THE FIRST

ROCK & ROLL Confidential REPORT

By DAVE MARSH

AND THE EDITORS OF ROCK & ROLL CONFIDENTIAL

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majority of Latinos and Anglos alike. But I don't believe this situation can last forever—the numbers are there, the creativity is there, the connection between the music and the growing problems of daily life is there. I sometimes find myself on the Sixth Street Bridge, looking west toward downtown Los Angeles, standing at the point where east meets west. I see the L.A. River smiling up at me, yet with a tear in her eye, reflecting the joy and the sadness of a century of Mexican life in the City of the Angels. The joy has been in the music: *corridos, norteñas*, bolero ballads, jump blues, and R&B, rock, soul, punk, and hip-hop. And that stew is still being stirred. But alongside the river I also notice the tracks of the Southern Pacific railroad, tracks that we laid over trails that once were ours. Tracks that brought our *familias* here. Tracks of the American dream laid on the backs of Mexican-American history.

There are no guards on the Sixth Street Bridge, no fences and no tolls. There is and always has been a price to cross, but we will continue to pay it. River or no river, east will meet west. The Sixth Street Bridge is a bridge of destiny. Julio Iglesias will not be the only Latin musician to catch the ear of the United States in the eighties. The second golden age of Chicano Rock is on the horizon. I can feel it.

¡Que viva Los Angeles! Con safos.

Ruben Blades: Searching for America

"A stone cold genius." That's how we described Ruben Blades in RRC 12 (May 1984) but, while Julio Iglesias is on his way to becoming a household word in the United States, Ruben Blades remains virtually unknown. His isolation has been such that when his 1982 record about U.S. intervention in Central America, "El Tiburon" ("The Shark"), was removed from many record stores and Blades became the object of death threats, not one word appeared in the press, though the singer lives and works in New York City. Elektra's 1984 release of *Buscando America (Searching for America)*, his first album for a major U.S. label, made quite an impact on American critics, but it remains to be seen if it will help the Panamanian singer/songwriter break through to a wider audience.

Buscando America finds Blades moving away from the traditional Afro-Caribbean sounds of salsa by replacing horns with vibes and employing doo-wop, rap, and a "world pop" sensibility à la the Police. The songs touch on everything from the viciousness of Latin dictatorships to the plight of high school lovers anxiously awaiting the girl's period.

Ruben Blades has a most unusual background for a pop star. Starting out as a typical undesirable in the barrios of his native Panama, he became a lawyer there but gave that up to move to New York in pursuit of success as a singer in the mid-1970s. He found it, recording a series of highly

successful albums on Fania Records that made him a star throughout Latin America. His most successful record, *Siembra*, sold somewhere between 300,000 and 1 million copies (Blades and Fania are suing each other over royalty payments) in a market where 40,000 units is a hit. Songs like "Pedro Navaja" have been made into successful plays and Blades has plans to pursue an acting career himself. In a sense, he turned full circle in the fall of 1984 when he entered Harvard Law School as part of a plan to return to Panama and lead both undesirables and lawyers to political power. RRC caught up with Blades early in 1985 in New York as he was rehearsing his band Seis del Solar (Six from the Tenement) in preparation for recording the follow-up album to *Buscando America*. . . .

RRC: *You were born and raised in Panama. What was that like?*

BLADES: I always lived in one barrio or another. When I was three or four we moved to a section of Panama called Pueblo Nuevo, which was very old, like all Pueblo Nuevos are. We ended up having to move from that house because there were ghosts, a lot of poltergeist experiences. So we moved back to where we had started, a place called Santa Ana. My family was always working, trying to make things better. My mother was obsessed that her children have a better deal, and my father felt the same way, so they were always living beyond their means, were always caught up in debt. They felt that by giving us more than they had, there was a better chance that we wouldn't end up as hoodlums.

