

Film

The Usually Private Rubén Blades Opens Up About His Life for a New Documentary



By Monica Castillo

As one of the most famous Panamanians in the world, salsero **Rubén Blades** has enjoyed an exhilarating career on and off the stage. He's jumped from music to movies to politics, even launching a presidential campaign and serving as his country's Minister of Tourism for a number of years.

In the new documentary, ***Ruben Blades Is Not My Name***, director **Abner Benaim** follows the musician on tour, through his kitchen, and while walking the streets of his second home, New

York City. Blades is as busy as ever, but allows Benaim to ask probing questions into his past, including his time with Fania superstar, Hector LaVoe. Here are excerpts from our conversation with Benaim.

Official trailer: <https://youtu.be/6DOp79subO0>

On Deciding to Profile Rubén Blades

I grew up listening to his music. I'm from Panama myself, so I was a fan. There was a special connection just from knowing he's from Panama. But when I grew older, I got a sense that the lyrics to his words were very different and special, and that they were somehow imbued in my mind. Just like the first time you listen to lyrics by Bob Marley, for example. The kind of lyrics that shape you. And then I figured that it's not only me, of course. Not only Panama, but it's all of Latin America mostly. It's my generation, one generation above me and one below me. It's three generations of Latin Americans and people, Latins in the States and Europe, who have [take] some kind of influence from his lyrics. Just taking all that was enough to get me curious about who's behind those lyrics because his songs have become anthems and they keep on being present. You hear it and it sounds like listening to something old, it sounds like a revival. They have remained present.

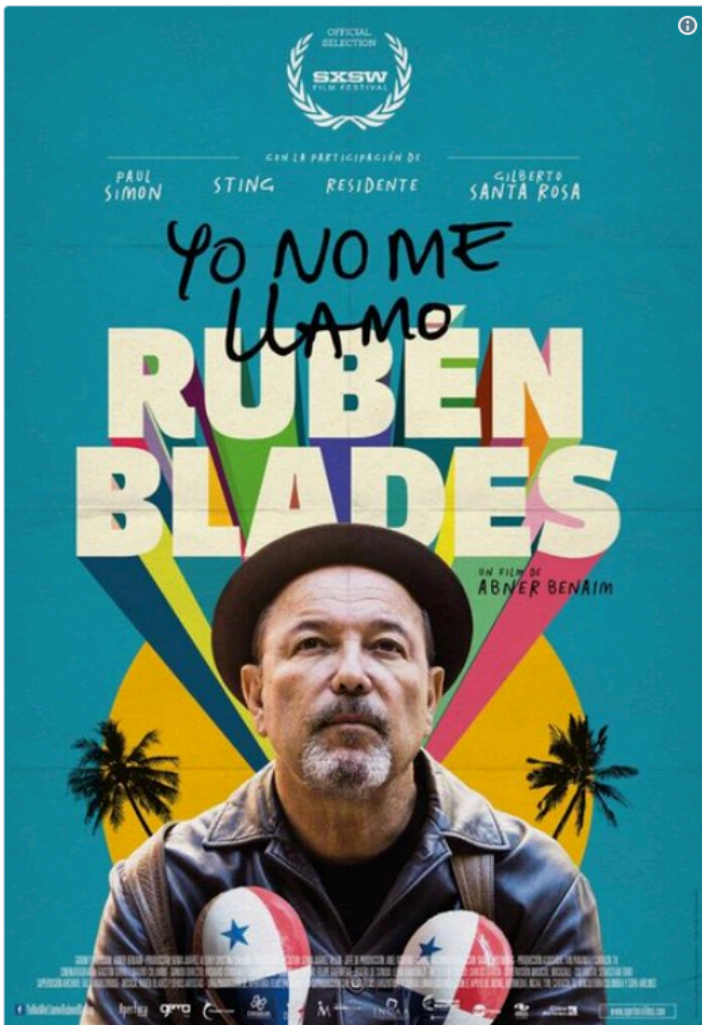
I don't know, I was mostly curious to know who was behind those lyrics, and also to get to know him because there's also something strange about his story. It doesn't have any obvious drama – he doesn't have a case of drug addiction, or he didn't kill anyone, the obvious documentary stories that are supposed to be good.


