

EXCLUSIVE HOURLY GUIDE TO MANHATTAN CABLE TV

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SOHO NEWS

SIXTY CENTS

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THE COUP TO COME
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SALSA'S RUBEN BLADES

WOMEN LOVE HIM,
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THE SEXIEST MOVIE OF THE YEAR IS NOT 'POSTMAN'

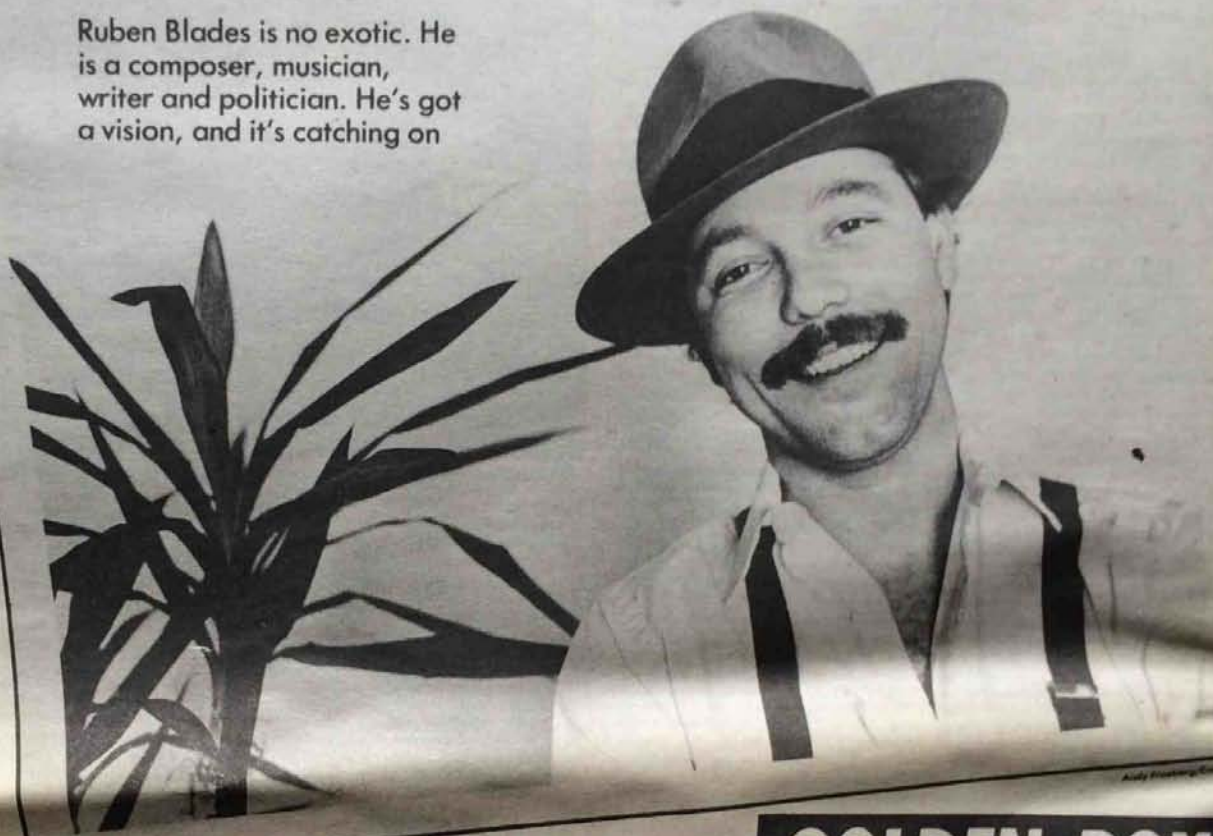
Veronica Geng

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SOHO ARTS

NOT JUST SALSA'S

Ruben Blades is no exotic. He is a composer, musician, writer and politician. He's got a vision, and it's catching on



GOLDEN BOY

Enrique Fernandez

In 1970 Pete Rodriguez made a special album that introduced a new singer who — a curious and strange phenomenon in the world of salsa — was the composer of his entire repertoire. The record was titled From Panama to New York, Pete Rodriguez Introduces Ruben Blades, and on the cover, Rodriguez's band, riding one of those convertibles so common to the album covers of that period, picked up on the road a blond adolescent whose aspect was that of one of those middle-class boys who played the unbearable rock of underdevelopment. The boy, however, did not do rock but salsa...

