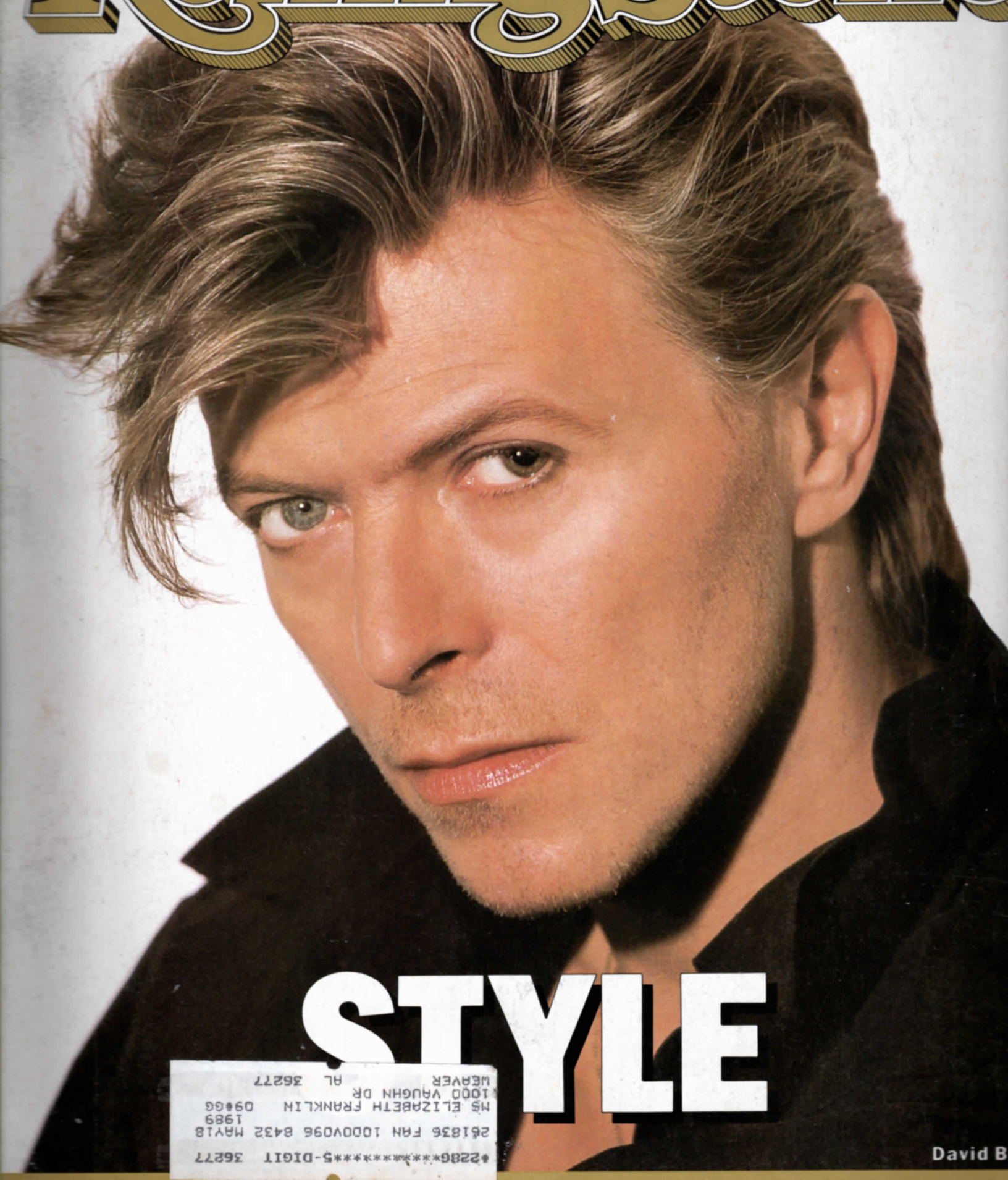


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IN THIS ISSUE

ISSUE 498: "ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS"

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THE ISSUES AND EVENTS OF OUR TIN

BICOASTAL BOB Out in L.A., Dylan shares the stage with John Fogerty and George Harrison; then in Brooklyn, he sings in tribute to the Gershwins. Also noted: Billy Idol, David Byrne and R.E.M. **By Mark Coleman** 9

