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SEXUAL FREEDOM: TOO HOT TO HANDLE?

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**RUBEN
BLADES**
SUPERMAN
OF SALSA

LATEST "HOT
DISCO NEWS"

AWARD WINNER

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Seduction of
MACHO MAN

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THIRD WORLD
HERO**

(EN ESPAÑOL)
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CONCIERTO DE CUBA
¡HA LLEGADO
LA TAMBORA!
Y MUCHO MAS





THE
NEW

LATIN NY

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by
Jimmy
Arauz



**RUBEN
BLADES**

SUPERMAN
of **Salsa**

By Anne Saxon

Four years ago, a young Panamanian flew into New York and took a job in the mailroom at Fania Records. He had a law degree back in Panama, but he wanted to be a singer. Bands passing through Panama had heard him sing, and they said he was pretty good. When Ray Barretto lost the singer in his band, he came to the mailroom to check out the guy from Panama. His name was Ruben Blades.

December 1978, four years later, *Latin N.Y.* magazine announced in the Latin Music Poll that Ruben Blades had won as Male Vocalist of the Year, beating out thirteen veteran singers and that the

newcomer had also won as Composer of the Year. The words beside his photo read: "Don't let that boyish grin fool you; Ruben Blades floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee! The Legend of Ruben Blades has just begun!"

Indeed, what extraordinary genius does this young singer possess to explain his meteoric rise to stardom? Not only has he captured the hearts of the younger generation who view him as sexy and smooth, but he has penned hit tunes for most of Salsa's popular vocalists. Songs which speak of a new reality: the reality of a cement jungle, not the tropical Cuban countryside but a

celluloid city. Songs like "Numero Seis" and "Paula C." that became lingering refrains in the memories of our youth who were more and more being sucked into the synthetic soul of disco. What disco was making them forget, Ruben was making them remember: their roots and their reality. Just when it looked as though Salsa was a dying music with nothing to offer young Latinos, and nothing short of a superman could jolt it into the oncoming 80's, along came Ruben Blades: the Superman of Salsa.

Ruben Blades stepped into our offices at *Latin N.Y.* right after putting the finishing touches on his latest recording



On the move—Ruben makes a fast getaway from the Corso to board a tour bus.

Siembra. He announced that he was off to Europe where he intended to see how they responded to Celia and Pete's concert in Holland, but he was planning to take in England, Spain and France. "I want to go where no one knows me and see how I get along." Ruben was dressed in his usual casual uniform: jeans, sneakers, and a loosely buttoned shirt. A general flutter arose from the female staff. Ruben is not only a good singer, but he's a pleasure to look at. You

know, a guy with brains *and* beauty. So we decided that we'd all conduct a joint interview and led him into the conference room. Superman didn't seem to mind being held captive, and proceeded to fill in the details of his Kryptonian past.

"Although I come from a musical family, my parents didn't want me to become a professional musician. My father, who is Columbian, was a percussionist. From him I learned Afro-Cuban music. My mother, a pianist,

gave me a classical appreciation. But my parents travelled a lot when I was a child, so I spent a lot of time with my grandmother. She was an extraordinary woman, and had a tremendous influence on me. She introduced me to art, poetry, literature, philosophy. She was the first woman in Panama to graduate from a school of higher learning. She was even into yoga."

Ruben remembers his first performance as terrifying. He recalls: "My mother had a TV show and she brought me on her show to sing. I was so scared my knees were shaking, and I was too embarrassed to look at anyone." Speaking of his inspirations: "The Beatles were the first group to really inspire me. I also listened to Chuck Berry and Frank Sinatra. I followed American music first, then I came around to Salsa. The Joe Cuba Sextette was a group that I really related to.

"Finally, after I finished school, I went to Miami where I had relatives. There had been some talk with Jerry Masucci of Fania about a recording, but when I confronted him, he wasn't ready to take a shot on an unknown; so instead of a recording contract, I was offered a job in the mailroom, which I took."

Considering Ruben's rapid rise to recognition, one might expect him to be pretty full of himself, but he's not. His sincerity and warmth have a way of putting everyone at ease and opening the channels for communication. With his intriguing combination of Clark Kent boyishness and Superman sense of purpose, he'd make the perfect guest on a TV talk show. Good looking, charming, and articulate, he's made for the media. But when someone compared his sex appeal to that of John Travolta, Ruben winced. He just doesn't see himself playing that role.

"Sure, people look up to you, and I like that. But when I went to PR (with the Fania All Stars) I talked to hundreds of people. When people see me offstage, I don't want their reaction to be 'there goes Ruben, the Star', but 'there goes Ruben; let's rap.' Like when I went back to Panama to the corner where we used to hang out, for the first few minutes, there was a coolness. But then after we started to joke and talk—they told me, 'You haven't changed. You're still the same.'"