Cesar Miguel Rondon, *El libro de la salsa*

"Cuidado, que ahí viene Reagan!" "Watch out, Reagan's coming."

The club is jampacked. Getting in wasn't easy. (I'm Enrique Fernandez from Soho News. I made arrangements with the owner in the guest list tonight our photographer is already inside this guy with me is also from Soho the ladies are our dates: Oh, yeah, see the guy upstairs: I'm Enrique Fernandez from Soho News. I made... .5 Word was out that Ruben Blades was making one of his rare club appearances and everyone had turned out.

It is a few days before the Reagan inauguration — which explains why the singer is offering a warning in the middle of one of his more political songs. Between numbers, he patiently explains the meaning of what he has sung. And he makes soft-spoken pleas for Latin voter registration.

I recognize the gentle, careful phrasing, the pedagogic tone, the nonregional accent: it is the voice of the Latin American intellectual. Out of place in a salsa club, I'm thinking, when suddenly the voice changes to a funky jiv-

ing tone, which I also recognize: it's the voice of the Latin American street.

It is the first time I have heard Ruben perform. Before meeting him a few months ago I knew him only from his records and from his reputation as a salsa rebel and non-conformist. Since then I had heard him sing in his home, in a bus, even in a college auditorium, as he sang alone, unself-consciously, with the salsa soundtracks of a Brazilian movie festival. But never, until now, had I heard him perform maracas with Willie Colon's first-rate salsa band.

I had first gone to his apartment to interview him for a piece on the salsa scene because I knew he could be counted upon to be outspoken. Several hours later, I had been exposed to what one of his friends called "a Ruben one-man show."

To begin with, his background was unusual. This salsero was a Panamanian. His maternal grandfather was from New Orleans, his grandmother from Spain. They met in Cuba where their daughter would become a pianist and singer. On tour she married a Panamanian percussionist of West Indian and Colombian background.

Ruben's paternal grandmother, a Latin American suffragette, writer and artist, was an eccentric who practiced yoga, vegetarianism and spiritualism and who taught her favorite grandson the importance of art, education, social justice and personal independence.

It was clear to me from that first meeting that music was only one of Ruben's interests. He wrote good fiction and journalism. He was working on the stage adaptation of his latest recording effort, *Maestra Vida*, a two-album musical saga about life in urban Latin America. He had film projects. He had political projects. He was debating whether to quit music and go back to Panama to practice law, in which he had been trained. Furthermore, he pro-

fessed that cultural presumption I admire in Latin Americans: the belief that the world's cultural patrimony is our hope.

And, of course he was a fine singer, a talented musician, charming, polite, handsome, friendly, down-to-earth. (Anything wrong with him? the reader asks: Why, yes, a surprisingly provincial taste in food.) Now, as I watch him perform for the first time, working the crowd through his music and through an unaffected, distinctly nonarrogant charm, I begin to see Ruben as the potential forger, in the smyth of time, of the unformed consciousness of his race.

More than salsa's golden boy.

"Let's face it," says a Latin DJ, "Ruben's popularity, particularly with women, is due to the fact that he's a cute white boy." True. When *Latin N.Y.* magazine put Ruben on its cover a few months ago, the issue sold more copies than any other in the magazine's history. Quite the opposite result has been the case when major black salsa stars have graced the magazine's cover. White sells, black doesn't — a phenomenon that, our DJ points out, holds true for the entire magazine industry.

