

Lily García's Tour of Cuba • More Hidden Treasures

# SAN JUAN

Vol. VI, No. II 1997

PUERTO RICO'S CITY MAGAZINE

Rubén Blades'  
World Party

And  
the Best

Place to Picnic  
Movie Theaters  
Carnitas  
Piononos  
Tostones  
Chuletas  
Lechón  
Criollo  
Sushi  
etc.  
OF S.J.



Puerto Rico's Choice  
Dining Guide  
Inside

# C O N T E N T S



## F E A T U R E S

### 61 More Hidden Treasures

San Juan Magazine sets  
out to rediscover  
Puerto Rico.

### WORLD CITIZEN 40

Grammy Award-winner Rubén Baldes sits down for a one-on-one interview to talk about music, his latest album, politics and more...

### SAN JUAN'S FINEST 47

Our readers spoke and we listened. Once again, San Juan Magazine unveils its annual poll listing the Best San Juan has to offer.

### OUR WOMAN IN HAVANA 54

Last Christmas TV reporter Lily García visited relatives in Cuba. What started out as the fulfillment of a promise became a rendezvous with despair.

## D E P A R T M E N T S

- |    |                 |    |
|----|-----------------|----|
| 9  | THAT'S THAT     |    |
| 13 | PICANTE FILES   |    |
| 19 | SCORECARD       |    |
| 21 | BUSINESS TALKS  |    |
| 29 | EXECUTIVE SUITE |    |
| 33 | SAN JUAN WOMAN  |    |
| 72 | CITY LIGHTS     |    |
| 75 | CITY PULSE      |    |
| 83 | GOURMET         |    |
| 87 | RESTAURANTS     | 40 |

#### On the cover:

Rubén Blades embraces the world. Concept and design by Philippe Schoene Roura. Rubén Blades shot by Marcano © 1996. Graphic assistance by Tina Ruiz. Imaging done by Marcano Studios and VISTA COLOR.



# WORLD CITIZEN

"AT THE MOMENT OF TRUTH, WHAT COLOR IS YOUR LIE?" — RUBÉN BLADES

**F**or years, I feared for his life. And finally, after more than a decade of hopeful waiting for that one-on-one encounter with the man I was certain was the most important figure in the music of my culture, my people, I met up with him. And during the course of an hour-long interview, my resistance finally waned and I casually interjected: "Do you fear for your life?"

I should have guessed it. His reply — sharp and concise — was what I had subconsciously suspected all along: "No."

His intrepid nature has long been mirrored in his verse, some of the very same verses that have incited my apprehension: "El mundo solo será del que camina sin miedo," (The world will only belong to the one who walks without fear), a line from "Ojos del perro azul" from the "Agua de luna" album.

Ever since he arrived on the music scene more than 20 years ago, singer-songwriter Rubén Blades has not only stirred the imagination, but provoked an entire generation of Latinos to recognize and to think about the injustice and corruption inflicted upon them and of the folly we perpetuate upon ourselves.

In short, from "Plástico" to "Pablo Pueblo," "Ligia Elena" to "Decisiones," "Muevete" to "Patria," Blades music and verses have compelled us to take a good, hard look at ourselves. He has incited us to anger and at times to laugh at ourselves. He has exhorted his people — Latin Americans — to transcend.