BEASTIE BOYS Stupid tales of life on the road with rock & rap's chart-top-ping nude boys, including Louisville's reaction to the twenty-foot phallus, the Beatles' not-so-friendly advice to Citizens for Decency and a historic visit to GraceLand. **By David Handelman** 15

JIMMY JAM AND TERRY LEWIS Last year they wrote or produced seven Top Ten singles, including four for Janet Jackson. A fifth for Janet is a hit right now. That's what they've done for us lately. **By Michael Goldberg**..... 30

RUBEN BLADES Why does a Latin-music superstar want to cross over to the other side? To capture the rock audience? To retire to Panama and run for president? Why not? **By David Fricke**..... 36

RIVER'S EDGE This teen flick almost wasn't released. But *River's Edge* brings a new lost generation into sharp focus. **By David Edelstein** 43

SUPPORTING PLAYERS Standing in the shadows of the stars, supporting players from *I Love Lucy* to *Newhart* have provided some of the best moments in television history. **By Michael McWilliams** 49

THE TOWER INFERNO It cries out for gonzo journalism, but *Tranamok* has to settle for the Tower Commission report. Some choice moments with Bud and Ollie and the other foreign-policy cowboys. **By William Greider** ... 55

THE NEW ECOLOGY REVOLUTION After years of frustration, is the green movement finally seeing red? **By Alston Chase**..... 61

THE WIZARD OF ODD Magician Ricky Jay wrote the book about geeks and freaks. Turns out he's a little weird himself. **By Rob Tannenbaum** 69

DAVID BOWIE IN THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW, THE MASTER STRATEGIST OF ROCK IMAGE TALKS ABOUT HIS AFFAIR WITH STYLE. **BY KURT LODER**... 74

LOOKS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD TIMELESS VISIONS FROM OUR ROCK & ROLL MEMORIES. **PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW ROLSTON** 86

TWENTY YEARS OF ROCK & ROLL STYLE TURN UP THAT COLLARI ROCK-ERS HAVE ALWAYS FLASHED A STYLE OF THEIR OWN - CUT DOWN AND SLICKED UP. ELVIS IN BLACK LEATHER, ELTON IN FEATHERS, THE BOSS IN T AND JEANS. . . . THIS IS THE LOOK AT THE LOOK OF TWO DECADES OF ROCK & ROLL. **BY GERRI HIRSHLEY** 97



1967-1987 ROCK STYLE 1967-1987 ROCK STYLE 1967-1987 ROCK STYLE 1967-1987 ROCK S

Cover: Photograph of David Bowie by Herb Ritts, Los Angeles, Feb. 1987. Grooming by Teddy Ricketts, styling by Mitchell Love Ricketts, Los Angeles; shirt: Comme des Garçons at Max Azria, Los Angeles

PRINCE *Sign o' the Times*, his dazzling new album, is a double dip of funk & roll, but it stops short of the Big Statement. **By Kurt Loder** Also reviewed: New releases by Pete Townshend, Smokey Robinson, Lou Gramm, Concrete Blonde, Andy White and REO Speedwagon. 145

Departments
LETTERS 155
4 TECHNOLOGY 176
29 CHARTS 176

ON THE ROAD..... 176



Blades knows crossover dreams can become crossover nightmares.

RUBÉN BLADES'S LATIN REVOLUTION

By David Fricke

HERE WAS THIS GUY I KNEW, RAFI," Rubén Blades shouts as he strolls briskly down New York's Columbus Avenue, trying to make himself heard over the today stampede of taxis and delivery trucks. "He worked as a male nurse, but he was a really good singer. He had a lot of talent. But he wanted to cross over, to get to the other side and have a taste of the good life, you know? Well, he made it. He signed with a major label, did the whole pop thing, and

after a while, he moved to Los Angeles. The word was that he was doing real well. A couple of years later, someone asked me, 'Did you hear about Rafi?' I said, 'Yeah, I hear he's doing real well out in California.' The guy said, 'No, Rafi's dead.'"

Blades pauses briefly at a street corner, looking solemnly up at the bright midday sun through his black wraparound shades. "It turned out his manager had taken out a million-dollar insurance policy on him. That's the kind of thing that can happen when you cross over. That's what can be

waiting for you on the other side."