If white sells, black, according to the most deeply rooted musical myth, swings. In salsa, as in jazz and blues, the white musician must labor against the facile version of negritude that correlates authenticity and melanin. In other words, society grants the black musician an intangible quality, soul, while it withholds the tangible reward of financial success, a reward reserved for the white musician, who, poor dear, will never have any soul.

Ironically, the "blond adolescent" who in 1970 climbed aboard the salsa convertible was white only by disposition of that capricious god of the Caribbean, blind chance. Given his parentage, a different roll of the genetic dice

could have made Ruben black, or at least "black" in the eyes of society, and the unsold copies of his *Latin N. F.* issue would now be crowding the magazine's Park Avenue South storeroom.

Ruben's white looks would be an unqualified blessing to his career if his ambition were merely commercial. No doubt Ruben is ambitious; you don't become salsa's shining star by being laid back. He could even become, as someone told me, referring to the top-selling Spanish balladeer, "another Julio Iglesias." His ambitions, however, go far beyond commercial success, and in these endeavors it helps to be "a cute white boy."

To understand why, it's best to consult a sacred text: the script for Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* specifies that the French protagonist's Japanese lover look, dress and act Western. This detail is a master stroke. It guarantees the absence of the exotic, that realm where sexual and racial exploitation meet. When the biracial lovers in the film embrace, they do so as historical, not mythic, beings, bidding good riddance to the oppressive chiaroscuro projected by Othello and Desdemona's grief. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is no *Shogun*.

In linguistic terms, racial differences signify, and this, in art at least, can be a curse; a barrier between the spectator and the thing itself. Thus we have the odious categories of black literature and Latin music, but — and here's the rub — no white literature or Anglo music. The latter are allowed to exist as unqualified literature and music, the thing itself. Art.

Funny, you don't look Latin.

Funny, you don't dress Latin.

"Did you see the way Ruben dressed for the Ochentas gig? He does that on purpose to show his scorn for a place that is trying to upgrade things by enforcing a strict dress code. Most of the time he looks like a slob."

The speaker is one of the many non-Latins who work in the salsa industry. I try to fathom the meaning of this criticism. I was there that night and I make an effort to remember what Ruben was wearing. Let's see — sure — sports jacket, pleated pants, knit shirt, all of it in the soft European cut so modish in the Upper West Side, where Ruben lives, Basic Columbus Avenue.

What Ruben wasn't wearing was a tight-fitting, bell-bottomed, wide-lapel, three-piece polyester suit with the shirt's long-point collar open over the jacket. I assume this is what my interlocutor would accept as correct Latin attire, not Ruben's *GQ*-cover casual flair.

Traditionally, Caribbean peoples, like everyone else, have worn the clothes most esthetically suited to their environment. The subtle shadings and texture of Harris Tweed, which stands up so well in the soft focus of the British Isles, would disappear under a blazing Caribbean sun, as would the wearer, who would simply melt. Conversely, the shiny silks and colored cottons that look so right under that tropical sun appear garish in the gray light that illuminates urban spaces in the temperate zone. Culture, in its wisdom, teaches us to like what looks best where we are.

But when a people are transplanted, sold synthetic versions of their own products and relegated by business interests to those forgotten corners of the marketplace where bad taste reigns, the results are impracticality and tackiness. In other words, polyester. Or, to quote the title of Ruben's hit song from the *Siembra* album, "Plastico."

*Ella era una chica plastica
de esas que hay por ahi.*

"Plastico's" satirical disco opening suggests nothing more than a salsified critique of the Latin disco scene. But it is also much more. The song outlines the lives of a plastic couple in a plastic city (full of "polyester faces"). As satire, it is a bit short on nastiness. But "Plastico" is no "Dancing Fool." The last stanza is a straightforward exhortation:

*Listen Latino, listen brother, listen friend, never sell
your destiny for gold nor for comfort;
learn, study, because we have a long way to go. Always
go forward so together we can end
ignorance, which has us fooled by imported models
that are not the solution.*

*Don't let yourselves be fooled. Look for the cause and
reason of things.*

Remember, you can see the faces, but not the heart.

