

MID-SUMMER FUN: MOVIES and SALSA

# LATIN N.Y.

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and Salsa.

Also the  
Willie Colon  
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Split.



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2nd OF A THREE PART SERIES



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*"Let's not pit nuestros tesoros against one another..."*

## **Blades/Colón Controversy**

Dear Latin N.Y.:

I am writing to express my objection to your recent article on the Willie Colón/Ruben Blades split. When speaking of two artists who have made significant contributions, pitting one against the other is unfair to them, their public and the music.

The author expresses a clear bias towards Ruben and makes many negative statements about Willie which are both unjust and inaccurate. Rather than go into detail, I would simply like to point out that any fan of Ruben's should acknowledge Willie for introducing Ruben as a solo artist on *Metiendo Mano*. That album was not a collaboration between peers by any means. This is not to underplay Ruben's talent; his current success is a clear illustration of the artistry he has given us. But as the article points out, Willie has been in the business for many years, and had received numerous awards prior to his collaborative efforts with Ruben, who was basically a newcomer at the time the partnership was established.

Whether or not the author "approves" of Willie's current musical direction, the fact remains that he is one of Latin music's major innovators and has spread the music to many new listeners through his experimentation with forms other than pure Salsa.

Willie's musical awareness was the perfect compliment to Ruben's progressive lyrics, and we were treated to a series of albums that succeeded on many levels: commercial, artistic and educational. Now that these two men have decided to pursue their careers separately, surely we can offer both our gratitude and support.

— Ann Page  
Manhattan

Dear Latin N.Y.:

I was quite amused to learn of the musical breakup of Willie Colón and Ruben Blades. If anyone should be laughing, it should be Julio Iglesias. To say that Willie is going to challenge Julio in the international record market is about as absurd as mentioning the two singers in the same breath.

Willie Colón is a fine arranger, producer and band leader, but his vocal chords just don't measure up to his other talents. He's flat, bland, and boring. If I had a choice between going to see Ruben's ensemble and Willie's big band, the choice is clear, hands down: Ruben by a landslide. Furthermore, I think Willie is harnessing the talents of that incredible band of his (Khan, Cardona, Pineda, et al). Willie should let the reins loose and allow those fine musicians to create. This is why Ruben's small ensemble is going to pull away from the field. Marrero, Hernandez and Montalvo, not to mention Mr. Vinas, are creative musicians who have a leader that will not put blinders on them for his own personal gain.

Funky and small is in, big and slick is out! Right on, Ruben. More power to you!

— David Ortiz  
New York, N.Y.

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*"Few musicians in  
any field have been  
as adventurous  
and as willing to  
change as Willie  
Colón..."*

---

Dear Latin N.Y.:

I write in response to your June cover story about the Colón/Blades split. The article was obviously biased toward Ruben Blades and many facts were inaccurately reported.

Ruben was not a "big star in his own right" when he and Willie hooked up. He had done coros on numerous albums — an unsuccessful one of his own, and one (on which he shared the lead vocals) for Ray Barretto. One need only look at the cover of *Metiendo Mano* to see that Willie was presenting Ruben, not co-starring with an established peer.

*Maestra Vida* was not their last album together. *Canciones del Solar de los Aburridos* came out at the end of 1981.

*Corazon Guerrero* does not feature ballads (there is only one ballad on it, "El Papa y el Hijo").

As far as "resting on their laurels" after *Siembra*, what about Willie's *Solo* album (1979) and *Fantasmas* (1981)? The first was not mentioned and the second only briefly — strange, since this album's popularity and critical success led to its platinum sales status, a first in Latin music history.

Willie is portrayed as singing about "highs, fantasy and life," while Ruben is characterized as "a thinker, a social reformer, a kind of conscientious objector." Ruben's lyrics are more directly political: Willie's deliver a subtler, more personalized philosophical/political statement. He has written about the experience of the Hispanic in Big City, U.S.A. ("Juancito," "Nueva York"), and the *anoranza* that all Puerto Ricans here feel for *la isla del encanto* ("Volar a Puerto Rico"), wondered about the meaning of our existence ("Oh Que Sear"), its disillusionments ("Sueno de Papelote"), its impermanence ("Toma Mis Manos," "Dormido No!"), the futility of thrillseeking (drugs) as an escape from reality ("Sueñale el Rabo al Dragon"), and the frustration of trying to live a meaningful life in

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**"Willie Colon is a fine arranger, producer and band leader, but his vocal chords don't measure up to his other talents..."**

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this crazy, dangerous world. These are lyrics written by a thinker. He also puts his money where his mouth is. On the back cover of *Corazon Guerrero* is a line that tells the shocking statistics of how many people die from hunger. If you send away for a chocolate heart like the one on the cover, part of the money is donated to a hunger project.