Crossing over is a subject Rubén Blades knows all too well. As a mail-room clerk and a struggling songwriter at Fania Records in New York in the mid-Seventies, he saw some of Latin music's biggest names and greatest talents gaze hungrily at the distant glitter of mainstream pop success while they battled daily to defend their hard-won stardom on the highly competitive, financially exploitative salsa scene. A decade later, in the 1985 movie *Crossover Dreams*, Blades played an ambitious Hispanic musician named Rudy Veloz,

who swallows the crossover bait and trades in his girlfriend, his manager and his Latin-music heritage for an illusory shot at the *Billboard* Hot 100.

Veloz, Blades explains, was a composite portrait of those real-life Latin musicians who had, for better but mostly worse, made that trip to the other side. "What we were saying was success and happiness are not achieved by crossing over. Your life is not going to be any easier. You just bring your problems with you."

Ironically, Blades himself is the most notable exception to that rule. At thirty-

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15 YEARS OF MEETING THE NATION'S STEREO VISION

eight, the Panamanian singer is one of salsa's reigning sultans, an international superstar whose audience extends from the asphalt barrio of New York's Spanish Harlem down through the mountain villages and urban tenements of Mexico and Central America and into the jungle heart of Colombia and Venezuela. Yet since the 1984 release of his critically acclaimed major-label debut, *Buscando América* ("Searching for America"), Rubén Blades has made the trip to the other side and back with increased frequency and impressive results.

Blades has recorded with Lou Reed and Linda Ronstadt, toured with Joe Jackson and protested apartheid with a million-dollar cast of rockers and rappers on "Sun City." Last summer Blades represented the Latin quarter with his riveting performance of the human-rights anthem "Muévete" ("Move On") at Amnesty International's all-star benefit concert at Giants Stadium, in New Jersey. And this year he hopes to record his first-ever English-language LP with assistance from such top-drawer lyricists as Elvis Costello, Paul Simon and Bob Dylan.

Blades has also established major beachheads in Hollywood and in Ivy League academe. A fully qualified member of the bar in Panama, Blades recently took a year off from music to earn a master's degree in law from Harvard University. After his graduation, in 1985, he filmed *Critical Condition* with Richard Pryor. Robert Redford has since cast him in the pivotal role of a seedy Mexican American sheriff trapped between ruthless white real-estate developers and a Hispanic community in the forthcoming adaptation of John Nichols's novel *The Milagro Beanfield War*. A movie with Whoopi Goldberg is also in the works.

Blades's success in gringo showbiz is unprecedented in salsa circles, especially since he continues to record his own songs in his native tongue (he includes English translations on the LP sleeves). Traditionally the best a Latin musician could hope for was a novelty hit, like Ray Barretto's 1962 million-seller "El Watusi," Joe Cuba's 1966 smash "Bang Bang" or Santana's popular rock-up of Tito Puente's "Oye Como Va." But Blades has seduced Anglo audiences with his mellifluous singing, charismatic stage presence (imagine a hip-grinding Springsteen with a mustache and a Spanish accent), literate, politically outspoken songwriting and the jazzy expertise of his crack electro-salsa ensemble, Seis del Solar ("Six from the Tenement"). In a white pop world overpopulated with cheap Latin stereotypes, Rubén Blades has crossed over with his sound and vision intact.

It has been, in some ways, a costly victory. Top salsa promoter Ralph

Mercado claims that Latin attendance at recent Blades concerts in New York has been down. "The more professional people dig his music now more than the common *salsero* guy," says Mercado, "because he's moved a little bit away from the rhythm of salsa and he's putting more electronics in his music." Journalist and television reporter Pablo Guzman, a longtime friend of Blades's, admits there is "a strong element among Rubén's fans in the Latin community who are worrying, 'Boy, I hope we don't lose him.'"

One former associate, *Crossover Dreams* director León Ichaso, bluntly accuses the singer of deserting his Latin brethren. "Rubén Blades has become a Rudy Veloz of sorts, but worse," he snaps, "because Rudy Veloz had to return to the barrio. Rubén doesn't. He's let everyone down. He's burnt every bridge he's crossed."

Blades accepts such criticism with the stoic calm of someone who's heard it all before. "Do you know how many

'Music is not exclusive,' says Blades. 'It's inclusive.'

times I was told I would never work in this town by promoters and record labels?" he remarks with a sly smile, knocking back a lunch-time glass of Dry Sack in an Upper West Side bar after his Columbus Avenue constitutional. "I'd present a song and these guys would look at me and go, 'That song is too long. And what is this theme? Why are you writing about these things? People want to dance, they want to forget.'"