Ruben Blades *(Caroline Greyshock/1984)*

RRC: *What did your parents do? Were they musical?*

BLADES: My mother was a performer in Cuba, professionally singing and playing piano, and when she was eighteen or nineteen, she moved to Panama. It was right after World War II, a lot of ships were stopping there, and there was a tremendous nightlife, including stars from New York like the Nicholas Brothers and top talent from all over the Caribbean. My mother played those clubs, and at the time my father was a bongo player, a very respected percussionist. He was also a very good basketball player—a guard—and ended up on the national team.

In Latin America, everything is a contradiction that works. Take my father: a bongo player who plays basketball and ends up being a detective in the secret police. The joke was that he got in the secret police because they had a basketball team they wanted my father to play for. Here's another incongruity: The secret police has a basketball team and it was called "Secret Police." If you wanted to know who was in the secret police, all you had to do was go to one of their games. Anyway, my mother started coming to a nightclub where my father was playing. She was a very beautiful woman, he was a bit of a peacock himself, and after a while they got married.

My mother worked on the radio doing soap operas during the day, and at night they were both playing in clubs. So I was basically raised by my grandmother. She was quite a free spirit; Emma was her name. She was

into spiritism—she was a medium; she was a poet, a painter, a playwright. She was a yogi, a vegetarian, a Rosicrucian. She was one of the first women in Panama to graduate from high school. I learned a lot from her because she always treated me like a grown-up, not a child. I credit her for the diversity of interests I have today.

RRC: *What was the impact of rock & roll on your generation in Panama?*

BLADES: When I was a kid in the early fifties, everyone had a radio. In those days the whole family would sit around the living room and listen to the radio. It became not only a way of being in touch with what was going on with the world but was also your movie theater, your TV. My parents, being musicians themselves, had their own very clear ideas about what music was supposed to be. So, as a child, I always perceived music through the radio as a grown-up thing. I never listened to the radio and felt "this is me, this represents me."

I was born in 1948, and even as a little kid, through the radio, I was very much aware of *boleros* and stuff like that. I remember Beny Moré, who was a Cuban singer with a very distinct voice and personality, and everyone in the Caribbean idolized him. I remember when he would come to Panama—everybody would go crazy, everybody had to see him. My father took me to see him once when I was very little. I guess he wanted me to see the legend before he passed on, because Beny drank like a horse. So, I could recognize his voice on the radio, but I never really felt that that was what I wanted to play, that that was me.

Then in 1956, my cousin Alberto, who had been studying at McGill University in Canada, came over to the house with a record. "This is something like I've never heard before, but it's a big, big thing in Canada." It was "Heartbreak Hotel." I heard that record, and I immediately knew that this was something totally different from any experience I had had in my life, and it just flipped me out. Even today—I'm thirty-six years old—I remember so clearly how powerful it was what Elvis was doing as a person. Elvis had something of his own that came through that record that day and grabbed me. I *had* to hear that record, but we didn't even have a record player so I went over to my cousin's house and listened to it over and over and over again. That was my first contact with rock & roll.

RRC: *What was Panamanian radio like?*

BLADES: There were no formats, the DJs would play whatever they felt like—a Frank Sinatra record, then Los Trio Los Panchos, then "Lili Marlene," and then Elvis Presley and then Beny Moré. So, all of a sudden everybody was hearing Elvis on the radio and we were all talking about this "thing" called rock & roll. Even though Elvis was an old man in my eyes, I could relate to him because he was like an older brother, whereas Beny Moré was like my father—a very big difference. Of course, I had to get a guitar. Immediately. Like most working class families, we couldn't afford a piano, but a guitar was a possibility, and finally my mother got me a plastic guitar and that's when I started to fool around with music.