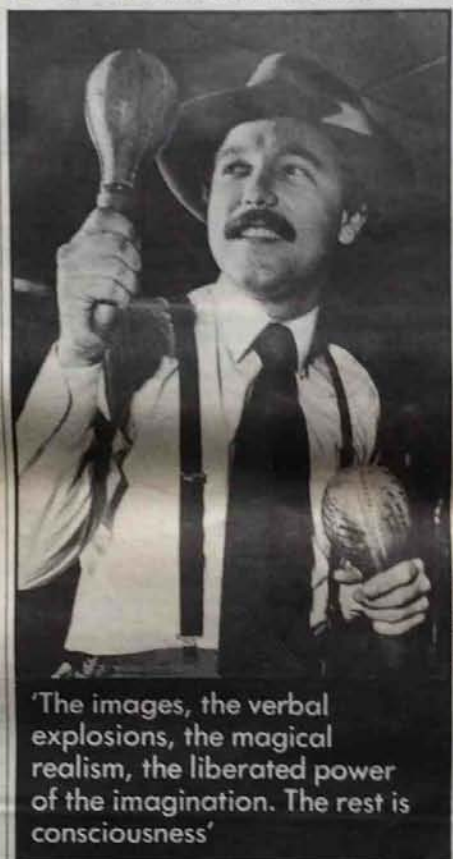
The last line becomes the *coro*, that part of a salsa tune in which the backup singers, driven by an insistent cowbell, repeat a line around which the *sonero*, the lead singer, improvises. Halfway through, Ruben marks a switch in his improvisation by breaking into a recitative:

*But, ladies and gentlemen, in the middle of the plastic,
one can also see the faces of hope, the proud faces of
those who work for a united Latin America and a tomor-
row full of hope and freedom.*

Ruben picks up the improvising again, ending with praise for those nonplastic people who work for a "united Latin America, the one Bolivar dream of." Here the singer calls out for the band to take off, but not with the usual calls, rather with the title of the album and the last song, "Siembra!" (Sow), exhortation to invest one's energy in the future of all Latin America. And, while the band drives the rhythm and the dancers to a frenzied finale, Ruben begins a rollover of Latin America countries, answered by the *coro*:

"Panama!"
"Presente!"
"Puerto Rico!"
"Presente!"
"Mexico!"
"Presente!"
"Cuba!"
"Presente!"

Hearing him sing it live, in front of a dancing, fist-raising, *presente!* answering crowd, one can believe the most Utopian slogan of the first years of the Cuban revolution, linking politics and music: *Revolucion y Pachanga!* One of the last countries called, just as the



'The images, the verbal explosions, the magical realism, the liberated power of the imagination. The rest is consciousness'

volume fades, usually causes a particular confusion:

"Nicaragua without Somoza!"
"Presente!"

The walk uptown along Sixth Avenue holds its pleasure, for me, at the end, where I come upon the trio of Latin American Liberators on Central Park South. San Martin and Bolivar face each other manfully on their steeds, while my compatriot, Jose Marti, whose central place and dramatic composition suggest the greatest importance, is on a rearing horse, to signify, according to the street rules of statuary, a heroic death in battle. But unlike most riding heroes, he is not charging gloriously forward, but is, well, falling backward, shot dead, in fact, in the very first military action he ever saw, falling off a horse he did not know how to ride.

Marti's place among the Liberators was earned by his feverish work for the liberation of Cuba from Spanish domination, political not military work, except for that brief, first and last, unwise sally. But his place in the world of letters is equally secure. Marti was one of those Latin American writers who have pursued literary, journalistic and public careers; except that for Marti, public life meant more than a diplomatic post; it meant revolutionary commitment, imprisonment, exile and death.

