with Tito Gomez and you were singing then. Were you already contributing songs to Barreto's band at that time?

RB: Yes, but Ray didn't want to touch... Ray had very definite ideas of what he could handle or what he wanted to play which surprised me because Ray has

always been an avant-garde guy and one of the most intelligent articulate musicians we have in New York City. He's also very vocal about Puerto Rican nationalism. So I was very surprised that he would not pick tunes that I found more in accord with that spirit. He took two plaintive songs that were about Africa, and a bolero. But he wouldn't touch "Pablo Pueblo" or that type of song because he felt they would never click. He felt they were too long and for an audience that he didn't believe existed. That, I guess, was the biggest tragedy of the whole salsa movement in New York. They never understood the presence of Latin America. If they had I am sure that salsa music wouldn't be where it is today.

Avance: What is it that you mean by Latin America?

RB: In New York you have American Latins, descendants of Latin Americans,

But Latin America as an entity is not perceived there because people have their own worries and don't know anything about Latin America. They don't know the market, the language, the idio-syncracies. I always found that very strange because they're doing Caribbean music and yet they didn't know anything about the people, about the rest of the people, the Latin American people. So when I wrote as a Latin American for Latin America they couldn't relate to it because how could you present imagery to people who are not ready to handle the concepts. They don't understand. They don't know, for instance, the difference between a Latin American esquina and a corner on 110th and Lexington. The elements are different. There is a certain law that makes you function on a corner but there were subtleties and nuances that were not grasped, concepts that were totally alien. They knew something was there but they didn't know what to do with it and when the words came, since they could not grasp them, they said, "Why would I want to bother with this?"

Avance: Since we are talking about Latin America, can you share with us your past and present political philosophy with regard to that part of the world?

RB: Well, I was at the same time an observer of Latin American politics through the reality of my country. I learned that we had been in a very uncomfortable position with the United States, the government of the U.S. that was always presenting itself as a friend. Yet we weren't receiving our share of the benefits of such a friendship. And I learned it on my own soil. I mean the situation of the Canal Zone. I never belonged anywhere politically, not even during my student days. I never joined a political party because I found that behind each political party there was an ideology that in order to sustain itself had to condone things that I found were contradictory and sometimes wrong. As a result I moved away from political parties, but because of my search for truth and because of the times, I have been a constant critic of anti-Latin American policies that the government of the United States has continued to follow year after year, president after president. Some with a greater degree of zest than others. I have always been placed to the left. Now, the left today is very confusing because there is far, far, far left and there is a little off center left and left in between. The Communists alone have about five different positions and it's very, very confusing. I'm resigned by now to the fact that I'm always going to be placed on the left because I'm in a position of opposing the anti-Latin American policies of the government of the United States. Politically where do I stand? I stand with the truth. I stand with the need of changing structures that today cannot work anymore. I am against injustice. I am against the one percent of the population deciding what the ninety nine percent of the population is going to eat and do. Where does that put me politically, since I have no political party? I don't mean to avoid the question at all—I would just have to tell you that I am with the truth. I go where the truth is, and I'm not afraid of it, of where the truth lies and to talk about it.

Avance: Do you support the Sandinistas?

RB: I support the right of each country to self-determination. That's what I support. Within each ideology there are going to be people who are going to take one side and people who are going to take another. So when we talk about the Sandinistas, what are we talking about? The ideal of Sandino? Or the ideal of two or three that are part of the nine commanders who control? Or are we talking about the people of Nicaragua who overthrew a tyrant?



Avance: I'm talking about the actual governmental structure as it exists today.  
RB: There have to be changes, but in order to criticize effectively I would have to embark on a long discussion so that I would not end up attacking a whole idea without specific criticisms. What I'm saying is that each country should be allowed to determine for itself where it wants to go. If you're asking do I support the Sandinistas? I support the right of the Nicaraguans to define their own life by their own means. Now if we mean to define the whole ideological structure of Sandinismo, there are things that I like and things that I don't like. But it's not fair to say, "No, I don't support the fact of suppression of freedom in this area." Because you have to, to be fair, analyze the whole movement and take the good things with the bad things and then present some alternatives. It wouldn't be fair to all of a sudden say, "No, I don't like this or whatever." But of course I have my criticisms of the regime as well.