We started listening to more and more rock & roll and also the black vocal groups, but what really established rock & roll in Panama, as a *force*, were two movies: James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Rock, Rock, Rock*. You understand, we had never *seen* these types of people before. When I saw Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers in *Rock, Rock, Rock*, I said these guys are like me, they're like my friends from the neighborhood. It was the first time I had seen young kids singing and doing music, young music. Before, all I had seen were Latin musicians, who were older, or Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire in the movies. Father figures. We started getting together bands and *Rebel Without a Cause* affected our attitude. Everybody wanted jeans, everybody wanted boots, everybody wanted their shirt collars up, everybody wanted a big mop of hair, everybody was in gangs, everybody had a knife. It changed everything around. Boom!

The same thing that happened in the U.S. happened in Panama. We went through the same things, which proves that there is a bond, no matter what. It wasn't just imitation. Rock & roll touched a point inside all the youth and made us react to the same things. Just as freedom is internationally appreciated, it was the same way with that music.

RRC: *So you started forming bands?*

BLADES: Oh yeah, everybody did. We all got a guitar, even a plastic one, and got together to play. And it was instant gratification because all you had to do was learn two or three chords and you could play the songs you heard on the radio. So rock & roll became, in Panama, a means of expression for working people's kids. A piano was hard to learn and, besides, was much too expensive. My mother played piano professionally all her life, yet we could never afford to have one in the house. Anyway, the piano was an adult thing, the guitar was for us.

RRC: *Is it true that you began to learn English from "Heartbreak Hotel"?*

BLADES: Sure. I remember that I tried at first to just repeat the words, literally. You're talking almost thirty years ago and I can still remember, very clearly, Elvis going, *[sings]* "We-l-l-l-l, my baby left me"—I must have sung that two thousand times. And then you start learning not just a few words, but you get interested in the *whole* culture—you want to know more. I learned from Frankie Lymon's records, too: You know, when Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers came to Panama, they were so popular that the President sent his personal limousine to pick them up at the airport. That must have freaked them out because, from what I understand, they were getting ripped off in the U.S., and then when they went to Panama they were treated like kings.

RRC: *The same thing happened last summer when Joan Jett played in Panama. She was treated like a visiting diplomat, invited to the Canal to open the locks, the whole red carpet treatment. Yet in the United States, where Frankie Lymon and Joan Jett come from, the government generally ignores popular culture. Why the difference?*

BLADES: In Panama, the people who run the country are so close to their popular origins that they have not left that background so far behind that they would develop an attitude of "Well, I'm way beyond those things now."

RRC: *So it's not like in America where those who run the country are* from birth *a whole different class of people?*

BLADES: No, not at all. For example, when I went to Montreal to see Roberto Duran of Panama fight Sugar Ray Leonard for the first time, there were two lieutenant colonels, very high-ranking members of the junta, who were there to make sure that Duran had no problems. I personally know one of the colonels, and the other one turned out to be an old friend of the family—used to run errands for my mother. I ended up playing dominoes with Duran against one of the lieutenant colonels and his bodyguard. If you think about this and try to translate it into North American imagery, it would be like Muhammad Ali playing dominoes with Elvis Presley against Alexander Haig and Gordon Liddy.

This type of closeness with the people is why Panama has never had as repressive a police state as the rest of Central America, and that's why Joan Jett was invited to open the locks of the Canal.

RRC: *Why did you leave Panama?*

BLADES: When I was going to law school in Panama, I was working with this band called the Rhythm Savages, and a buddy of mine, Roberto Sedeño, was the timbales player. But he was also studying medicine. He was a natural musician, a fine composer. But once he graduated from medical school, he quit playing music to pursue his profession. I think a part of him just dried up. I said to myself, "That's not going to happen to me." So, when I finished law school, I was working in a bank, I had quit my band. I went through the motions for a while, but I knew I would never be happy if I didn't follow my heart, if I didn't play my music. So I quit the bank and came to New York where I got a job with Fania Records in the mailroom. That was in 1974.