While both Cubans claim him as an ideologue, I prefer to see him as a gifted man of letters, a master craftsman of language, who succumbed to the great Latin American temptation: the temptation to make history. It was history, not letters, that felled the poet who, having described that irresistible force of history in a poem as statues of heroes sprung to life to seize him, became himself a hero cast in bronze.

The heroes have seized Ruben Blades. Clearly, his songs are the most political in salsa. But music alone does not bring about change: commitment must extend past songs and performances. Ruben has used his privileged standing and relative invulnerability in the salsa industry to promote LIMA (Latin Industry Music Assn.), an organization that, although it is not precisely a union, does perform some syndicalist functions. He has been looking for ways to extract some social profit from his performances.

He attempted this at the Ochentas gig this winter: with the help of Herman Badillo, Ruben planned to make voter registration available at the club. The club owners were not too keen on the idea, but Badillo and Blades — lawyers both, after all — persuaded them to allow the registration next time. Fearing that club owners' reluctance may still prevail, Ruben now has plans to give a voter registration concert elsewhere, perhaps at a college. Another plan, yet to be tried, will call for the creation of scholarship funds as part of his payment for foreign performances.

Ruben's politics is that of a non-doctrinaire progressive. "If your ideas are progressive they'll accuse you of being a communist," he sings, taking advantage of the rhyming *progresista* and *comunista*. But in the narrow world of salsa, an artist who embraces any political commitment, no matter how moderate, can be seen as a dangerous radical.

No one, of course, will openly come out in opposition to Ruben's politics. After all, who could be against voting, education, Latin unity? But the covert objections are that, one, they will hurt his career; two, that politics has no place in entertainment; three, that politics is not hip; and, four, that Ruben is not sincere.

The answer to the first objection is obvious: his politics has not hurt him within the politically claustrophobic world of salsa and it will not do so in the broader market, where even leftist posturing has been tolerated, and, one suspects, encouraged for publicity reasons. The second objection is irrelevant in a society where an entertainer is now President. The third one may have some validity in Ruben's case: his politics is not hip, he has no sympathy for the devil, hasn't named an album after a Latin American revolutionary group. But this will matter little because, to answer the last objection, he really is sincere.

The critic who saw the young rocker in Ruben's operatic cover was right: the blond adolescent was a rocker, or at least had been one at the beginning of his musical career. Here was a musician who was bringing to salsa the progressive, cosmopolitan, studied outlook of the rock generations.

In Latin America, this spirit has too often led to the unbearable rock of underdevelopment or to a forced esthetic and political progressivism. It is a rare Latin artist who can find the right formula for mixing the need to connect with the roots and the urge to modernize. Ruben has not done it yet, but if anyone can, he will.

In the world of salsa Ruben Blades is known as an innovator, though where his innovations are coming from is not always apparent. Take his biggest hit, "Pedro Navaja," also from the *Siembra* album, a narrative — in itself a salsa rarity — about the fatal encounter between the pimp who goes by that name ("Navajero" means "blade") and a streetwalker. If the characters sound familiar, so would the music, although I admit I didn't catch the move until I heard Ruben, who does not like to keep things obscure, mention Bertolt Brecht as he introduced the song in a club. "Pedro Navaja" is a salsa reworking of "Muck the Knife," so well adapted in music and lyrics that it has given new life to the old raker. "Pedro Navaja" has been recorded by other artists in the Spanish-speaking world, has been turned into more than one stage production, and for a while there were plans to make it into a film.