Avance: Fidel Castro?  
RB: Same thing. Exactly. Same thing with him too.

Avance: Who are your heroes?

RB: Latin American writers I love very much—García Márquez because he is a writer who has found a way of reconciling the fact of being intellectual with the fact of being popular and being a human being. Of all the foreign writers, I like Camus very much because I think I read Camus to be a very honest man. I've always been obsessed with Kafka because of the way he meticulously describes the absurdities of society. Musically, I have great admiration for Jose Cheo Feliciano. I admire what Willie is trying to do, Willie Colon. I know exactly what he is trying to do. Some people accuse him of moving away from salsa and trying to be a Julio Iglesias and stuff like that. I don't think that's true. I think that Willie is listening to his own sound, his own notion of, and in his own way is trying to break away from the stereotype of salsa as music to be enjoyed by certain people. I think he is sincere about what he is trying to do and I wish him the best of luck. I like Tito Puente. I like Mongo Santamaria—no nonsense. I like the fact that Carlos Santana did what he did, developing his own rules as he did it. In percussion I love Peraza, Orestes, Louie Ramirez. Ramirez is an excellent musician; one of the best when it comes to melodies. I respect very much the guys in my band. I have so many heroes. I see people everyday. If you ask me what actor—Olmos. If it sounds like, "Ya know, Olmos, yeah, because he's Chicano." No. Olmos the man. Olmos. Write this down. I hope he reads it. Answer me, Ed, if you do. The character that he played in *Blade Runner* was more interesting than the Harrison Ford character. And I think that they must have edited that part down. As I think of it, I don't know what he was. Was he a Chicano or a Japanese? You know what I mean. He was like this super cop and nobody knew who the hell he was, where he was coming from. Very, very, very intense actor. And, Harry Belafonte. Ed Asner.

Avance: Politicians, any?

RB: Politicians? I believe that time will set Torrijos' record straight. I think he was an important part of Panamanian history.

Admiration for politicians is very hard. I admire certain traits of Carter's character when he was president. He decided to understand Latin America better. I did find that there existed an approval of a lot of things that happened when Carter was president that were beneficial for Latin America. But in terms of politics, politics? I'll tell you who I like. I think in the long run...I mean it's not the right time but I admire Jesse Jackson.

Avance: We admire Jackson too. But, speaking of Jacksons, have you ever met Joe Jackson?

RB: Yes.

Avance: He has expressed that you were an influence on his type of music. Have you two ever worked together?

RB: Well, we haven't worked together but we've eaten together and we've talked. We've had wonderful talks. I hope that I can make him do something for *Buscando America* which I know he'd love to do. He once made a comment to me that was very interesting. He said he that was shocked by people who utilized certain written forms, Latino forms, but merely dressed in a particular Latin way and used them as a...not just a ripoff but as a cartoonish representation of the real thing. But he found that distressing because those people knew nothing of the culture, nor did they exercise any effort in educating themselves. Joe Jackson lives in lower Manhattan which is a Latin community, totally Latin.

Avance: Why don't you consider yourself part of the salsa community?

RB: Why? I consider what I do to be more like an urban chronicle. It's a kind of music of the same background as salsa, Afro-Cuban—not that I consider my music better because I don't. I don't think there's better music and worse music. I never liked my songs to be called salsa because you can't define a song like "Pablo Pueblo" as salsa or a song like "El Entierro" from *Maestra Vida* as salsa or a song like "El Viejo de Silva" as salsa or a song like "Padre Antonio Amonieja Andres" as salsa. You can't define these tunes as salsa because people think that salsa means dance music. So, it not only limits you but it also at the same time kind of reinforces a stereotype that if this music is not sung in a particular way or if this music is not played with this or that instrumentation or if this music is not played with a formula beginning it is not salsa and therefore you're not good. So what I chose to do was to establish a different category for my music, to create a genre of my own so I can determine on my own ground what it is I want to do and the audience will know what it is that I'm going to do so that they have an option. If they don't want to hear it they don't have to come.