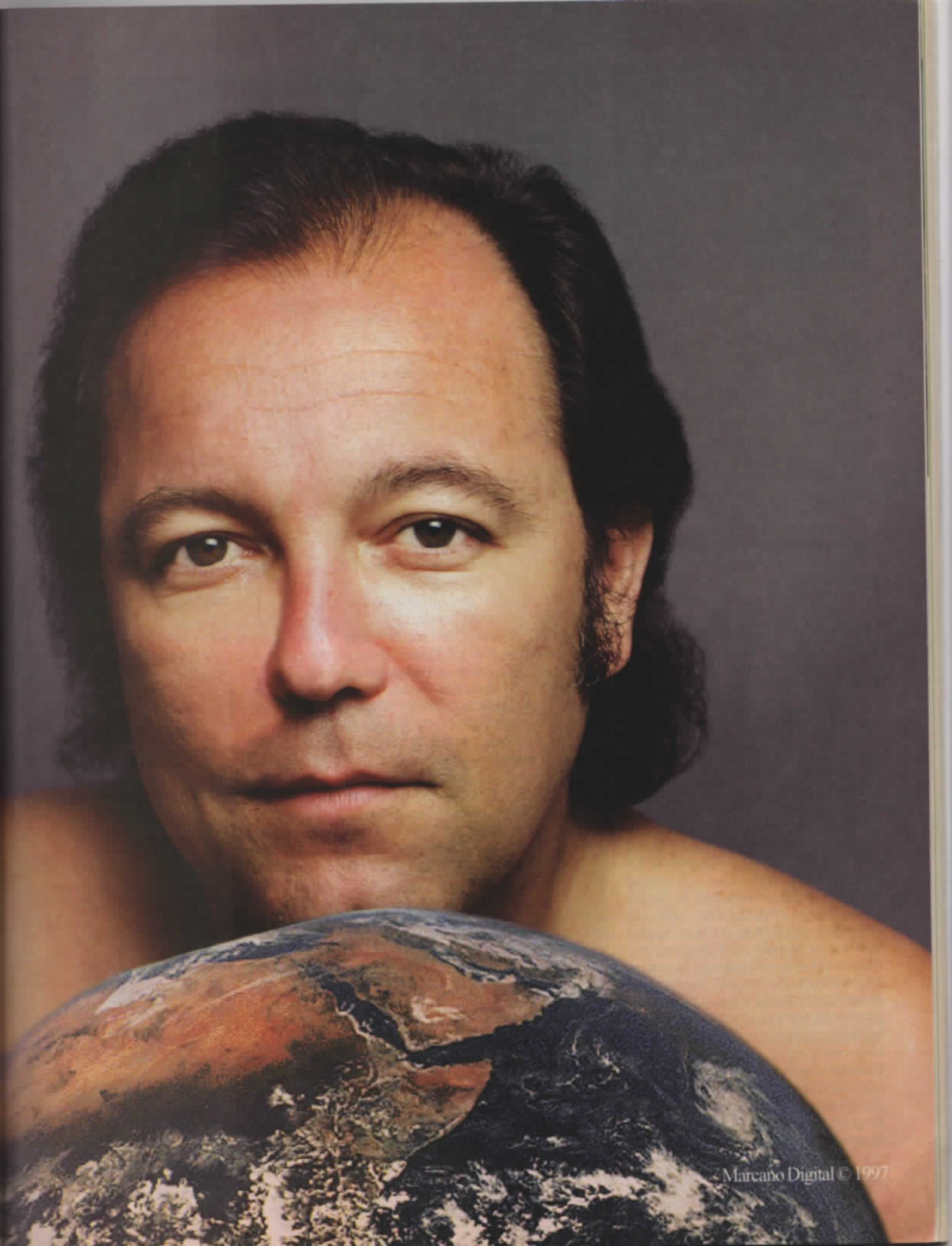
And thinking of the fate that at times catches up with some great teachers, thinking of Malcolm and King, I had thought someone would some day come along and silence his voice.

Not so!

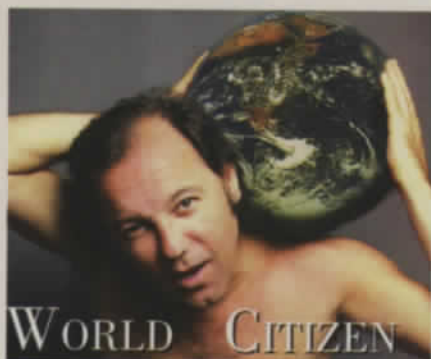
---

**P.J. Ortiz Interviews**

---



Marcano Digital © 1997



"I became involved in politics because of the apparent contradiction between what I was singing about and what I was becoming. I was singing to the poor, the Pablo Pueblos of the world and about social issues. Yet, I was making money by singing about their needs."

Today, Blades' voice more than ever continues to shine, inspire and awaken. At 48, Blades remains an undaunted aspirant to the presidency of his native Panama, despite his loss in the 1994 elections. He remains active as a film actor, currently co-starring alongside Harrison Ford and Brad Pitt in "The Devil's Own."

Just last month, Blades received a Grammy award, his third, for "La rosa de los vientos," an odyssey in which he explores the musical roots of his mother country, Panama. Blades is presently collaborating with Puerto Rican composer Tite Curet Alonso on an album to be called "La campana en el fondo del mar" (The Bell at the Bottom of the Sea).

Most recently, Blades was in Puerto Rico for a two-concert stint in Bayamón and Ponce. Some salsa diehards criticized the performances because they wore blinders to the show and expected to see and hear an old Blades perform old songs. The concert promoters were partly responsible for failing to market the concerts for what they really were: Blades showcase of Panama's talent.