"I want to integrate the music," says Blades, "to end this nonsense, this racist fallback. Black-music radio, white-music radio, Latin-music radio - it's another form of racism. When they try to get a certain audience, they are ultimately excluding people. Music is not exclusive. It's inclusive!"

"The other thing is my own example. Because I make a movie with Redford, does that mean I can't go to El Corso [a Latin dance hall in Manhattan], that I'm dealing with my musicians differently? If I bump into a guy on the street and he says, 'Qué pasa, Rubén?' does that mean I don't say, 'Qué pasa?' back? Do I turn my back? I don't do that. So whatever criticisms come, come from people who don't have arguments."

The greatest argument for Blades's integrity is his songwriting. The techno-sheen of Seis del Solar's twin synthesizers and the sensual propulsion of its percussion section are a radical departure from the grunting trombones and



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boisterous trumpets of regulation Latin dance bands. Yet as a lyricist, Blades grounds his stinging protests of Central America's bureaucratic avarice, military tyranny and public lethargy in the gritty realism of everyday life. Over a subtly percolating rhythm in "GDBD," on *Buscando América*, he steps inside the head of a secret policeman, juxtaposing his oppressively mundane home life with the casual indifference he shows when he goes about his dark work. "Sorpresas" ("Surprises"), on Blades's 1985 LP *Escenas* ("Scenes"), a seven-minute playlet of robbery and murder on a moonlit street, captures with poetic vividness and chilling detail the tenuous nature of barrio life.

Blades's latest LP, *Agua de Luna* ("Moon Water") - a musical adaptation of eight short stories by the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez - takes his lyrical animation of Latin American spirit and suffering a dramatic step further. Through the Nobel laureate's often comic surrealism and profound faith in the moral fiber and emotional resilience of his race, Blades addresses the essential need for Latin America to reinvent itself in the face of its own civil apathy and of de facto U.S. imperialism. "Isabel," based on Márquez's "Monologue of Isabel Watching It Rain in Macondo," combines the cleansing image of falling rain with new hope for the future, as embodied in the pregnant Isabel's unborn child. In "No Te Duermas" ("Don't Fall Asleep"), adapted from the story "Bitterness for Three Sleepwalkers," he equates the mysterious illness of a young woman with "the unconscious state of Latin America." Where *Buscando América* and *Escenas* examined the Latin condition through contemporary headlines and real-life suffering, *Agua de Luna* is - much like Márquez's own stories - a trip into Latin America's tortured soul.

"It's an inside look," says Blades, who counts Márquez among his closest friends. "Behind every military coup in Latin America, behind every civilian dictatorship, lies civilian responsibility. We allowed it to happen. We did not look inside, we did not act from within. We voted and then went home.

"In 'Bitterness for Three Sleepwalkers,'" he continues, "I don't know if Gabriel ever considered the possibility of that story being interpreted as a cry against insanity or a cry against the state of sleepwalking in Latin America today. In the context of his work, though, I don't think he will be angry about it. As a writer, you can only do so much. Sometimes, though, you hit on some kind of universal truth that spreads into so many different areas."

Blades usually pinches a few nerves and steps on a couple of toes every time he hits on a universal truth. In Miami, out-

rage in the Cuban-exile community over a song called "Tiburón" ("Shark"), in which Blades censures American intervention in Latin American affairs, led to an airplay ban on his records there in 1980. The last time he performed in Miami, Blades wore a bulletproof vest onstage. There are also salsa insiders who find it hard to reconcile Blades's radical soapboxing with his financial success. "He was talking about social issues, some of them critical of America," notes Izzy Sanabria, the former publisher of *Latin New York*, "but he managed himself from a capitalist point of view."

"When people say, 'You make money exploiting the reality of Latin American life; I have a great answer,' Blades says. "I say, 'Do you know any lawyer who has quit their job to go play in New York for seventy-three dollars a week?' At a time when I could have been the youngest lawyer in Panama's foreign-service history, when I was offered work as a lawyer in the Panamanian embassy in Washington, I was singing here with Ray Barretto, making seventy-three dollars a week. You're going to tell me now, after all I've been through, that it was a master plan for success?"

WHEN RUBÉN BLADES WAS NINE YEARS old, he wanted to be a teenager - with a capital T. He'd heard Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers on the radio and watched the young quintet sing up a storm in *Rock, Rock, Rock* when the film opened in Panama City. He knew every one of their schoolboy R&B hits by heart and felt eminently qualified to be the sixth Teenager. So he wrote a letter in crude English to Frankie Lymon applying for the job.