Avance: What were the reasons why you and Willie Colon split?

RB: I'll tell you. One reason is that I wanted to dedicate myself to other things beside singing and I couldn't do them as long as I was a member of the band. Willie had the power to say, "We'll play tomorrow. We're going for two weeks to wherever." And I had to go along. If I wanted to do a film, I couldn't do it because a film is going to take me three months. So, I can't do that. So I tell him, "I'm tired of this because what we're doing is the same thing, same

**"When we talk about the Sandanistas, what are we talking about? The ideal of Sandino? Or the ideal of two or three that are part of the nine commanders who control? Or are we talking about the people of Nicaragua who overthrew a tyrant?"**

thing, over and over, and working and working and traveling and doing this and I'm really tired of this at this point." And also the whole situation with the people we were working with I didn't particularly care for. And I felt that my opinion was not necessarily shared by Willie and it would not have been fair for me to impose myself by saying, "Well, I'm not going to do this." It was also very, very delicate, the relationship between Willie and me. Delicate in the sense that we both come from different backgrounds. I come from Latin America. I had other expectations and other ways of looking at things. Willie was a New Yorker...and had been very much abused during his youth by this industry. So it was very hard to get close to him and it became at times uncomfortable. I also had an incredible desire to do other stuff, to move in another direction. And I didn't want to impose my will on him. I decided after a while, "OK I'm going to move away." Then boom, came *Fantasmas* and that established him, really—it gave him credibility as a singer. And that's when I decided to move away.

Avance: Who is in *Seis del Solar*?  
RB: Oscar Hernandez, piano; Eddie Montalvo, timbadora; Mike Vinas, bass; Ricardo Marrero, vibes; Luis Rivera, bongó, and Rafael Trizzary, timbales. When we started everybody said, "No way. Vibes, forget about that. Since Joe Cuba, that's gone. Nobody wants to hear that." It was very hard. Plus we started charging more than the traditional lead bands charge in New York City because we wanted to set a precedent.

Avance: Do you get opposition from established promoters?

RB: I don't think they think it's an "us against them" situation. But I do think that the fact that we don't conform is a reason for alarm on the part of certain promoters. And rocking the boat is not good for them. Now, nobody can forbid me from working in the city of New York but if club owners don't give me work this can send a message, a warning—"unless you conform you won't work."

Avance: Do you find that happening in New York towards you and your band?

RB: Well, in a way, yeah, because we don't get a lot of gigs in New York City. We don't. We work basically in Latin America. We don't work that much in New York because they don't want to pay. They're not telling me, "We don't like you." They're just not calling me period.

Avance: Not even with the reputation that you have?

RB: No, because they're not interested in quality. You see, they feel that I'm controversial because I want to see a contract. You know what I mean. Or, I want the guys who work for me to be respected. The musician in New York has not yet realized his power. The relationship between musicians and club