Ruben Blades is a one-man production machine, fueled by some unpredictable energy. (His mother had predicted that he would either be the President of Panama or wind up in jail.) To understand his drive one must understand two things. First, Ruben is a Latin American, not an American Latin. He was born not under the sign of the ghetto but under the sign of underdevelopment. To put it simply, in Latin America, people like Ruben Blades are not a minority. We are not even "Latin" — something

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many of us learn that we are considered only after arriving at these shores. We are simply ourselves. And although we may still have to define ourselves in terms of the people we are not, those Others live in another country. An American Latin calls the Other "white," a term borrowed from American blacks and born out of the need for solidary struggle. A Latin American may call himself black or white, but he calls the Other "yanqui," "gringo," "americano." Even the Spanish term for race *La Raza* — has nothing to do with skin color, and everything to do with culture, language and allegiance.

Second, Ruben was born into those optimistic generations into which you, dear reader, were possibly also born. If in the Anglo-American world these generations have picked up Afro-American blues in its urban manifestation and wedded it to the esthetics and technologies of pop modernism, their contemporaries in the Latin American world have picked Afro-Latin sounds in their urban manifestation (salsa) and, divine alchemy, have turned salsa into... what? Count Julian's invasion, Macho Camacho's Beat, Bolivar's dream, *revolucion y pachanga! Siembra!*

The project has been outlined by the new Spanish American novel. That, a decade or so ago, a generation of writers could turn the nearly forgotten formulas of literary modernism into the most vital, engaging and demanding fiction since himself projected the inner life of Dublin onto the wide screen of the cosmos, is a tribute to the energies that lie seething in the Spanish New World. The problem with fiction is that my man on the corner ("pasame el tabaco, bro") has never heard of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and why should he? My Anglo men riding the elevator up to the corporate world haven't heard of Donald Barthelme, either; if anything, it's the Colombian they know about and have even read.

But salsa, my man does know ("Vaya!"). And the artist who is singing has read Garcia Marquez, and — this is something my man has no way of knowing — even writes fiction, which were it not so derivative of the Colombian would be first rate (take heart, Ruben, even Gabo had to wrestle with Faulkner's ghost before he could mature). The images, the verbal explosions, the "magical realism," the liberated power of the imagination, all flow in (*Cono, esta heavy ese numeriot!*). The rest is consciousness.

Or *conciencia*. Which in Spanish means both consciousness and conscience, as well as political awareness. *Conciencitar* means to make oneself or another politically conscious.

Imagine a *barrio* that stretches from the South Bronx to Tierra del Fuego. Imagine a music that binds that barrio together. Imagine the author and performer of that music. Hold that for a while.

Now, imagine a tribe at the dawn of its history. Imagine those tribe members who make composing and singing about the epic struggles of their tribe their work, which will come to be called Work, or, in their language, Poetry. Imagine that their work is so powerful that it gives consciousness to the tribe, it makes the many, One; and that One, grateful for its constitution, returns the favor by naming all the poets one poet, all the bards, Homer.

Zippan to the recent past. When John Lennon said that the Beatles were bigger than Jesus Christ he was being neither blasphemous nor cute; he was simply stating his assessment of their power in the Age of Media. *O tempora, o mores*. But the truth is that today one Homer, not a tradition posthumously named after one bard, can sing to a goodly share of all humanity. Achilles' wrath in an LP. Video cassettes of the Trojan horse. Satellite coverage of Ulysses' travels.

The late Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier urged Latin American writers to compose the great epics of their people, to be the epic singers of their race. Writers, however, are not singers, and Carpentier, in spite of his credentials as a musicologist, was a man whose immense culture prevented him from understanding pop phenomena, from considering the role real singers could play. It is fitting that the challenge has been taken up, unwittingly, by a singer who has served a double apprenticeship as practitioner of traditional Latin music and enthusiastic reader and writer of new Latin American fiction.

Ruben Blades' two-album "discodrama" *Maestra Vida*, a three-generation-long narrative that, following the model of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, captures the rhythms of life in Latin America, is but the tip of the fictive iceberg that fills the author's imagination. The characters of *Maestra Vida* are only a few of the characters who inhabit his world of fiction; the rest appear in Ruben's other works (most of them in progress): the dictator of the country, who came to power, in a satirical literalization of *machismo*, by virtue of his enormous penis; the town fool who prophesies the coming of the MGM lion and walks through the barrio with the moon on a string like a balloon; the glorious bandit Cipriano Armenteros; Pedro Navaja, of course; and many, many others.