RRC: *Was your political sensibility shaped before you left? Did you take part in the Panama Canal riots in 1964 where U.S. troops shot Panamanian protestors?*

BLADES: No, but my father did. What happened with me was that, prior to 1964, I was totally pro-U.S. They could have done anything and I would have backed it up. Like most Panamanians, I only knew the good side of the U.S., the savior, the guys who kicked the Nazis' ass. All we knew about the U.S. was what we got from movies and music and it was very exciting. But the riots in 1964 were *local;* we saw for ourselves what was happening, how the U.S. acted. The dream crumbled and many of us began to question everything about the United States, even the movies. The Busby Berkeley musicals were great, but where were the blacks? We became very angry, I felt raped. All throughout Panama, people, even the

Border Song. . . . One of the driving forces behind American pop music is the tension between the constant merger of various musical traditions and the need for those who suffer most in our segregated, unequal country to express their particular reality on their own terms. For example, CHR radio attracts the widest audience by airing the most popular black and white music. Yet the success of CHR is causing an identity crisis for many urban contemporary stations as they try to compete while remaining distinct (i.e., black).

Latin music is undergoing the same process, albeit at a slower pace. Acts as different as Ruben Blades and Julio Iglesias are making moves on the English-speaking market. Major Latin radio stations, such as New York's WJIT, have already stirred controversy by programming up to 25 percent English-language pop in an effort to compete for the millions of Hispanic listeners whose ears are glued to the dance/rap-oriented spots on the dial.

Yet traditions built up over years cannot be eliminated by a wave of a demographer's pen. Pure salsa and merengue are still enormously popular, and the hip-hop music that is sweeping the world is a direct, organic descendent of James Brown's rhythmic innovations.

To us, some of the most exciting music being made today consciously straddles these contradictions. We can now add to the list of "Rockbox" the "Dancing in the Dark" 12-inch and Jason and the Scorchers' pair of hot new singles from Sunbelt Records (Box 5494, Austin, Texas 78763). "Do I Ever Cross Your Mind" by Leonard Davila is a magnificent country ballad that puts Ray Charles' version to shame. Backed by piano and accordion, it moves with the grace of the best of Lionel Richie as Davila proves he's not just going through the motions; he really *wants* an answer. The flip, "No Me Importa," might have been made by the early Stones if they'd grown up in San Antonio. The companion release, "Novela," by Patsy Torres, is cantina-rock out of the Shangri-Las while the B-side, "Low Rider," both emulates and parodies Pat Benatar and street-rod machismo. While Sunbelt is as hand-to-mouth as any newborn independent label, the sound is crisp and clean, and we'd buy the sultry and stylish cover sleeve for the Torres single even if it were empty. Although most of the lyrics are in Spanish, you won't need an interpreter: Davila and Torres speak the universal language fluently. *[RRC September 1984]*

totally pro-U.S. recalcitrants like my father, began to question our relationship to the United States.

RRC: *So it was the equivalent of what Vietnam was for so many people in the U.S.?*

BLADES: Exactly. It was our Vietnam.

RRC: *The Nobel Prize–winning author from Colombia, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, has had quite an impact on your work. Could you elaborate?*

BLADES: Garcia Marquez is without question the most popular author among all the youth of Latin America. Even though these kids have been raised on TV and don't read that much, they read that guy. Why is that? I think it comes from his background. Gabriel comes from a little town near the coast called Acataca. My idea of Acataca is this small little town in a rural setting which allows that formalism of the conservative life to slowly and very softly control your life with that routine, habituary structure of life, but with the added advantage of having the ocean in front of you. The ocean has always been the place where news comes from, the medium by which you can leave. The horizon is always there reminding you that there are other things on the other side. That adds to that comfortable, conservative routine an element of magic, of adventure, and of uncertainty that, when it's present in a family living in those circumstances, makes a child think anything is possible in life. Gabriel to me is a product of such a combination, and it shows in his writing. And because it's so Caribbean and at the same time so Spanish, it touches a chord in every one of us. It's the same sense of contradiction as the Secret Police basketball team. He begins *A Hundred Years of Solitude* by saying that "the day that so-and-so was to be executed he remembered the day his father took him to touch ice for the first time." Right away he grabs some memory you have and draws you in.