owners or empressarios is a feudal type of relationship. There is a master and there is a servant. The servant is allowed to work and allowed to keep part of the proceeds, but the bulk of it must always go to the master. I think the majority of the people approach the business with a bodega mentality. There are no real businessmen because if there were they would nurture and protect that which feeds them. I told a guy there once, "You know, I can be at my house and have a machine answer the phone and get a gig when somebody like you calls but you can't sing and write like I do. The point is—I don't need you. But you need me because without my talent you wouldn't exist." And that simple truth is not knowledge there. Salsa is a dying thing at this point. Killed by greed. Don't get me wrong. You have to be very clear when you write this down. When I'm saying salsa is dead I'm saying that the idea behind the word and behind the boom was to sell a product to North American audiences, not to sell a Latin American product because these people don't have any idea what Latin America is. OK? They wanted to sell a product to the North Americans. They needed a name that the gringo could repeat quickly. Salsa, everybody can say that. Therefore, salsa was born. And they tried to portray it as simple and limpid as they could. In the most limpid way. Why do you think that situation was repetitive? Songs are the same, easy. "Vente mama, vamos a gozar. Oooo bee lay oh, oooo bee lay oh." Small things. Why? Because they don't want anything too complicated. Now who are the guys behind these productions? It's the same mentality. Why do we go to Argentina and why doesn't Eddie Palmieri go to Argentina? Why doesn't Johnny Pacheco go to Uruguay? Why is it us all the damn time? Why was it us? Why was it Willie and I? Because of all of them we were the only ones who had a notion Willie, because of his trips. Me, because of my birth, my awareness of where the true market was. All of these guys were looking for Las Vegas. That's what they kept looking for. We kept looking at Latin America. Latin America, Latin America. When I presented my lyrics and they said, "Ah, too many lyrics man. People are not going to stand it." They were thinking of North Americans, or of the people in the market of New York who are American Latins. Not once did they think of Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, you know, never! Brazil, never. For them that doesn't exist. Their goal is stardom in the United States mold. I said it before and I'll say it again, I was never interested in the salsa market. The salsa market was little pockets of Latin America in the United States. There is a seething Latin American urban reality. I write of that. That's what I've always done. I wasn't ripping off the old

Cont. on pg. 46

**"Salsa is a dying thing at this point. Killed by greed."**



Cuban songs. I wasn't trying to find a formula so people would like it. I came out with a Latin American imagery, a Latin American perspective, and what happened was inevitable. I received the backing of Latin American cities. It wasn't the North American or Las Vegas crowd that came to back me up. My albums don't sell that well, I'm sure, in New York, not as well as a Hector Lavoe album. And that's fine with me. More power to Hector. But tell me who sells more from Mexico down. In Venezuela alone *Solar de lo Aburrido* sold 250,000 records. In Venezuela alone. Two fifty. Now tell me who sells 100,000 records in this business. Show me one guy in the salsa field. Tell me one guy. Who? You know what I mean? Why is it happening? Because we have something to say and we address issues and people find it interesting, refreshing.

The album *Buscando America* is going to be the most controversial and at the same time the toughest album to swallow since *Siembra* and even more so because, coño, I feel my hair standing on end. It's a very poignant album written by somebody who is learning his craft and I'm much better now than I was when I started.

Avance: Now when can we expect this album to come out?

RB: January.

Avance: On what label now?

RB: I don't know. It might be Electra or it might be an independent label, but I'm going to put it out.

Avance: What are you writing about in this album?

RB: The whole concept of *Buscando America* is we're all in search...the tragedy of Central America is that everybody...the tragedy of the world is that everybody wants the same thing and yet some guys are screaming to other guys that are across from them. Everybody wants security for their children. Everybody wants to survive. Everybody is searching for America. Everybody is searching for the ideal that made those guys or those people jump from one end of the world to another in search of something better. Because aside from the economic motivations, cono, man, you really must be desperate for a better life to get on a boat and go. There really has got to be a spiritual desire behind it, a drive that goes beyond money, for you to embark on that kind of adventure. And everyone of us is looking for America. Everybody is searching for America, that promise, that thing. So *Buscando America* is a series of vignettes, little stories, some of them will seem disjointed but they are not because the thing I want is for people to think, man, I don't want to go over there and say, "OK, this is it." No. Think why. Think Act! You know, contribute your own idea. Argue. Provoke. Write me. Tell me something. Not everything is there for you to swallow directly, you've got to chew too. So we open up with a song that is not mine, "Como una Naranja." Why that song? Como una naranja, like an orange. I have you in me. I remember you. You live with me like the smell of an orange. I don't have to see an orange to remember how it smells. You are in me already. So who is he talking about? A woman? I'm thinking more of a concept. I have the idea of freedom. I have the idea of right. I have the idea of justice. Just like an orange. Second song, "Nacer de Ti," be born of thee. Be born of what. Of the earth? Of a place? To be born of you—that's the whole justification of life, to be born here. This is my richness. This is my happiness. Now, third song, "Desaparaciones." Disappearances. It could have been a pamphlet if somebody else writes it from a political point of view. But you see, people disappear, period, under any government. So you can't write about one government