Maestra Vida is flawed. The flaw lies in what one Latin and jazz aficionado calls the "overproduction syndrome," an excessive attention to orchestration and fullness. But at the heart of *Maestra Vida* are important conceptions: the vision of one Latin American urban space and one Latin American saga; the progressive stand on social and sexual politics; the presentation of salsa as total spectacle, not just dance music; the production of an integrated piece, not just a collection of swinging tunes.

To be sure, Ruben is not the first to try. These have been salsa operas and salsa suites, there has been politicized salsa, and the Latin American New Song Movement is politically committed and musically experimental. But he may be the first to succeed artistically and commercially.

Sales have not been stupendous. But, as music critic Tony Sabourin points out, *Maestra Vida* is a work whose success will only be apparent years from now. In other words, *Maestra Vida* is not an instant hit, but a slowly simmering classic. It is important to reserve judgment until the stage version, now in preproduction, is realized. New York Latinos have been waiting to make their mark on the New York musical stage. *Maestra Vida* has more than a fighting chance to do it. Ruben is determined to do it right. Nothing *plastico*, now.



BLADES: A DISCOGRAPHY

- 1969 — *A Las Seis* by Los Salvajes del Ritmo (Discos Istmenos Panama).
- 1970 — *De Panama a Nueva York* by Pete Rodriguez (Allegre).
- 1974 — *Barretto* by Ray Barretto (Fania).
- 1975 — *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* by Willie Colon (Fania).
- 1976 — *Fania All-Stars: Homenaje a Tito Rodriguez* by Fania All-Stars (Fania).
- 1977 — *Metiendo Mano* by Willie Colon and Ruben Blades (Vaya).
- 1977 — *Salsa Suite* by Larry Carlo (Fania).
- 1978 — *Spanish Fever* by the Fania All-Stars (Fania).
- 1979 — *Siembra* by Willie Colon and Ruben Blades (Fania).
- 1979 — *Crossover* by Fania All-Stars (Fania).
- 1980 — *Commitment* by Fania All-Stars (Fania).
- 1981 — *Maestra Vida: Primera Parte* by Ruben Blades (Fania).
- 1981 — *Maestra Vida: Segunda Parte* by Ruben Blades (Fania).

One time, about three or four years ago, Willie Colon and I came to the Madison Square Garden to do our sound check for a concert when someone introduced us to the "special effects" man. I thought, is this a concert or a George Lucas movie? The guy shows us this cannon and tells us that we should go inside the cannon and then there'd be an explosion while someone says something really ingenious like "The Salsa Explosion!" and we'd come out of the cannon. Now, the guy was terribly enthusiastic about the cannon, but we told him, "Sir, we've never been inside a cannon and we haven't the slightest interest in being fired from that cannon tonight." This caused the guy to look very worried and he called the promoters, who tried to explain to us the beauty and the "showbiz impact" of our coming out of the cannon. I told him we were musicians, not clowns, and that night we were the only ones who did not come out of a cannon or were suspended from the ceiling or anything like that. It was like a circus.

"Going to see Ruben is an experience you have to be ready for," says Leon Ichaso, "for you don't only visit him, but all his characters and all his fantasies." After a few visits, it is obvious why Ruben doesn't do drugs, not even beer, which, I'm told, he used to down like water to not the slightest effect. His imagination is so fertile that any chemical change would be either an overdose or insignificant. I've known people like him before: my friend, the Harvard-educated theologian from Montana, whom

neither booze, reefer nor acid could change in any way. I always thought it was his Indian blood.