You say that Willie does not want to "blaze a trail all his own in the musical world," I cannot think of a more apt phrase to describe his career. "Cheche Cole" introduced different African influences to a popular audience. *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* used rock and Brazilian music. *Solo* used a full orchestra with strings, and half the album was instrumental. *Fantasmas* incorporated more Brazilian music and American pop. *Corazon Guerrero* adds a European element. Few musicians in any field have been so adventurous and willing to change with the times. Certainly his support and partnership with Ruben Blades was a risk. Willie is also the first (and one of the few) men in Salsa to use an all-female coro, something that will hopefully not be so rare in the future.

I have no problem with your praise of Ruben Blades. I enjoy his music and message, and am in support of his artistic contributions. What I do not understand is why you not only present incorrect information, but downgrade one of our heroes and pioneers. I don't see any need to take sides in this split. I enjoy the art of both men and find their individual "messages" educational and inspiring. If you are going to publish an article about Ruben Blades, fine. If you are going to publish an article that is supposed to be about Willie Colón and Ruben Blades, then please do it fairly, honestly and, above all, correctly. We should encourage as many of our artists as possible to achieve such heights as these two have. Let's not pit *nuestros tesoros preciosos* against each other. It's pointless and damaging.

— M. Marin  
New York, N.Y.

### **Blasting Bobby Capo**

Dear Latin N.Y.:

I am writing to protest vehemently against the statements made in your July issue by Bobby Capo. As a non-Hispanic Salsa fan, I was shocked and outraged by some of the grossly inaccurate remarks he made. In the first place, the reason why the so-called "big name" singers fill stadiums while Salsa stars have to have many groups on the bill has nothing whatever to do with these singers having a style or message — quite the contrary! Julio Iglesias and others of his ilk sing in a bland, internationalized, watered-down pseudo-style that is devoid of any message whatever — that's what makes it easier to sell. The less a singer is identified with a particular ethnic group, the easier that singer is to promote. You just have to look at the history of rock'n'roll and country music in the United States to see this principle in action: Pat Boone sang "cover tunes" of Black singers and made millions off their songs; the McGuire Sisters covered the Moonglows and made a bundle. Iglesias and Jose Luis Rodriguez are the Pat Boones of Latin music today.

To say that all Salsa bands sound alike is insulting and ridiculous. My mother and boyfriend (both non-Hispanics) have come into contact with Salsa recently, through me, and even after hearing a particular band only once on a record, they can identify it again, and tell the difference between the sound of Eddie Palmieri, Bobby Valentín, Hector Lavoe, and la Sonora Poncena. My boyfriend is crazy about La Poncena; my mother adores Hector Lavoe and Cheo Feliciano.

But the really outrageous comment was about Puerto Rican statehood. I don't care about Capo's position on it, but to use the example of Hawaii is a real indication of his ignorance. Has he ever been to Hawaii? I have. Its culture has been completely destroyed; the remnants

exist only as pathetic hula shows in nightclubs for tourists. *The New Yorker* magazine recently ran a three-part book-length series of articles documenting the pernicious way in which the indigenous culture in Hawaii was systematically wiped out by mainland Americans. The same thing would happen in Puerto Rico if the American federal government was ever unleashed there. It should be evident to anyone living in New York today that the attitude of the American establishment is virulently anti-Hispanic. Bobby Capo is either misinformed or an unwitting tool of interest groups that want to exploit Puerto Rico. To say that Hawaii achieved its statehood without sacrificing its heritage is ludicrous.

The last thing I would want to see is for Puerto Rico to become another Cuba. But when I read statements by people like Capo, who purport to be representatives of the "moderates," it almost makes me feel like supporting the F.A.L.N.

— Dita O'Daire Sullivan

*Editor's Note:*

*Miss Sullivan is a free-lance writer on Latin music.*

### **More Menudo**

Dear Latin N.Y.:

I am a fan of the group Menudo, and I enjoyed reading the April issue which had a special article on them.