RRC: *How has this affected your songs?*

BLADES: We move within the same structures, what some call magic realism. Surrealism? No. Surrealism had to be invented by Europeans, because in Latin America we *live* under it. Magic realism is a combination of the popular, the street, with the sophisticated, the conservative element. A very formal irreverence. Gabriel would go to the Champs Elysee, sit at a sidewalk cafe, and love every minute of it. But he would never trade it for his fields in Colombia. That's the point. And that's what I try to do with my songs, my characters. Take the nobleness of the street, the value of the popular culture I was raised with, and present it in a larger context. The contradiction that works.

RRC: *I understand that you are working on an album that will be based on short stories by Garcia Marquez.*

BLADES: Right. I want to break down the idea that intellectuals and popular musicians are totally apart, to break down the myth that popular

music is not an art form the equal of literature. So I asked Garcia Marquez if it was O.K. with him and he said fine. The work on it is moving along, it will be the album after the one I am working on now, which is the followup to *Buscando America*. I hope to go down to Colombia to take a picture with him to put on the album cover.

RRC: *Why does fantasy, the supernatural, play such an important role in the literature of Latin America, whether it be Garcia Marquez in Colombia, Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, or Rudolfo Anaya in New Mexico?*

BLADES: I think it's because we are so affected in Latin America by an oppressive reality that North Americans have never experienced. In Europe they can understand it much better because the experience has been much harsher there, as in World War II. But in North America there hasn't been a war fought—on home ground—since the Civil War. And in the U.S., you had the whole entertainment industry, the movies, to take you away from a reality like the Depression. But all we had was what you sent us. When it came to expressing *our* reality—upheavals, dictatorships, political struggles—magic became a way not only to describe what was happening but what we hoped for. Magic became a way to be sarcastic, a way to control and change—without a rational explanation—the environment. You could escape by both confronting and evading. You wrestled with reality but you always found a way out. But I think as we move toward a natural solution to our problems, we're going to move away from magic as an answer.

RRC: *Garcia Marquez has been denied a visa to visit the United States on more than one occasion, and you are sometimes criticized for living in the United States while criticizing its policies.*

BLADES: Well, the President of Colombia has interceded personally with Reagan, and I believe that Garcia Marquez' problem is being straightened out. But more fundamentally, on the question of immigration, the thing the United States needs to do is make things better in Latin America so that people won't have to come here. Anyone who leaves their home is leaving a part of their heart behind. Nobody wants to leave their country to do what they wish they could do at home. You can't stop immigrants with fences, with Simpson-Mazzoli bills.

As for myself, I see no contradiction in my living here. I have no problem with the people of the United States, only with some of the policies of their government.

RRC: *What kind of music do you listen to?*

BLADES: Well, I don't listen to the radio *ever*.

RRC: *Why not?*

BLADES: Because of the way all the stations are so segregated: white music over here, black music over there; Latin, country, everything separate. I

have a very broad taste in music, and that's how I want to hear it. One of the last albums I bought was the *Deliverance* soundtrack, all that "Dueling Banjos" stuff. I like bluegrass a lot. I think that country music is very similar to Latin music in the way it expresses the feelings and aspirations of working-class people. A song like "The Gambler," I can see that being done in Spanish. Stories—I like that.

I listen to jazz if it's accessible, not a whole array of abstract notes and tempo changes which require me to know a lot of mathematics or physics to get into what the guy is doing. Some people, like Springsteen, I buy their albums the minute they come out without even thinking about it. I always like to check out what my peers in Latin music, like Willie Colón or Eddie Palmieri, are doing. I'm very partial to some classical stuff like Mozart and Bach. Los Lobos, too.

