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# TIME

**EUROPE VOTES**  
Sending Signals  
Of Concern

**LATIN AMERICA**

## THE DEBT MESS

**TOTAL: \$350 BILLION**



AUSTRIA . . . . . \$ 34  
 BELGIUM . . . . . F 80  
 DENMARK . . . . . Kr 14.00  
 FINLAND . . . . . Mk 11.00  
 FRANCE . . . . . F 3.00

GERMANY . . . . . DM 4.50  
 GREECE . . . . . Dr 160  
 ICELAND (incl. tax) . . . . . Kr 45.00  
 IRELAND (incl. tax) . . . . . £1.20  
 ISRAEL (incl. tax) . . . . . IS 230.00

ITALY . . . . . Lit 2500  
 LUXEMBOURG . . . . . F 90  
 NETHERLANDS . . . . . Fl 4.75  
 NORWAY . . . . . Kr 12.00

PORTUGAL . . . . . Esc 175  
 SPAIN . . . . . Ptas 225  
 SWEDEN . . . . . Kr 14.00  
 SWITZERLAND . . . . . F 3.90

UNITED KINGDOM . . . . . £1.00  
 U.S. ARMED FORCES . . . . . \$1.75  
 YUGOSLAVIA . . . . . YD 200  
 WEEKLY

## The Keen Edge of Rubén Blades

*He is a lawyer, essayist and . . . oh, yes—a terrific musician*

**Q**uick. Catch him now, before he gets elected.

He is 35, one of the biggest stars in Latin American music, a composer who can combine bold lyrics, intricate narratives and bright, salsa-inflected melodies with the fine flair of the best singer-songwriters. Bruce Springsteen, Pete Townshend, Jackson Browne come first to mind, and if that is heavy, heady company, then all right, just keep the jostling to a minimum and make a little room.

But even way up there at the top where the air is thin, Rubén Blades would seem a rare, highflying creature. His songs have not only rhythms that insinuate but lyrics that can touch the conscience with humane political passion. He has been a lawyer for a bank in Panama, a mail boy working for a Latin record company in New York City and one of the main perpetrators, with Trombonist Willie Colon, of *Siembra*, estimated to be the bestselling salsa album in history. He currently writes short essays on art and politics for the newspaper *La Estrella de Panamá*; conducts a long-distance collaboration with Gabriel García Márquez on a cycle of songs based on some of the Nobel prizewinner's early stories; and, with his pistol-hot band, *Seis del Solar* (Six from the Tenement), has been galvanizing a concert tour that has ricocheted from Berkeley, Calif., to the Cannes Film Festival and home to New York City. He can also be heard on the sound track of *Beat Street*, the just opened break-dancing movie, doing nicely by a lollipop love theme. But the best place to catch Blades and his Tenement Six is on their new Elektra/Asylum album, *Buscando America* (Searching for America). All the record's seven cuts are sung in Spanish, but if there is a better album this year in any language, its impact will have to be measured off the charts. On the Richter scale, maybe.

It seems a shame, then, that Blades is going into Panama politics. He has a while yet to change his mind, which is good news for anyone who favors music with a hard edge and a hard swing. This fall Blades will move farther north, from his bachelor apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side to the cultivated wilds of Cambridge, Mass., where he will work for a master's degree in law at Harvard. "I am totally convinced that I am going to have a lot to do with the future of my country," he says. "But I don't want people to say, 'What does this guy know? He's been singing.'" Getting a master's is

probably a prudent first step on a very extravagant course, but anyone who has listened to Blades sing his songs in his streetwise tenor would have no doubt that he knows plenty already.

As he says of García Márquez, Blades has "one foot on the moon and the other on the earth. We are both citizens of an emotional continent." Blades' songs, featuring characters as diverse as political policemen, murdered priests and preg-



The singer-songwriter swinging hard on the street corner  
*Measuring impact on the Richter scale.*

nant teen-agers, explore exotic territory that is made immediate and familiar by his graceful narrative gifts and by the fleet, conversational translations of the lyrics that he provides on the album's inner cover ("Where do people who disappear go to? Look in the water and in the high grass . . . When do they return? Every time our thoughts bring them back").

His music is instantly infectious but startling, because salsa in the U.S. has always been subterranean. Predominantly Afro-Cuban and heavy on brass, salsa singled the edges of the pop music scene in the mid-'70s without ever burning through to the center. On *Buscando America*, Blades replaced the traditional brass with vibes, giving the music a somewhat easier, more seductive feel that loses

nothing in intensity. "I couldn't just take away the Afro-Cuban format," Blades says. "It was the only link to the people. I basically kept the music and changed the lyrics." Blades has taken contemporary American Latin music and not only made it Latin American but pushed it even further, universalized it.

Blades' next outing, to be written and recorded before law school classes begin, will be in English, and for the occasion he will switch his first name to Panama, partly in homage to his homeland and partly in remembrance of his grandfather, who was drawn from Barbados by the boomtown allure of the canal. Blades' grandmother Emma had a strong hand in raising Rubén and his four siblings. His mother, a piano player and singer, and his father, a percussionist, police detective and basketball star, "never stopped working. They always wanted for us to be ahead of them." Emma was far ahead of her time and maybe out of it as well: a yogi, a feminist, a Rosicrucian, a vegetarian, a "wonderfully crazy woman who practiced levitation and instilled in me the silly notion that justice is important, and that we can all serve and be part of the solution."

Such service exacts its price. In 1980 Blades wrote and recorded a biting parable about international intervention called *Tiburón* (Shark):

*The moon rests amidst the  
silence  
Resting on the great  
Caribbean  
Only the shark is still awake  
Only the shark is on the prowl  
Only the shark is restless . . .*

Lyrics like that got Blades banned from the most popular Latin station in Miami, which ran an editorial calling him a Communist. The charge infuriated Blades not only because of its inaccuracy but because his parents now live in Miami and were caught up in the furor. Blades' life was threatened, and he took the precaution of suiting up in a bulletproof vest. He has not performed in Miami again.

Before classes start at Harvard, Blades and the band will play the Montreux International Jazz Festival, then tour Panama, Puerto Rico, Colombia and Ecuador, taking the music back to its taproots. The music business characterizes the kind of musical-cultural hybridization Blades is carrying off as a "cross-over." Says Blades: "I would rather think more in terms of converging than of cross-over, because if you cross over it might be lonely on the other side." Blades deserves a lot of company wherever he goes, and will get it if there is any justice. And he knows that there is. Grandmother Emma told him so. —By Jay Cocks. Reported by Mary Ann French/New York