"Fool that I was," he says with a laugh, "I gave it to my mother to mail. And she threw it out." His mother later made it up to him by buying him a plastic guitar with a decal of Elvis Presley and a hound dog on the side.

Although Blades - the son of a Panama City policeman and the second of five children - never got to be a Teenager, he was hooked on rock & roll almost from its birth. Because of the U.S. military presence in the Canal Zone, rock was readily available to Panamanians via Armed Forces radio and, beginning in 1957, television broadcasts. Blades saw the Beatles' momentous *Ed Sullivan Show* debut on the Southern Command Network only a week after its U.S. broadcast.

"The Beatles were a huge force in Panama," he declares. "And not just them. I'm talking about Gene Vincent, the Platters, Jackie Wilson, Billy Stewart. We got all of that." Blades actually made his first public appearance as a singer in 1963, fronting the Saints, a rock band led by his older brother, Luís.

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like Julio Iglesias and myself," he argues, "is that I'm not coming here to capitalize on what's hip. Nor do I have any illusions of turning myself into Wham! or Bam! or whatever. Nor do I have to be coached. I have a musical background that is inclusive of pop and rock as well as Latin. I went through that process like anybody here in America."

The January 1964 Canal Zone riots, which left twenty-one civilians dead, temporarily chilled Panamanian enthusiasm for *Yanqui* culture, and the fifteen-year-old Blades quickly developed a voracious appetite for Latin sounds, particularly the high-energy fusion of locomotive Cuban percussion and Dorsey-style big-band bluster that in the early Seventies came to be known as salsa ("sauce" or "spice"). While studying law at the University of Panama, Blades performed with local Latin groups. He cut an album with one of those groups in 1968, and he was offered a singing job with Joe Cuba's band, which he turned down to finish school.

In 1969, a student riot caused authorities to close the school, and Blades took the year off, venturing to New York and recording *De Panama a Nueva York* with Pete Rodriguez (Blades wrote the lyrics to all but one of the songs). He seemed poised for a major

musical career, but when the school reopened, he went back to Panama to complete his law studies. When Blades returned to New York in 1974 – lyrically charged by the political events at home, the influence of pop songwriters like Bob Dylan and Paul Simon and his own reading of Kafka, Faulkner and Hemingway – record companies repeatedly turned down his material. He relied on his shipping-room salary at Fania Records and temporary singing jobs to pay the rent until trombonist Willie Colón offered to take a chance on Blades and his songs.

"The melodic structures were more interesting to me. They were more Pan-American," Colón says. "In those days, there was this real Cuban fever. Everything had to be like reliving this frozen legend. If you deviated from that, you got a lot of flak. I was kind of lonely out there, and when I met Rubén, who was of like mind, it was really a great help to me."

Their collaboration was a fruitful one. Their late-Seventies album *Siembra* is considered to be the biggest-selling LP in salsa history. At one point in their six-year career together, Colón and Blades had five songs in the Venezuelan Top Ten. After they split up in 1982, Blades – brimming with self-confidence

– formed his own group, determined to pursue his musical and political vision.

But the same progressive qualities in his music and songwriting that have attracted a new young, white audience to his records and concerts have turned off some hard-core salsa fans. "There are people who like the fact that he is a songwriter who is charismatic and has a political message," observes journalist Enrique Fernández. "But the fans that he had when he was doing dance music with Willie Colón, those fans have gone by the wayside. Those are probably also the fans that didn't like the fact that he was doing political stuff, or cared little about it."

At the same time, salsa is, in a way, an aging music. Blades is one of its youngest stars. "The salsa business has been steadily losing its youth, in New York especially," claims Izzy Sanabria. "You can't expect Latin youths, eighteen or nineteen years old, to be following the old-time Latin musicians."

Blades's dilemma then is twofold: how to reenergize salsa for young American-born Latinos already hip-hopping to the latest rap sounds without completely severing his strong roots in the music's Afro-Cuban traditions; and how to maintain his cross-over momentum without becoming, in

his words, "the Ricardo Montalban of the Eighties." He hopes to accomplish the former with an album called *Antecedent*, featuring standard salsa trombones. The proposed English-language collaboration LP – which he plans to release under the name Panama Blades – could be a major score on both fronts.