RRC: *Los Lobos? Are they popular in Latin America?*

BLADES: No, but they would be if their record company would distribute their records down there.

RRC: *It's obvious that you're making a conscious effort to reach a broader audience. Why? Is that in part because you have a message to deliver that you want the greatest number of people to hear?*

BLADES: From a musical standpoint, I like to experiment with the sounds that are happening today internationally, because I want to *communicate*. The more embraces I receive the better I feel as a human being and as a musician.

Politically, it's imperative at this point to establish communication with as many people as possible, to motivate as many people as possible, because time is running out. We have to try to accelerate and get as many

Joan Jett, who played Panama in 1984, is seen here opening a lock at the Panama Canal. *(Elliot Saltzman)*

people organized as possible, to touch as many people as possible. A war is coming, it's running at us but we don't realize it.

Economically, the more people you reach, supposedly the more money you'll make. I perceive money as being a way to acquire independence so I can continue with my work and to avoid the pitfall of debt that my family went through. But money is never and has never been a consideration in my work. I've always tackled the things that people warned me against: "Don't do that, you're going to fall on your ass. This will be your last album." Yet it's never worked out like that. When I did *Maestra Vida,* people said it would never sell. An opera, a two-album set. It was a hit. The "Tiburon" song: People said you're going to have a problem—it will be perceived as anti-U.S., and you'll be called a communist. I did it anyway because it was a needed denunciation of U.S. intervention in Central America.

In terms of the North American audience, what I'm proposing is to allow communication to flow by translating my songs into English. But I'm not going to go knocking on doors, house by house, to sell my Latin Americanism. Rather than "crossing over," I propose to converge. Let's meet somewhere. I'm here. Some of the North Americans think of Latin Americans as some kind of nightmare, but we're here. We started this continent and we're going to end up with it. Mathematically speaking, that is an unavoidable truth. So let's start knowing each other. Let's start working together. I'm going to walk from here to there—so you'll understand me I'm going to translate my work so you'll know where I'm coming from. But the rest of the move is up to you. So from that perspective, crossing over doesn't have the same meaning for me as for Julio Iglesias.

RRC: *There's a tendency in popular music today, from your work to the Police to Talking Heads, to mix and synthesize an international variety of styles of music. Do you think there's a danger that we'll wind up with one bland "world music"?*

BLADES: I would rather work towards establishing a world musical communication, meaning, for example, that radio stations would allow music from different places to be played. What I have in mind is something very different from one world pop music as the form we all have to follow to be able to communicate. Art cannot be translated into Esperanto. But I do think there is an international exchange of *information* in terms of music, due to the advances of technology, that is very healthy. A band can play in Spain and I can watch it on TV here in New York City at the same time that people are watching in Panama. As a consequence, there's more musical "borrowing" going on, but I don't think there can be a "world sound" or that it would be desirable.

RRC: *Why did you change the sound on your first Elektra album,* Buscando America, *from the traditional brass-dominated salsa sound to vibes and synthesizers?*

BLADES: We need musical options. Latin musicians have been stuck with the big band 1940s thing. If you don't have brass in it, it's not good. I think that's totally wrong. Music must not be condemned to a certain fixed position; it's got to be allowed to move, to take advantage of the present technology and the present feeling. I was born in 1948 and I'm living in 1985, not 1930 and 1955. Let's integrate what we have if it comes naturally, if that's what you feel. It happens to be what I feel. I don't think that in order to preserve tradition we have to live by it all the time. I think that tradition is something you can always go back to, but it's a continuous movement. But I'm doing it gradually. There were some synthesizers on *Buscando America,* but that was just a taste. On the next album there will be *only* synthesizers, except of course for rhythm and percussion instruments. That doesn't mean that I will never, ever again record with a big band. In fact, I'm already thinking about it.