I know they are from Puerto Rico, but could you please tell me what city each member (Miguel, Charlie, Ricky, Johnny, Ray) was born in and where they live now. Also I'd like to know where former member Xavier was born.

I hope you do more articles on Menudo in the future.

— Alicia Lucas  
Bronx, N.Y.

*Unfortunately, we have no idea where the boys were born. All press materials stress the fact that they are puertorriqueños, and no matter what town they hail from, they belong to us all.*

— Ed.



Photos by: JIMMY ARAUZ

# Salsa's Big Three

by Izzy Sanabria



Since singers are usually the main focus of attention on stage, it was inevitable that Willie would move to center stage as a vocalist. His albums *Fantasmas* and *Solo* have established him as a singer. And now, according to our music editor, Tony Sabournin, his latest LP, *Corazón Guerrero*, is a critical success that moves Willie into the ranks of Salsa's top vocalist/composers. But what's happening on the live scene?

Our July, 1983 issue featured the new directions of Willie and Ruben since their split. The article caused an avalanche of mail from fans, alternately defending or criticizing both men.

The reality is that perhaps the combination of Willie with either Hector or Ruben is what created magic. Because while Willie has gone bigger and slicker, his live performance has not exactly caused fans to go crazy. In fact, in a recent

Jersey appearance, the biggest reaction of the night was when Hector sang a medley with Willie.

On the other hand, Ruben Blades and his smaller group (a sextet) aren't really bringing in the crowds in droves. When Ruben submitted various independently produced LPs to Fania, the record company snubbed the sextet-backed albums in favor of the lush orchestrations of *El Que La Hace La Paga*, Ruben's current hit.

Ruben Blades and Willie Colon are smart, sharp businessmen. They're never late for a gig, and are highly responsible to their public. Ironically, Hector Lavoe is an irresponsible person with personal habits which rob him of his life and career. He has no apparent direction, no stage presence to speak of, dresses drably, and uses no choreography. Yet once he opens his mouth to sing, he gets to the heart and soul of every audience he faces.

They forgive him; they love him. They forget he made them wait. They give him back their love and attention. They adore him. Now if he could only believe it himself, he could be a superstar.

Fortunately or unfortunately, these three people carry a great deal of weight on their shoulders — the very salvation of Salsa. They are three of the most outstanding acts in modern Latin. While we still have big draws from out of town, they are responsible because in many ways they represent New York. The big, traditional names of Salsa are no longer having any great impact. Whatever happened to Grammy Award-winner Eddie Palmieri, the grand master of the piano? What about Ray Barretto? Ever since he moved into Jazz and then returned to the Salsa fold, he has been unable to regain his billing as a top Latin star. And while there is a whole new discovery of Tito Puente,



with special concerts and TV coverage, he draws big only with special combinations (such as teaming with Puerto Rico's Santitos Colon which draws an older crowd).

It is the first law of nature that the old get older and the young eventually take over. In the case of Willie, Ruben and Hector, however, the older stars seem to have permanently overshadowed them. Something is missing, and the consequence is a less exciting, less spontaneous music scene.

The one ingredient I feel is missing from Willie and Ruben's respective repertoires, and which might

help, is humor. Again, ironically, Hector Lavoe, though haphazardly, uses humor to his advantage. While a bit on the corny side, his *jibaro* down-home earthiness gets over. Between songs, Hector goofs with the audience, and they love it. El Gran Combo and many Dominican groups use humor in their music quite effectively. It was humor that made hits of such fun-filled songs as "Eliminación de los Feos" (El Gran Combo), "El Watusi" (Ray Barretto), and "Wilfrido, Dame un Consejo" (Wilfrido Vargas). Early in his career, Johnny Pacheco's infectious humor and the group's zany carryings-on on

stage helped grab the attention that catapulted him to stardom.

Unfortunately, humor seems to be missing from most Salsa acts — Ruben and Willie included. Personally, Willie has a wild and zany sense of humor which he's not using in his public life. As for Ruben, he takes himself much too seriously. Come on, fellas, the whole purpose of being an entertainer is to entertain!