Except for a very down home Latin American fondness for beer, which he has banished from his life, Ruben has stayed away from the chemical scene. This has had two healthy consequences. One is that having neither an expensive habit nor a family to support he is one of the few Latin Americans, perhaps the only one, who enjoys a certain measure of financial independence. The other is that since he never took that first step, he has not felt the urge to graduate from hallucinogens to mysticism.

In the salsa world, benignly neglected by the dharma mongers, the only religious impulse that has taken hold has been *santeria*, the Yoruba-based Afro-Cuban religion so powerful in the Latin population. *Santeria*, may the *orishas* be praised, is, in many ways, an exemplary religion, for it does not teach otherworldliness; instead it projects spiritual values to the material world, which, ruled as it is by the deities, is sacred.

Ruben's world view, or at least the one he projects through his songs, is far from such mysticism. It reflects, instead, a secular, progressive perspective that has long been common to the intellectual and political vanguards of Latin America. The dominant note is skepticism, and skepticism is a shield against facile spiritualisms and ideologies.

The writer: "If I were politically committed to an ideological line, I would be after you to convince you of the correctness of that line, so you would use your privileged position to communicate it."

Ruben: "Oh, I've been approached to do that, but I can't. There are too many contradictions. The people who think it's OK for me to go to Cuba don't think it's so great for me to go to Chile, and the ones who think it's fine if I go to Chile, would criticize my going to Cuba. Since I'm in the middle, my only weapon is to tell the truth."

And the truth for Ruben Blades is that there must be changes. It is in the nature of things:

Today for you, tomorrow for me.

(Chorus of Cipriano Armenteros)

Life the Teacher, comrade,

gives and takes away,

takes away and gives.

(Chorus of *Maestra Vida*)

Life is full of surprises,

surprises is what life is full of.

Oh God!

(Chorus of Pedro Navaja)

On the album covers of *Maestra Vida* Ruben asked the listeners to send their comments. A mountain of mail is piling up in his apartment; he asks me to pick two letters at random. "You see," he says after I read them, "they're not fan letters, they don't say 'Oh, papi, I want to make it with you.' They're letters of encouragement." And that they are — letters of solidarity, the best proof that the Latin public wants experiment, and intelligence.

Ruben is in touch with the longings of the Latin American audience. He knows, for example, that he is creating for a public that has not abandoned certain traditional values, salient among them, *romantic love*. The romantic ballad is the biggest selling genre in the Latin music market: the biggest artists, like Jose Iglesias and Jose Luis Rodriguez, are romantic balladeers. And although Ruben's crooning is far from the easy-listening genre, he is a romantic singer, capable of writing and performing love songs of such poignancy that only the hardhearted can hear them and not feel the urge to go fall terribly, hopelessly, ecstatically in love.

But the next move for Ruben will have to be to step across the "ethnic" barrier, to reach an international, multilingual audience. To do so, he plans to sing in other languages and to change both his music and his presentation.

The changes in format will include closer attention to the presentation of shows — bolder, more intelligent use of choreography, lighting, costumes — and the formation of a new musical team, smaller, more flexible and more versatile than a traditional salsa band.

How the music will change is still a mystery. Some have pointed out that musical composition is Ruben's weakest point, that he has paid too much attention to his message and not enough to his form. Nonetheless, the time is ripe for a break from the old Cuban models of salsa. Latin America is increasingly becoming a single culture, and salsa has to open itself up to the other powerful currents of that continent if it is to survive.

But music, as the narrator of *Maestra Vida* says, "is only a pretext."

Leon Ichaso: That was one of the things that was beautiful about John Lennon, that he was the only musician you knew who was intelligent, sophisticated; he could offer you things, not just music. He would come around with a signal, and you'd pick it up and say, "Thank you, John; you're right there, man." And that was nice that he had come back just now, because he was going to be around for a while, he had solved his whole problem. He was at peace. Ruben is not at peace. Ruben is boiling.