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SALSA ISSUE

"Music can't be separated from society"

# LATIN N.Y.

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**RUBEN BLADES SPEAKS OUT &  
SHOCKS INDUSTRY at STUDIO 54**

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# Studio 54

## Another door opens to Salsa and Latinos

By Izzy Sanabria/Photos Jimmy Arauz

On Sunday, May 25th, over two thousand Latinos paying \$20 in advance and \$25 at the door jam-packed Studio 54, the world's most famous disco. A club which in the past has refused entrance to top stars, celebrities and jet setters. People who would have gladly paid any amount to get in but were rebuffed by the whims of co-owner, Steve Rubell who is now in jail for tax evasion.

While the enthusiastic crowd partyed and danced to disco and live Salsa, backstage a heated argument broke out between performers Ruben Blades, Willie Colon and promoter Ralph Mercado and "Paco" Navarro (WKU) — an argument that arose out of comments Ruben Blades made while on stage. The conflict brought out an important issue: whether an artist who is being paid to perform is entitled to make

speeches of a political nature — whether an artist has the right to express his opinions, especially if they go against the very people who are employing him. And whether Ruben Blades was right or wrong in what he said, or if he was actually insulting the audience that paid to see him.

This is how it all happened. Before introducing Willie Colon and Ruben Blades, "Paco" announced to the crowd, that this was another giant step for Latinos and Salsa (being in Studio 54). "Another door opened for our music" and "we finally made it" commented Paco. He then brought on Willie and Ruben.

Ruben and Willie opened their set strongly. A crowd gathered in front of the bandstand to watch the special effects and listen, while others danced to the music. After a few numbers, Ruben took

the mike. Dressed in a white collarless shirt, suspenders and non-designers jeans, wearing sneakers on his feet and a rumpled hat on his head, he looked like an unemployed worker from the great American Depression of the Thirties. With his beard, and guitar in hand, he even resembled the famous folk singer Woodie Guthrie, who captured the turmoil and suffering of that era in song. Without a word of warning, Ruben launched into a speech that caught everyone by surprise — and absolutely shocked the industry.

"This event is being billed as a giant step for Latinos — but that's bullshit! If you want to make giant steps for Latinos, you should all register and vote!" The crowd responded with approval, and I thought up to this point that Ruben was right on target. Ruben continued, "The only reason why we are



But Ruben Blades' speech  
causes controversy and  
heated arguments . . .



*"What inflamed me were statements made by the emcee that we had arrived and made some big advancement in terms of Hispanic participation in this city—and that's bullshit."*

*"If an artist chooses to stay quiet because he is afraid of losing money and not express the truth as he sees it, he is a prostitute."*



here is because these people (Studio 54) have lost their liquor license and are having problems. They need our money and that's why we 'Spics' can come in today."

Ruben continued, "Willie and I have recently completed recording over ninety minutes of music for our next album. The length would necessitate making a two-record set. Against our better artistic judgement, we decided to start editing it down to a single LP because we felt that it might be hard for many people to lay out fifteen dollars in one shot for a recording. It was then suggested that we put out two separate LPs instead (Vol. 1 and Vol. 2), thereby giving people the option to buy one or the other, or one at a time. But after tonight, I guess we were wrong — if you all paid twenty and twenty-five dollars just to see the inside of this place. Personally, I think you're crazy. I wouldn't pay twenty-five dollars to see me or Willie."

At this point the crowd applauded loudly, and Ruben started to sing. After he finished his set, Ralph Mercado, who promoted the event, challenged what Ruben had said on stage: that wasn't what he was getting paid for — to voice his personal opinions — to tell people they were crazy to spend their money. Willie backed up Ruben's stance 100 per cent, but Paquito took Ralph's side — the people paid to have a good time and enjoy the environment — and see Ruben perform, not speak his mind. He had stepped out of line.

By the time I (Izzy Sanabria) arrived on the scene, Paco was the only one left in the office. He was still ranting as Willie walked out the door. Ralphie threw me out, so I decided to follow-up on the phone, questioning each person after they had calmed down. The following interviews are from taped telephone conversations.

### **Ruben Blades Interview**

**LNY:** The main comment that caused all the furor at Studio 54 was your saying that Latinos had to be crazy to spend \$25 to see Studio 54. Why did that bother you?

**Ruben:** I don't mind, or find anything wrong with people spending \$25 or even \$50 to go to any place where they choose to enjoy themselves — it's their money. What I resented and what inflamed me were the statements made prior to our appearance by emcee Paquito Navarro. Statements to the effect that "we had arrived" and made some "big advance" in terms of Hispanic participation in this city — and that's bullshit! In fact, Studio 54 prohibited advertising our event in the Anglo media — they didn't want people to know they were renting to Latinos. However, I did see advertisements for a James Brown show there. Even Miriam Colon, who was trying to hold a fund-raiser at Studio 54 for The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, was given a very hard time and she had to cancel out at the last moment, after she had already made public announcements.