Concert producer Damaris Martínez, producer of events for Pro Show, a local production outfit, told **San Juan Magazine** they weren't able to hold a

press conference to disclose the details of the concerts because Blades was delayed on his trip back from Hong Kong. He had been in the Far East putting the finishing touches on his next film.

Nonetheless, other more receptive aficionados relished Blades' admirable performances and were thrilled to listen to a mostly unknown cast of musicians perform a new blend of music that Blades has been cultivating for more than two years, a music with a broader, more worldly appeal.

"My life has been a straight line, no matter how many detours," he would later say. "All my interests are combined. I have always said I'm a Latin American from Panama, but I am also a citizen of the world."

Following his two concerts and a week of engagements with a social mission, **San Juan Magazine** caught up with him. We met him in the lobby of a Condado hotel as scheduled and went up to his room overlooking the blue expanse of the Atlantic.

Wearing blue jeans, a polo shirt, sandals and a pair of oval-shaped sunglasses, Blades sunk into a sofa. And as the magazine staff prepared the setting for the photo shoot, I told him I was less interested in Paula C than Laura Farina, two of Blades' many "fictional" characters — Farina being one of the characters in Blades' masterful "Agua de luna" (Moon Water), an album released in 1987 based on the early short stories of Gabriel García Márquez.

"I was reacting to his short stories," Blades said. "I took what he wrote and gave it my own interpretation."

But Blades' intent went far beyond, taking elements of literature to the "realm of dancing and real physical passion."

"We tried to create a link between literature and popular music," he said. "We took literature to the street corners, and people who never read a book were reciting verses of literature through the music. The quality of (Márquez's) writing allowed me to be more lyrical, but it was seen by some critics as pretentious and arcane, like when I referred to the military as silver-plated crabs who had stolen the moon and would not return it."

"'Agua de luna' has the best arrangements of any record I've recorded. Yet the album just died. If

you don't please the people, they won't buy the record regardless of how good it may be."

Although the album was nominated for a Grammy, it did not receive it. A year later, his "Antecedente" (1988) received the coveted award. It was Blades' second Grammy. His first was presented to him for his 1985 tour de force "Escenas," which gave synthesizers a prominent place in Afro-Caribbean music.

If "Agua de luna" was Blades' attempt to bring literature into music, "La rosa de los vientos" reflects one of Blades' most cherished rites of passage: his return home.

"It signifies my arrival and my attempt to explore my Panamanian side," he said. "Thomas Wolfe once said you can never go home. You can go home, provided you don't expect it to be the same as when you left it."

"La rosa de los vientos," a 16-piece project is Blades' first production recorded in Panama — after more than two decades of establishing himself as one of the Latin music genre's leading exponents.

There is much to be said about this new project. The first and most significant is that it deserves to be recognized as a work of art, a production to be enjoyed by anyone who appreciates gourmet tropical.

From the technical elements, as the engineering and mixing, to its lyrical content, from its vocal and instrumental harmonics to its diverse rhythms, from melody to swing, "La rosa de los vientos" is one of Blades' finest works.

This new project is rich in color and texture bordering on the realm of world music. It is a total departure from a total salsa bag. Instead, Blades incorporates other Latin and South American flavors, among them cumbias as in "Mi favorita," and Osvaldo Ayala's haunting "Eres mi canción," and the candombe, a samba-like rhythm of Afro-Uruguayan origin in the piece "Amándote." Salsa doesn't take a back seat; it merely shares the spotlight as in "Amor mudo," where it is interwoven with an upbeat Colombian cumbia or in "Tu mejor amiga," where it is capped with a march-like Brazilian drums riffs.

Blades maintains the salsa tradition with such strongholds as "Sin querer queriendo" and "Chilam Balam," a



piece reminiscent of "Agua de luna" and the blaring trumpet sound of Ricardo Ray. In both pieces Blades spices things up with riveting montunos and vocal antiphonies — his trademark.

The album has many highlights, but there are two that really stand out. "Eres mi canción" is a compelling melody that culminates with a powerful two-part chorus line. The title track is a musical odyssey via Panama and its social and political realities. It is the quintessential piece written for Blades, yet its message hits home whether you're in San Juan, New York, or Kansas City. Its musical fabric sets a spine-chilling solo by Brazilian violinist Raimundo Penaforte to a rhythm section featuring accordion, guitar, bass, percussion and hand clapping.

Blades role in this album reminds me of Quincy Jones, who dedicated much of his work to presenting young unknown talent. Here, Blades introduces us to a cast of musicians from his homeland that we never had the pleasure to enjoy until now.

"The album is a showcase of Panamanian talent," Blades said. "The musicians there are an extension of what I was at 13- and 14-years-old. They are excellent musicians and were well prepared for the project."