and not write about the other. When you talk about political prisoners you have to mention Cuba too. You have to mention the Soviet Union. You cannot talk just about political prisoners in Chile. "Because it's a right wing government and everybody knows that a right wing is bad and..." I have to talk about political prisoners in the general context which is my criticism of political doctrines. The Communists will tell you, "No, it's justifiable to have political prisoners because they stand against the society that is based on Marxist-Leninist precepts and anybody who is against that is not a

cycle, the first cycle, with a song called "Todos Vuelven" which is an old waltz from Peru, which says they all return. So the cycle ends that way. It doesn't matter what happens but everything returns. So that's side A. Side B, a song called "Decisiones." Three vignettes, an ex-virgin, an ex-virgin's dilemma as viewed through the boyfriend's eyes. What should he do? He decides to wait until the period comes. I know that some people say, "Hey, you can't say 'period.'" As if in Latin America nobody had the period. Because officially the period does not exist. You don't talk about it so it's not there. It's like

Avance: In Latin America or here in North America?

RB: In North America. In Latin America never. I've been in uncomfortable situations. I've had people inside my room hidden behind curtains. So you learn to live with a certain paranoia to a certain degree. Your phone may be tapped because they think you may be meeting with so and so. Some people may think that I have contact with extremist groups, which I don't. I don't know anybody who is an extremist. And most likely I would never have a possibility of having a friendship with an extremist because he's an extremist and I'm not. But because there are people who don't have the information, or simply don't have the desire to be informed, I have to take my own measures. There is nothing they can pin on me. I'm not politically motivated by this party or...nothing. I don't have any connections with anybody. None whatsoever. Absolutely none. I meet with nobody. I receive money from nobody. I don't say this is right or this is wrong. You know what I mean. None of that kind of stuff. All I do is say this is the way it is because my conscience dictates that to me. This is the way it is and you really have to take a stand because I think it's important that we take a stand, and perhaps I'm also reacting to the guilt that I felt for having been led for so many years to believe that reality was what it, in fact, wasn't. Because I come from the generation that wanted to be soldiers...the generation that wanted to have a house like the Hollywood homes...wanted to have a family like the one on *Father Knows Best*. I was led, misled. And I have now the responsibility to make an effort, in my modest way, to start saying that this is the way it is or this is the way it seems. This is what's going on. This is what's happening. And what are we going to do about it?

Avance: Do you have any plans to do any video or films? Have you done films?

RB: Yeah, we did two films. I worked on *The Last Fight* in which I played a boxer and then *Crossover Dreams* I did with Leon Ichaço which we're trying to get distribution for. The reason we got involved with that film was because it was a Latin American endeavor, a totally Latin American endeavor in English. And again, if we don't participate and if we don't do it ourselves nobody's going to do it for us. They're going to do a movie about Latinos and what do they pick? A guy who's the king of coke. You know what I mean? Once again. And we have no possibilities of doing films that depict the other side of Latin America which are the guys who are not the kings of coke, but the kings of work. The people who are struggling, trying to make something out of their lives. So, we don't get the same break because the industry uses us. Right? We're like little cartoons. That's the way they want us to be because we're not dangerous that way.

Avance: Is that something you want to pursue, a film career?

RB: Yes, definitely yes because I found out that also, if you destroy that cartoon image you're also giving your kids a new image. Why shouldn't I try it if I have the talent? That's why I took the first movie. I wanted to find out if I could do it. I learned that I could. Now I'm going to do it because we also need that, not just in recordings, but also we need to be out there. We don't exist right now. In terms of North America we're non-existent. We're in the same situation that Blacks were in the '50's. Check as many North American films as you want from the thirties to the fifties, early sixties. You see Blacks only if there is a scene that calls for a shoe shine, a scene that calls for a racial stereotype or a porter. That's it, you know. When Blacks came about they were cartoons. That's where we are right now.