The new directions taken by Willie and Ruben, such as TV and film, could eventually help make their names even bigger, but it's their recordings and personal appearances



which will inevitably assure them of continuous draws. Perhaps Willie has to postpone his dream of becoming an international singer a la Julio Iglesias and start pumping more of his old Salsa magic into his act. Ruben may have to re-evaluate his sextet, adding more brass to create the sound people have grown to expect of him. Though Ruben has made it on the strength of his lyrics, it may not be enough to satisfy a very restless public. While his smaller group has a nice swing, people haven't been into the sextet sound since the days of Joe Cuba. Unfortunately, it seems that in the

name of art and creativity, trying something new may not be working as fast as they had hoped for.

As for Hector Lavoe, he's got to straighten out his life because many promoters are still afraid of hiring him. They never know if sweet, lovable, forgetful Hector will stiff them and not show up for a gig. While the public always forgives his slip-ups, an employer always resents paying a professional top dollar for less than top performance.

Fortunately, our three not-so-super stars all have the potential to become great. Willie has his incredible sense of orchestration. His true

genius lies in producing, arranging and creating. Ruben is the intellectual of the trio. His foresight and golden pen are truly legendary, and composing is his forté. Although all three are technically singers, Hector Lavoe is the true *cantante*. His voice is his meal ticket and, if he straightens out, it will guarantee him his place in the sun.

For the time being, Salsa struggles along with its bandleaders-turned-record producers, managers-turned-promoters, clubowners-turned-booking agents, musicians-turned-actors, and trumpettistas-turned-singers. Perhaps what Salsa



needs is a return to basics. A return to the times when excellence meant dedicating one's life to pride in one's craft. Diversity is enriching, creative and mind-expanding, but the current fragmentation we're experiencing is counterproductive and costly. ■



Photos by: JIMMY ARAUZ



## The Songs That Made Them Salsa's Top Three

Throughout the years, the songs of Willie and Hector, and Willie and Ruben, and their respective solo releases read like an anthology of Latin music. Below are our choices for top twenty.

1. Periódico de Ayer - Hector Lavoe
2. La Murga - Hector/Willie
3. Pedro Navaja - Willie/Ruben
4. Paula C - Ruben Blades
5. Cheche Colé - Willie/Hector
6. Pablo Pueblo - Willie/Ruben
7. Sin Poderte Hablar - Willie Colon
8. Siembra - Willie/Ruben
9. El Malo - Willie/Hector
10. El Cantante - Hector Lavoe
11. Calle Luna, Calle Sol - Willie/Hector
12. Plástico - Willie/Ruben
13. Maestra Vida - Ruben Blades
14. Ligua Elena - Willie/Ruben
15. Abuelita - Willie/Hector
16. Nueva York - Willie Colon
17. Te Conozco Bacalao - Willie/Hector
18. El Retrato de Mamá - Hector Lavoe
19. Juan Pachanga - Ruben Blades
20. Juancito - Willie Colon



# My Slim Role in The Last Fight

by Izzy Sanabria



Izzy Sanabria (Slim) gets some pointers from veteran character actor Anthony Serico, Jr.

One afternoon, about a year ago, I received a telephone call from Jerry Masucci, the President of Fania Records.

"Hey, Izzy, would you like to be in a movie?" asked Jerry.

"Sure, why not?" I answered. "Am I going to be the star?"

"The hell you are," snapped Jerry. "That part is reserved for Ruben Blades. But you could be one of the leads, Slim, a killer from Chicago."

I nearly choked on my Doritos. "You have the nerve to cast *me* as a killer, with this sweet, loving face of mine? Why can't I be the leading man? I'm better looking than Blades and I'm a much better lover. *That* I can prove."

"Your wife's opinion don't count, Izzy. She's biased. You pay her rent. Well, what about it? Are you Slim or not?"

"Jerry, you SOB, I've been slim all

my life."

"I'm talking about the *role* of Slim, you nut. You have the right kind of face for the part."

"And what's that crack supposed to mean?" I asked belligerently.

"Well, even you must admit you're not exactly Rudolf Valentino," said Jerry complacently.

I deliberated for a few seconds whether to let that remark pass or tell Masucci what he could do with



Kid Clave (Ruben Blades) contemplates his next fight.



Willie Colon in character as "Joaquin," the mobster.

himself. I finally decided to be big about it. What the hell, I figured, *el hombre entre más feo, más hermoso*. Besides, there were other, more important considerations...

percent for my agent, Adela López." "You crazy?" It was now Jerry's "What about money?" I asked, translating my thoughts into words. "I want at least a million, plus ten

turn to choke. "One million is the entire budget for the movie. But I can guarantee you \$50 a week."