Blades gives credit to producer-engineer Sergio Cambafort, who developed the console that recorded the album in Panama.

"I told him that if he built the console in Panama, I would record there. He did," Blades said. "The musicians just flocked to the recording studio, and I wanted to get back to the source of my music."

Throughout his musical career, Blades has sought to create a panorama of American music. He feels that with his latest project he has taken a step closer towards that goal.

"I've always wanted to create the kind of sound that would make people say, 'That's American music,'" he said, meaning the music of the entire Western Hemisphere including its African influence and indigenous instruments and forms.

Music is such a powerful force in Blades' life that he credits it with being the impetus for his political career.

"The reason I became involved in politics had to do with the apparent

**BIG APPLE**  
*bagel & deli*  
 A REAL NEW YORK DELI

Featuring:  
**BREAKFAST**  
**LUNCH**  
**DINNER**

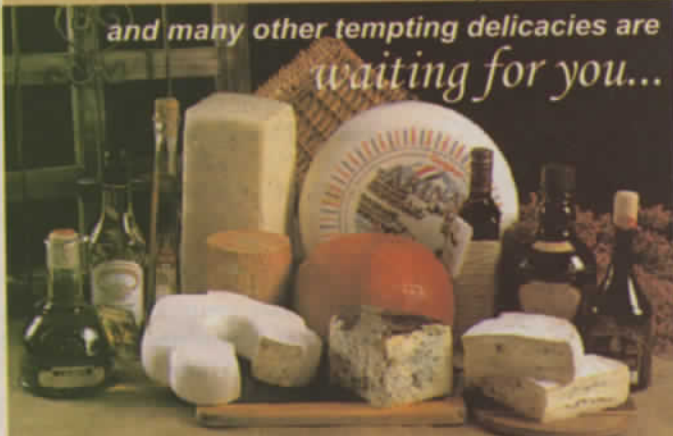
Overstuffed Sandwiches • Bagels  
 Omelettes • Muffins • Knishes • Waffles  
 Smoked Salmon and much more...

1407 Ashford Ave.  
 Condado  
 725-6345  
 Free Parking

**San Juan's Best**

The  
*Best of Cheeses,*  
 Patés, Terrines,

and many other tempting delicacies are  
*waiting for you...*



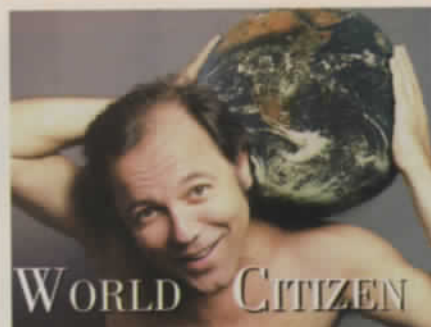
...to enjoy by every member of the family,  
 any hour, every day!



**MEAT CENTER**

Road #2 Ext. Villa Caparra  
**781-7779**  
 Villas de San Francisco  
**753-5657**  
 Garden Hills Plaza  
**783-1035**

Open Monday thru Saturday from 8:30 AM till 6:30 PM



contradiction between what I was singing about and what I was becoming," he said. "I was singing to the poor, the Pablo Pueblos of the world and about social issues. Yet, I was making money by singing about their needs and social injustice, while they remained poor.

"I realized I had to do something more than singing if I were to create a balance between the two. So, I risked it all to find a political solution.

"If the political structure worked, I wouldn't be there. But it doesn't work, and if you don't like what you see about the system, then you'd better do something about it."

In 1990, the prodigal son of San Felipe, a barrio in Panama City, founded the Papa Egoro party, which translates into mother earth in the language of the Embera people, one of Panama's indigenous groups. The party, which has a growing following, seeks true democratic reform in Panama, "eliminating monopolies, demagogues, an inflated bureaucracy and political clientage."

"Papa Egoro seeks social reform that contemplates a way to absorb the disenfranchised, a way to prepare them for social change," stressed Blades.

Blades, who was a practicing lawyer in Panama prior to obtaining a masters degree in international law from Harvard University, is well acquainted with world affairs. He was invited to speak about the world habitat before the United Nations. Blades delivered his testimony despite the death of his mother the day before because "she would have wanted it that way."

These days, Blades continues as the president of Papa Egoro and calls Panama his home, although his music and his film career commit him to extended stays abroad. Blades' political quest nearly bankrupted him. He didn't record, perform or act during his candidacy, selling off some of his assets to support his campaign.

"And I will do it again," he said. ■