**"We're searching for America but we don't seem to find it in this darkness. America is being kidnapped but we must set it free again so we must search our souls."**

political prisoner but a common criminal." Sure, but you can't voice your opinion. So you think you solve that problem by explaining it to me like that but a political prisoner is a political prisoner and I don't care what you tell me. You know what I'm saying. What do I do with "Desaparaciones?" Four vignettes. First a woman asks about her husband who's a nice man, who doesn't drink, who works as a night watchman in a used car dealership and who left two days ago and hasn't returned. She doesn't know what to do because this has never happened before. Then you have another vignette about a guy asking about his sister who was named after her grandmother. He knows she's not with her boyfriend because he just saw the guy. He is thinking about checking with the hospital again. The third person is asking, "Have you seen my son? He's a pre-med student; he's a little stubborn in his opinions but he's a good boy. Where is he? Nobody knows. They have another guy saying his mother is missing. They had arrested her for business that had to do with him so he wanted to give himself up. And now nobody at headquarters knows where the woman is. Then you have another guy saying, "Last night I heard gunshots and bombs. I heard cars screeching in the night. I heard the echo of footsteps in dark streets. I heard people knocking on doors. I heard screaming. I heard, 'Oh my gods,' broken dishes. They were showing the soap opera and nobody looked out." So then it comes, "Where are the ones who disappeared? Where did they go?" Then he answers, "Look in the high grass and in the water." Why do they disappear? Because not all of us think the same. How do they return? Through the mind. How do you talk to them? Through the heart. Justice. You know what I mean? That's it. Nothing else. Just four vignettes of four different people. Whoever listens to that is going to react because the tragedy is that it could happen to everybody, not just these people. That's why I don't localize it in a country or call them names. They have no names. They are you and me and everybody. They are people. Once you close with "Disaparaciones," a song...that's my song, "Disaparaciones." The other two were written by a friend of mine from Panama, Mil Franco. It's the first time ever recorded and it closes the

the retarded brother you may have that nobody pays attention to and is eating his own caca in the middle of a family reunion. Nobody looks at him, which is wrong. Because you have to address these things. That's why I bring them up. Second song after "Decisiones" is a song titled...it's very interesting because it's a short story that I'm singing. It's not a song. It's as if I took this paper and started singing from what was written. It's interesting because it's a short story that is sung. The title is "Men Under Dictatorships, Part I." And what it is is a guy waking up in the morning, the whole process of the guy waking up, what happens to him. When he goes to the bathroom he's white. The joke is when you find out what kind of business he's in. That's the horror because you say, "My God, he's like me." Third song, "Padre Antonio Andres," the priest and the altar boy were killed in the middle of mass. Closes up with one song, "Buscando America," which is the repopulation of everything. We're searching for America but we don't seem to find it in this darkness. America is being kidnapped but we must set it free again so we must search our souls. That's *Buscando America*. They're going to find out that we're not as dumb as they think we are. We're not singing every time, "Hey, mama, venta pa'ca." Or we're not fooling around with fruit on our heads. We also feel that artists have the responsibility to report what's going on in those countries. So maybe they'll start respecting the musical movement of Latin America a little bit more. And not through the eyes of a flag waving, angry political figure that represents whatever. I don't represent anybody. I'm just an articulate exponent of the hope, the anger, the compassion of Latin American musicians. I have tremendous satisfaction about this work. I know it's going to get banned. I know it's going to generate another wave of attacks. But I don't care if I am not understood because I believe the majority of the people will agree in a cold analysis that all that I'm doing and all that I have been doing is to tell the truth, period. It's a very dangerous thing to tell the truth.

Avance: Do you ever fear for your life, Ruben?

RB: Of course.

Avance: Have you received any threats?

RB: Yes.