The event at Studio 54 was making money off people's insecurities. Going to Studio 54 isn't going to make any significant difference in our lives. The development of Latino achievements in this city isn't going to be measured according to whether Latinos ever went to Studio 54 or not.

To go to Studio 54 isn't an achievement. They let us in because they need our money. It doesn't mean Latinos are being accepted or are being made part of the "beautiful people set" or the mainstream establishment of this city. Getting together and voting is what is going to get us power and acceptance. And that will be a

# Ruben Blades defends his position



forced acceptance based on our power of the vote, not because we were accepted for just being here.

**LNy:** Ralph Mercado (promoter of Salsa at Studio 54), Paco and other club owners/promoters have expressed the feeling that an artist who is contracted to perform has no right to make political speeches, especially when the comments appear to be against the interests of the person who hires the artist. Do you think the artist has this right?

**Ruben:** When a promoter buys my services as a singer/performer, he is not also buying my views, me as a person, or my heart and soul. The problem is that they don't make a distinction between renting professional services and the person.

What I said was the truth as I see it. Everybody should express themselves. If an artist chooses to stay quiet because he is afraid of losing money and not express the truth as he sees it and feels it, he is a prostitute. That is why I had to speak out the way I did at Studio 54. After what Paco said, if I had remained quiet, it would have meant that I went along with what he said. If a person sees another getting mugged and does nothing to prevent it, he is also guilty. It is the non-Latino participation that is killing us.

If Paco had just introduced us, I would have said nothing. But his comments, "We have arrived," inflamed me. Especially at a time

when things are getting worse in the barrios, not better. I live well, but I never forget about others less fortunate. I intend to get more involved in social and charitable work in the future.

**LNy:** Some businessmen and politically conservative Latinos, like Cubans who are political refugees of communism, think you are a socialist and even a communist. Do you think it may be the lyrics in your songs or have you ever made any public statements that would give them that impressions?

**Ruben:** Perhaps it was a comment I made in an interview that I am in solidarity with Puerto Ricans on the island of Vieques. I also said that I believed that political prisoners, such as Lolita Lebron, should be freed — since then, she has been. Comments like that will often make right wingers consider you dangerous. Actually, I have no party affiliation. People have been divided into two camps, socialist/communists and capitalists/free enterprise. People in the middle are criticized by both sides, to suit their particular purposes.

If I say that Castro should let the Cubans who want to leave, leave which I do believe, it's okay, but if I stand up for Vieques, then what? Some people just think there are communists lurking in every corner.

I try to be as truthful and right as I can be but I refuse to be classified. It's all a bunch of crap. None of the systems work completely for the common man, the worker.

**LNy:** What about the lyrics of your songs which have tagged you a "musical poet," carrying messages of social consciousness?

**Ruben:** My songs speak about people's struggle to survive, that's why they're so well received by the common people all over South America. The lyrics criticize the often phony values we live by, like in "Plastico." The songs also criticize politicians for being crooks eighty percent of the time. And

# Does a performer have the right to make political speeches? WKTU's Paco says "No!"

since I try to express the feelings of the masses and I advocate waking up, getting together, and actively participating to change the status quo, some people may find it too progressive for their interests — both communists and capitalists.

**LNy:** If you are neither a socialist nor a capitalist, what do you believe in?

**Ruben:** I believe in anything that contributes to the advancement of Latinos. If you criticize this government, does that make you a communist? Criticism of the political system is a right that we are entitled to. It's time to tell the truth as one sees it.

**LNy:** Some people in the business think you are a hypocrite because you demand top money. You live comfortably in this country. As Paco commented, "If he was sincere about what he said, he would have contributed his nights earnings to a charity."

**Ruben:** Willie and I both told Ralph Mercado to keep the money and we would split after that first set. There's nothing wrong with making money from your work and making a good living. I make a good living and I certainly wouldn't want to go back to living with my family in a one room apartment. But making money by lying to people is wrong.

**LNy:** Given the opportunity, what would you do to make things better?

**Ruben:** Make musicians' unions work effectively, and encourage the presence of more leaders in the community.

## Paco Navarro Interview

**LNy:** Basically, what did you say in your opening speech?

**Paco:** I said it was an honor to be there with my people and that it was quite an accomplishment for our music and our culture to be at Studio 54, because they finally realized that we have some kind of presence in this city and accept-



ability. We are an integral part of the city and because of that, we are a part of what's happening today. And it's true — they had to open the doors for us at Studio 54 because we are not so much a minority anymore, but rather a part of the entire community.

**LNy:** Did you say "we have arrived"?

**Paco:** I don't remember exactly how I phrased it, but I said that we were there, which was important.

**LNy:** I remember you saying "we have arrived," and that was what really bugged Ruben. What bothered you most about his speech?

**Paco:** It wasn't so much his

speech that bothered me; it was his portrayal of the facts in such an unethical, impolite, and unintelligent way. I believe that when people are out for an evening of fun and dancing, they are there for that and not for political discussions. If I go to church, I expect to see the priest giving a sermon, not a concert. There is a time and a place for everything, and you can't change that. If you go to a place to entertain, you don't have to spout political ideals to the people, particularly if you are booked as a singer, not even as a performer, as a singer! You're not supposed to give political speeches or indulge in any other conversation that is not related to what you are doing.