"I am not going to become the flavor of the hour," Blades insists. "But I want people to acknowledge the possibilities of a Latin artist fully – meaning we can do English, too. We were raised with rock & roll. We were raised with the U.S. culture banging in our heads. I think people in the States don't know that. In general, they think we don't have any understanding of the culture. And the only way you can bring that about is to sing in their own language."

"It's taken Rubén all the time I've known him to come to a point where he's finally going to wrestle with English in terms of his music," Pablo Guzman observes. "He was always adamant about doing it in Spanish as a part of his nationalism thing. I told him that was bullshit nationalism if you're going to work here. First of all, half the Puerto Ricans here don't speak Spanish. The younger generations are losing it. Thank God, there's a [Cont. on 158]

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... and, the Beastie Boys were fair-
... cient growing up. "My mom
... e me any money," Diamond
... figured I'd spend it on drugs.
... ed the only way to make mon-
... sell pot. I made about \$100 a
... and I thought I was in the big
... ch says that until recently he
... is the super of his current
... n Brooklyn. Of course, they
... one publication that Diamond
... red milk from the same truck
... and that Yauch had washed
... to mention that CBS had giv-
... Ferrari and that they don't
... (the unarmed). Such banter is
... a bit; they seem tired of being
... to be Beastie twenty-four
... y.

... just this quality that they re-
... crucial to their surprising suc-
... think people are ready for a
... at can laugh at themselves,
... everything," Diamond says.
... y with all this serious bullshit
... - you know, Live Aid, Egg
... d Aid and Shave Aid. It's all
... , it doesn't have any sense of
... out itself at all."

... have trouble with charges that
... exist or a bad influence. "We
... ch insult everything and every-
... uch says. "Everything on the
... oys record is joking around.
... gonna seem if we suddenly
... ink a lot of beer, but don't
... ou're gonna drive, 'cause you
... in an accident and die?"

... ing on the road made Yauch
... t the plot of *Footloose* - about
... se parents forbid them to
... was not as ridiculous as he'd
... "When we say, 'Suck my
... e explains, "it's a stupid thing
... t it's like nothing the kids are
... ed to say in school or in front
... ents."

... e Beasties seem uncomfortable
... g anyone's heroes. "What I

hope people like about us," says Dia-
mond, "is that we're three idiots onstage
having a good time, drinking beer and
saying rhymes. Hopefully everybody in
the audience thinks, 'That's cool. I
could do that.' I don't like the thought
that they say, 'I saw the Beastie Boys
last night, and they're mega-stars.' I'm a
lot happier when the kids who come
backstage or to the hotel try to give us
tapes of what they've done, instead of
just getting an autograph."

Still, they are celebrities; Horowitz's
relationship with Molly Ringwald - ini-
tiated when he gave his phone number to
the producer of her upcoming movie,
The Pick-Up Artist - has even made the
gossip columns. Yauch remains unim-
pressed with the whole affair. "The guy
hangs out with Molly a little while,"
Yauch says, "next thing you know he's
watching *Pretty in Pink* on TV all the
time like there's no tomorrow. The
fucking dude: we went to New York
for two days and he went to L.A. to
party with her. *Horowitz is chinking out on
the whole band!* He's a pussy, right? Tell
her to come to New York!"

The spotlight makes them nervous.
"We all feel we have so much weight on
our shoulders," says Diamond, "be-
cause everything we do from now on
has to be better than anything we've
done, and it's up to us. Most R&B
artists probably just say, 'Okay, now
we're really successful, we're going to
get the best writers and producers.'
Our next album is going to be us and
Rick again."

The Beastie Boys haven't written any
songs for the follow-up album yet, but
they do have plans to buy a building and
put in apartments for each one of them,
along with a recording studio, a pool, a
half pipe for skateboarding, a Wiffle
Ball stadium and a disco.

They are also overseeing their movie,
Scared Stupid (formerly *Scared Shit-
less*), which is set to film this summer,
following a European and Japanese
tour. The Boys hired a friend from
New York, Tom Cushman, 21, to help
write the film. "It's a lot of people run-
ning around with no clothes on," says
Cushman. "They kept warning me not
to make it too cerebral, so I watched a
lot of *Three Stooges*." Cushman, who
has completed three years at Columbia
University, is on the tour as an onstage
beer tosser and sometime musician. In
two cities, when Fishbone, the warm-up
band, had to cancel, Cushman and the
Beasties donned novelty-shop costumes

and went on as a heavy-metal band
called Trip Hammer. They enjoyed it.
"Next tour," Diamond says, "we might
actually play instruments."