Obviously, that's the way Ruben wants to keep it. He isn't about to exchange a false illusion for genuine feeling, for feelings are what his songs are all about. "I think people have got to be brought out of themselves more, or encouraged to go into themselves more deeply... When I first got here, I was told that



The bearded philosopher, Ruben Blades attacks the superficiality of disco in his tune "Plastico" from the visionary album *SIEMBRA*.—Photo by Anne Saxon



Panamanian Ruben Blades relaxes a moment with Puerto Rico's pianist Papo Lucca. Taken on location with the Fania All Stars in P.R.

songs like "Juan Pachanga" had too many lyrics, that people wouldn't listen. But that's insulting the public's intelligence."

Many people who have followed Ruben's career claim that his subject matter is depressing, even though they dig the content. Ruben objects, "How can you say it's depressing. It's just life and it goes on..." "The greatest obscenity," Ruben stated in a later conversation, "is that we perpetuate something

we know to be false—deep down people know the truth...they know."

Ruben's vigilance extends to his fellow musicians who Ruben feels should all be writing their hearts out. "When I couldn't record my own songs, I gave them to other singers who were in a position to record them. Now that I'm established, I don't want to continue writing for everyone else. I encourage them to write their own tunes because I know they're capable. Ismael Miranda

can write. I tell Hector and Cheo to write. That's one reason I joined up with Willie Colon. He's very receptive and eager to produce. When I work with Willie, it's like my alter ego, we complement each other so well." Ruben feels that Latin musicians have got to play a more vital role, or we will lose our youth to American music, especially disco which rips off the distinguishing factors of all music and blends them into a synthetic mixture of meaningless

The Panamanian wonder poses as Superman. This photo was taken after Ruben returned from Europe with a beard, and Ruben reluctantly shaved for the occasion. One of the sacrifices a star must make. Thanks, Ruben, you came through with flying colors!



sound and sensation. When asked whether he considered Salsa musically confining, he responded, "All musical categories have a structure which defines them and which the musician must adhere to. But within the category of Salsa, the melodic possibilities are limitless...so I think it's the other way around, the musician is confining the music."

Of course, it's a struggle to maintain such ideals under the heavy hand of

Below are listed fifteen of the thirty-nine tunes which are original compositions by Ruben Blades and registered with ASCAP. Although some of these tunes you will readily associate with the vocalist, Ruben Blades himself, the name listed beside the tune is the recording artist on whose album the tune appears.

- "What Happened"/Bobby Rodriguez
- "Canto Abucua"/Ray Barretto
- "El Cazangero"/Willie Colon
- "Cipriano Armeneros"/Ismael Miranda
- "Numero Seis"/Bobby Rodriguez
- "Nadie Sabe"/Roberto Roena
- "Amistad Barata"/Roberto Roena
- "La Leyenda"/Tito Puente
- "Juan Pachanga"/Fania All Stars
(lyrics by Ruben Blades/music by Louie Ramirez)
- "Sin Tu Carino"/Fania All Stars
(lyrics by Ruben Blades/music by Louie Ramirez)
- "Pablo Pueblo"/Willie Colon & Ruben Blades
- "Paula C"/Louis Ramirez
- "Las Exquina Son"/Ismael Miranda
- "No Vuelvo Mas"/Cheo Feliciano
- "El Cantante"/Hector La Voë

commercialism. "The Latin music industry is like a supermarket. It's mass production for maximum profit." Ruben describes his own individual crusade as "a costly process". He has been willing to make every sacrifice except his art form and message. "When I attended the Latin Music Awards ceremony a few years ago, I had forty cents in my pocket when I went up to accept my award. I guess people think I'm filthy rich by now. But look at how I dress. I don't own a car. That's not important to me. I save my money for things like this trip to Europe. Sure, I want financial security, and it's very frustrating to keep performing and recording and not being able to show more money for it—but money is not the ultimate goal.

Ultimately Blades intends to return to his native Panama to practice law and pursue politics. It's hard to imagine Ruben Blades, singer, becoming Ruben Blades, politician, and Ruben hesitates to use the word 'politician' because of its



Ruben embraces fellow musician Willie Colon at a Madison Square Garden concert. Says Ruben, "Working with Willie is like meeting my alter ego—we compliment each other so well." Their collaborative efforts have once again come to fruition on the album SIEMBRA.—Photo by Evelyn Collazo



As prominent vocalists of the Fania All Stars each perform a hit the others sing coro. (L to R) Pete El Conde, Ismael Quintana, Adelberto Santiago, Ruben and Cheo Feliciano.

connotation. But he insists, "I have to go to Panama because that is where I am licensed to practice law. At the beginning, people will come around out of curiosity to see Ruben Blades the lawyer as opposed to the singer. From that initial response, it's my responsibility to make things click. I don't want to be a leader of South America, but I do want to act out an alternative. Look what Muhammad Ali accomplished as a boxer. He eliminated the stereotype of the dumb singer who gets up and sings a sonero and doesn't really know about anything. I want people to think about the world around them, and believe that we can create change."

If Superman came to America to fight for truth and justice and a better world, Ruben Blades is determined to carry out a similar mission in the world of Salsa. His haunting lyrics always bear a message, and if anyone can bring the youth back to their own roots and plug them into their inner feelings, it is Ruben Blades, primarily because he isn't just a singer but a writer making statements through music.