"How many weeks?" I asked, still hedging.

"Three, maybe three and a half," said Jerry importantly. "You can make \$75 for sure. With luck...maybe \$100."

"It's a deal," I cried and hung up. "Wheee!!!" I yelled, jumping out of my seat. "I'm going to be in pictures..."

A few days later Jerry called again and asked me to meet him and director Fred Williamson in a restaurant on the East Side. He wanted me to audition for the part, he said. Williamson wanted to be sure I could act. Determined to impress them with the full force of my personality, I decided to dress for the part. I thought about it for awhile, and finally showed up at the meeting wearing boots and a cowboy hat. The way I figured it, cowboys, like gangsters, do a lot of shooting.

When he saw me, Jerry looked up at the ceiling, but said nothing. I took that as a sign of approval, and sat down. Jerry introduced me to



In a scene from the film. Slim watches as Kid Clave's girlfriend leaves a local shop.

**"Izzy, you're not exactly Rudolf Valentino!"**  
**— Jerry Masucci**



Producer Jerry Masucci looks pensive on the set.

Williamson and to Patricia, a young woman who was also at the table.

"Okay, Izzy," said Jerry. "This is what you have to do. Get up, walk around the table and say to Patricia, 'Excuse me, do you have a match?'"

"Is *that* my line?" I asked.

"That's your line," he said. "Go ahead and say it."

I stood up; swaggered up to Patricia, and gave her one of my most charming smiles. "Excuse me," I said ingratiatingly. "Do you have a match?" She looked at me with a blank face and said nothing.

"No, no, no," screamed Jerry, close to hysteria. "You were too damn nice. You are supposed to be a killer. Put on your meanest expression, snarl at the woman. She's supposed to be afraid of you. Do it again."

I wiped the smile off my face, put on what I thought was a sinister expression and repeated my line. Patricia flinched and handed me a book of matches.

Jerry turned to Williamson. "What do you think, Fred?" he asked.

"Okay," said Williamson laconically. "He's got the part."

"Did you like my acting?" I asked him hopefully.

"What acting?" he retorted. "It's your face that got you the job."

"I told you so," said a smiling Jerry.

This time I let him know what he could do with himself. And that's how I embarked on my first criminal role in a movie. ■



Hollywood's Fred Williamson (who directed "The Last Fight" and played the part of ex-cop Jessie Crowder) is shown here with a lady friend.

## About the Film

**B**oxing as a participating sport, on film or in the ring, appears to be entering the mainstream of American living. Witness the phenomenal success of the Rocky trilogy and the recent remake of *Body and Soul*. The tremendous response of the public to Roberto Duran's latest smashing victory also underlies this increasing interest in boxing.

On the other hand, Salsa is also popular not only among Latinos, but also among other ethnic groups. *The Last Fight* is a combination of these two exciting media, and to ensure its success, it boasts in the leading roles, two idols of Salsa: Ruben Blades and Willie Colon.

We don't want to give away the plot of the movie, so we will only say that Ruben Blades plays the part of a singer turned boxer and Willie Colon, that of his boyhood friend turned mobster, who tries to exploit Blades' talents in the ring. Unlike Rocky and *Body and Soul*, *The Last Fight* takes a unique look at a Latin pugilist who forsakes family and friends for fame and fortune until tragedy mars his destiny. The film is interspersed with powerful scenes from the boxing world, and insights into the Latin American community, the recording industry and the netherworld of the After Hours gambling casinos, where roulette and black jack are played throughout the night, sometimes with dire results.

*The Last Fight* also has as guest stars such big names as Joe Spinell of "The Godfather" fame; Jose (Cheguil) Torres, former Light Heavyweight Champion of the World; famous fight promoter, Don King; equally famous fight commentator, Don Dunfy; and World Featherweight Champion, Salvador Sanchez, not to mention Izzy Sanabria, Publisher of Latin New York.

The film was written and produced by Jerry Masucci, President of Fania Records, and directed by the well-known actor and director, Fred Williamson, who also wrote the screen play.

The film's true importance lies in its use of Latin actors, producers, directors, writers and production personnel. Jerry Masucci made sure that his *salseros* had featured roles throughout, making the result a truly unique product. ■

— M. González-Wippler