AFTER THE MEMPHIS GIG, THE BOYS ARE
particularly wiped out, partly from hav-
ing spent the previous night in the bus
bunk on the road from Louisville. In the
dressing room, Tom Cushman strums
an acoustic guitar, and he and the
three Beasties sing a somber version
of - would you believe? - "Ramblin
Man," though, since they don't know

Rubén Blades

[Cont. from 40] fight to keep it alive, but
if you want to communicate with the
greater society, this is the lingua franca."

The Panama Blades record will also
be important in Hispanic terms be-
cause, Blades feels, it "will allow me to
be dealt with, not like an oddity but an
equal. That is very important in terms
of Latin America, to be able to go back
and say, 'In their field, we did well and
we are back here again - by choice!'"

WHEN RUBÉN BLADES RETURNS TO LIVE
in Panama permanently with his new
wife, the actress Lisa Lebonzon - some-
thing he hopes to do by the end of this
year, schedule permitting - he will not
be going back as Mr. Entertainment.
Armed with his Harvard degree, Blades
plans to apply his previous legal experi-
ence in Panama and his years of intense
civic self-education to a pragmatic social
and political program. "My life is a cycle
that began in Panama," Blades says
proudly, "and it will close there."

His personal political ambitions, he
is quick to add, have been blown out of
proportion by the Latin and American
media. Several years ago he was asked
about his hopes for public office in Pan-
ama, whether he actually aspired to be
president. Blades replied, "Why
couldn't I? Because I'm a musician, I
can't be president?"

Today, Blades admits he isn't sure
exactly what function he can serve at
home. "I don't know what my role is
going to be, but I know I have one."
That combination of personal uncertai-
nty and emerging future vision was
evident in his master's thesis at Har-
vard, according to Frederick E. Snyder,
the assistant dean for international and
comparative legal studies at the univer-
sity's law school.

"It was full of very abstract general
political theory - the relationship be-
tween law and politics, tracing it from
Aristotelian times through twentieth-
century Latin American writers," says
Snyder. "But toward the end of the pa-
per, he tried to flush out the implica-
tions of his ideas, incorporating an en-
lightened legal philosophy in a country
like Panama for its future development

all the words, they have to mumble
most of the verses. Then there's a
brief, almost poignant silence; you can
see in their tired faces the three kids
behind the strutting façade. Then
Horowitz flips on the boom box, play-
ing reggae full blast.

Success hasn't changed the Beastie
Boys. Just ask Dave Scilken. "They've
never been really nice guys," he says
backstage in Memphis. "So it's not
like they're famous, now all of a sud-
den they're dicks. They've always
been dicks." ■

culturally, economically and socially. The
paper did have a spin on it at the end."

The spin Blades wants to put on
Panama's destiny is based on his own
refusal to align himself with any of the
country's existing political parties. He
intends to create a nonpartisan net-
work of students and workers to ad-
dress local problems and needs, to re-
cruit young university and pro-
fessional talent frustrated by the muck
and mire of the Panamanian bureau-
cracy. The next step, he says, would
be "to go for mayor or governor and
work with that infrastructure."

He's confident a street-level coalition
can work. When he visited his family in
Panama City shortly after he graduated
from Harvard, Blades went to a hotel
bar with a friend for a celebratory drink.
In the men's room, Blades noticed out
of the corner of his eye a young man in
a hotel uniform sweeping the floor.
Without even looking up at him, the
young man asked, "Did you gradu-
ate?" Blades said yes and the young
man turned around and offered his
hand in congratulations.

"I hesitated," Blades laughs, "be-
cause I was peeing and holding my dick.
But he said, 'No, está bien, we're men,
it's okay.' We shook, and he said to me,
'That diploma is *our* diploma. You got
the diploma for all of us, man, and I'm
really proud of that.'"

When Blades went back out to the
bar, he ran into three lawyers that he
knew in his old college days. "They
asked me, 'When is the next album
coming out? Play for us.' I was just the
salsa singer. When they heard about
Harvard, they didn't have the character
to deal with it. They ran away.

"That's where I can make the differ-
ence. Because we don't need those execu-
tives. They are dead weight, the minority.
The people like that kid, they are the ma-
jority. That's why I have to go back."

Will he continue to make records
and movies after his return? Blades is
not sure. But he is certain that "if I
don't go back, the only alternative is
those assholes. I couldn't live with that,
knowing that I could have changed
things but I didn't." ■