RRC: *What's the difference between being a mainstream rock star like Rod Stewart and a salsa star like yourself?*

BLADES: The rock stars are very isolated from their constituencies. In all my experience, no one has ever shot a pop star in Latin America, nor is there the violence, people getting trampled. I am very well-known in Latin America—in many countries like Venezuela every household has at least one of my albums. Yet even at home, in Panama, when I walk the street I am recognized and people feel pride in my success but without the desperation that so many U.S. rock fans attach to their idols, that would force an Elvis Presley to live the way he did.

"Who wants politics in music? I find politics the single most uninspiring, unemotional, insensitive activity on this planet."—*Adam Ant*

"I think you have to make a distinction, not between art and politics, but between art and propaganda. Politics is a part of life, and you would be ignoring a whole aspect of life by leaving it out of songs."—*Bruce Cockburn*

RRC: *Being on tour is rough for anyone, but do you have any additional problems on the road that a rock star wouldn't have?*

BLADES: For one thing, a rock star would have to search his room to see if there were any girls hiding in it, while I have to search a hotel room to see if there are any microphones or some thug behind a curtain who has a political beef with me. Latin musicians don't have the same kind of resources as rock stars to insure that the arrangements are right, the money is right. We have to fight over everything. We're at the level that black music was in in the late forties.

I played in Colombia last year, and the promoter added some dates that I hadn't agreed to play and tried, almost successfully, to keep me from leaving the country when I wouldn't play them. It was only through the personal intercession of the Panamanian ambassador that I was able to board my plane. Then the promoter told the press that the reason I had left was because I was afraid of the students, who had supposedly found out that my position on Latin America wasn't sincere.

RRC: *Your former musical partner, Willie Colón, played at the Reagan Inaugural and there is, of course, an ongoing controversy over artists who perform in South Africa. What do you think?*

BLADES: First, as far as I understand, Willie's motivation to play the Inaugural was not political, it was just this musician's thing of "a gig is a

gig." I didn't have to make a decision because, of course, I wasn't invited, although I would have turned Reagan down—just as I would refuse to perform in South Africa.

A few years ago the Haitian ambassador to the U.S. approached me and offered me quite a bit of money to play at a private party at the Presidential Palace in Port-au-Prince. I told the ambassador that all the money he was going to spend on air fares, on paying us, he should spend trying to improve the miserable living conditions of the Haitian people. And I really needed the money at the time.

RRC: *You told the* L.A. Times, *"I knew that after I was so successful in my music . . . I would end up in Panama trying to be President." Could you elaborate?*

BLADES: Well, to be President is a great honor, but a president is often just a figurehead without much real power and, in any event, just getting elected President would not solve the problems of Panama. But what is definitely going to happen is that at some point I am going to return to Panama and form a new political party. Not so that I can run for President right away—I have so much to learn. But I do want to create an infrastructure within Panama of young professionals, of street organizers—something that will encompass all of Panamanian society. We need to get a better understanding of the problems of agriculture, of the workers and the peasants—get the best people from every field to develop solutions. Panama is a very young country but very educated. One reason I'm going to Harvard now is to show people that I'm not just a guy who sings well but that I'm very serious about our problems. I am very popular there and, believe me, this party is going to attract a lot of people. The other parties are tainted; people don't respect them.

I would like to be in the government as the head of a ministry, such as housing. Get some results, because that's what it's all about—you can't just sing people's problems away. I'll turn the shit around in four years, and then we can go national based on our record.

RRC: *It seems that at a time when music and politics, in many different forms all over the world, are coming together, you propose to take it one step further.*

BLADES: That's right. Why do you think there's such a reaction to Bruce Springsteen's music? He has touched, on a national scale, many of the things that people have inside and could not articulate, especially the young people. He has a political influence great enough, even though he's a musician, that President Reagan had to quote him.

RRC: *But you're not talking about a musician being quoted by a president, but a musician being quoted because he* is *the President.*

BLADES: Right.