# an editorial comment

*"The words of a man's mouth are a gushing torrent, but deep is the water in the well of wisdom." Proverbs 18, Verse 4.*

**LNy:** In other words, you don't think the artist has a right to speak out like that.

**Paco:** A dance at Studio 54 is neither the time nor the place. I don't think he has the right. I was booked as the emcee. I get paid to talk and conduct the flow of the show. I would not bring up personal or political opinions because it is not my place to say such things on stage. Just as it was not Ruben's place to say what he said. Especially, when he is a guest in our nation. If I went to his country, I would respect it. If I went to his house, I would behave like a guest.

**LNy:** Did it bother you that he made that speech right after you made yours?

**Paco:** Definitely. It really bothered me because it completely destroyed what I said. You see, I know how to talk to people; I've been doing it for some twenty years, and I think I'm pretty good at it. I can talk to people and tell them what they want to hear. Also, I told them what I wanted to tell them, and I think that it was more or less what Ruben said. I just said it in a different way, a way that made them feel proud, not cheated. He made our people feel stupid in a sense. In other words, he called them stupid when he said "You've been cheated," and I don't think that was respectful to our people, to the Latinos of New York.

## Weighing the issues

By Anne Saxon

Who was right? Both Paco and Ruben seem to have a point...Certainly Ruben is right in saying that Latino accomplishments will not be evaluated according to who's been to Studio 54 — and with Steve Rubell in jail it's not big news that the club's exclusiveness has worn off and its owners need money to continue to operate. But what does that have to do with whether Latinos should, or shouldn't, spend \$25 to see a top artist perform in what remains one of the most architecturally impressive clubs in the world?

Why shouldn't Studio 54 with its terrific sound system and spectacular effects and decor provide

an appealing environment for our music? Why were Latinos "crazy" to pay \$25 each to be entertained in grand style — and finally, what does that have to do with whether or not an individual votes? These are separate issues quite removed from one another. No doubt, Mr. Blades felt compelled to not allow Paco to deceive the public into over-rating the significance of their presence in the club. But he also may have underestimated the intelligence of his own people — who certainly did not attend Studio 54 in the hope of seeing themselves in the society pages — but rather to enjoy the music and check out the club, which so many had heard about and so few had seen. And to spend \$25 for a top musical act in such a setting can hardly be considered insanely extravagant when compared with the price of other entertainment events in New York. (Broadway tickets are going up to \$30.)

Perhaps Ruben feels a professional animosity towards "Paco," who as an announcer for WKTU has come to represent the world of disco. And perhaps in the lavish setting of a renowned disco like Studio 54, Ruben felt that by calling Paco's introduction "bullshit," he made himself and the crowd immune to the "plastico" image that he puts down in his hit song. But Ruben — in spite of his good intentions — runs the risk of appearing equally superficial if he presumes to address himself to Latino progress by simply telling everyone they're crazy to spend \$25 to be there and that they should all register to vote. Paco is certainly justified in his suggestion that Blades should donate his profits to a good cause if he's so concerned with the condition of the Latino community. As for voting, we heartily agree, everyone should be urged to vote — and we should make our numbers count in more ways than one. But Blades should be able to motivate and enlighten an audience without calling them "crazy" and without invalidating the welcoming words of the master of ceremonies. Paco is right, there is a time and place for everything. However earnestly Ruben might justify his behavior as coming from

the occasion and ungracious to the public who came to see him and the industry which employs him. As others in the industry have since commented: It wasn't so much what he said, but how he said it.

Very often when an artist who is socially conscious begins to make big money from his "message" songs, and goes from struggling artist status to big star status — he finds it difficult to reconcile the many contradictions that surround him. He starts bending over backwards to convince himself and his public that money hasn't blurred his vision — that he's still "for real." At the very time when he starts wearing tailored suits and silk shirts in his private life, he dons faded jeans and sneakers for his performances, thumbing his nose at the establishment — and assuming the rebellious attitude of "who needs it." Blades shows all the tell-tale signs of being caught at this stage of the game — firmly ingrained in a capitalist lifestyle, enjoying the fruits of his labor — and yet unable to carry it off with grace and stature.

Ruben Blades is undisputedly the most exciting and significant lyricist and composer in the world of Salsa today. We are fortunate to have him in our midst here in the United States. But when he takes the microphone and addresses Latinos outside the context of his songs, he should weigh his words more carefully. His quasi-political speeches lack the force of commitment. (When was the last time anybody saw Ruben out registering voters.) Until Ruben Blades develops greater social ease to go with his social conscience, he should stick to his craft and confine his statements to his songs, where the issues are not muddled and the message comes through with a purity of intention. Blades is a charismatic entertainer who will continue to have great influence on the Latino public. With that power goes a serious responsibility. In closing, this message is for you, Ruben: Next time you get the urge to make a public speech — simply because it's the way you feel at a given moment — maybe you should think twice before you speak. ■