On stage he wears his heart on his sleeve. Backstage he seeks calm and quiet. Off stage, he is a loner, and few people know him intimately. Listening to him, one is struck by the wisdom and insight he seems to possess for his years. Born under the sign of Cancer in 1948, Ruben Blades will be thirty-one this July. Like most Cancers, a place to hang his hat and call home is important. But right now he seems more like a wandering minstrel, guided only by his music and his inner star. If you met him in a bar and shared a few drinks, you might catch his Clark Kent boyishness presiding over his Superman sense of purpose. But no one is more aware of his vulnerability than Blades himself—and he is *not* your typical macho male forever in command of his cool. When it comes to the messy business of living, feelings do not always fit into neatly penned lyrics, emotions do not come and go at your command. Every Superman has his Clark Kent side. In moments of great idealism or simple sincerity, Ruben Blades will continue to touch peoples' lives. As for his mission, how can he miss? In his own words, "I'm thorough and I follow through." So Ruben, MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU.

Interview conducted by Anne Saxon, Adela Lopez, Mary B. Hoffman and Mercedes Acosta.

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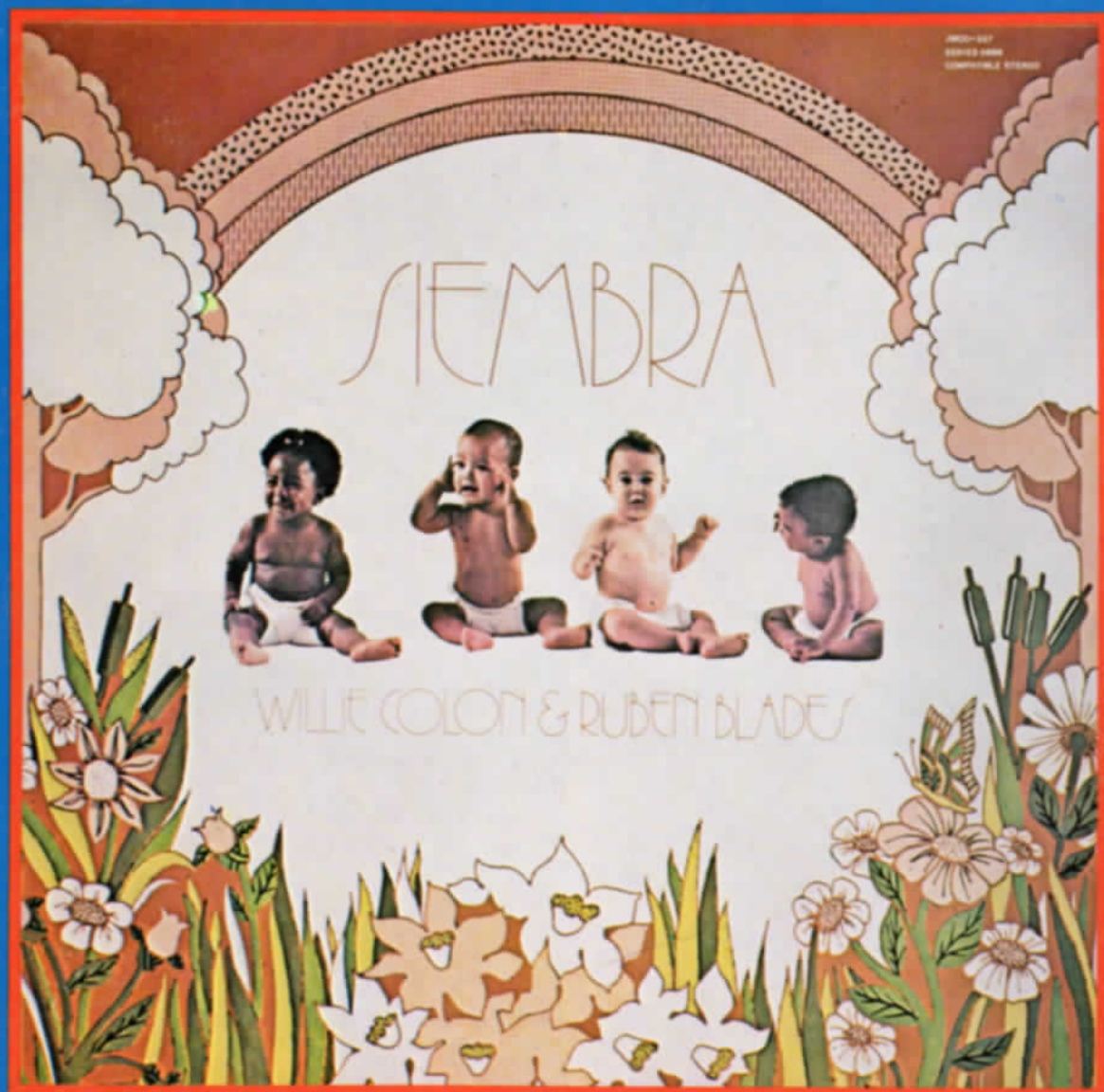
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