On Interviewing the Soft-Spoken Rebel

He's gone against the current a lot, especially in politics. His career choices, like he says in the movie, have been difficult. He gets out of his comfort zone all the time, so that was interesting to me. He's been consistent, and that's also something I wanted to learn. If you listen to an interview he did in the '70s and one he does today, he's on the same things and values. I don't know. He's someone I admired mostly as a musician and a popular philosopher. People know this but people don't realize how huge his influence has been on Latin America, and I thought that was interesting. He's such a modest guy. That's a mumbo jumbo of other reasons.

On Interviewing a Latino Superstar In the Age of Trump

We have it in the film, where he sings "Tiburón" and Sting says, "It's important for artists to tell the truth to power. To say your line." I think it's important to show that there's good people, and that there's people who are intelligent and they've been consistently saying what they think. It's important to hear these voices. That's also why I put Junot Diaz in the film – to show that there's smart people out there who believe exactly the opposite as Trump, and they can prove it with their own existence basically. It was important. It's not a political movie, per se, but everything about it is somehow political or ideological in some sense. I think that edge that he has, that ability to say the truth without worrying what the consequence will be is something to learn from also.



 **Rubén Blades** ✓
@rubenblades

Felicidades a @abnerbenaim (director y productor) por el reconocimiento obtenido por su documental en el @sxsw Film Festival, "Yo no me llamo Rubén Blades", con el premio del público "24 Beats per Second". Felicitaciones a todo el equipo de producción del film.

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On Who He Decided to Interview About Blades

It was mostly people I thought had something interesting to say, and who we could reach. The problem was when I asked Rubén to send me a list of people he knows that I could interview, he sent me such an incredible list, and they all said yes! I had to stop at some point, and everyone was saying yes. We flew out to Milan, for example, to interview Sting at a concert. We got Paul Simon in New York, and this was all done [coordinated] from Panama.

The criteria was mostly incredible artists in their own right who know Rubén well and have something in common with him. Sting, they composed songs together, and Rubén sang with him on an album. Paul Simon directed him in a theater play on Broadway. So it's not random. All the other guys were with him, and finding out some of them have collaborated with him and Rene [Perez, aka Residente]. They collaborated and they're always working together. It's people that have a real relationship, not just someone who heard things about Rubén, but people who can talk with authority and who are incredible artists in their own right.

On How He Balanced Scenes of Blades Performing and Talking About His Past

This music, for me, is where the first

attraction comes from, where the power lays. Watching a two or three hour concert of his is an intense experience, so I wanted some of that power in the film. It's like making a film about an athlete, you want to see him perform, or any performance. You want to have that. We didn't want to shy away from that and just have him talk all the time. I think that's something he does very well is to have that ability to connect with the crowd, not to make something up in the studio. I wanted to capture it documentary style. We also didn't use the usual setup that you'd make for a concert like this, with flying cameras and stuff like that. We were there close to him.

He's a very private man, but he's also very generous. I never heard him say, "I don't want to talk about that." He answered everything. I didn't convince him of anything. I said, "Do you want to do this?" He said, "yes." And he's also very professional about that, when he says yes, he comes. He shows up, and he opens up. Then there's a personal part where we're also friends. I've shown him I come from a good place, I don't have any hidden intentions, and he's seen my previous movies so he knows where I'm coming from. He was very brave in trusting me is very generous. I was very impressed by how open he was. He wants to leave things clear.

[Abner Benaim](#), [Documentary](#), [Ruben Blades](#), [Ruben Blades Is Not My Name](#), [sxsw](#). Tuesday, March 20, 2018 at 5:10 PM EDT