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Rubén Blades Turns 70 and is Not Retiring From Touring

7/16/2018 by [Judy Cantor-Navas](#)



Carlos Alvarez/Getty Images

Ruben Blades presents his tour 'Caminando, Adios y Gracias' at Casa de America on July 14, 2017 in Madrid, Spain.

“I quit now, who’ll pick this up?” says the globally famous salsa singer, who celebrates his birthday today.

[Rubén Blades](#) turns 70 today (July 16), and never mind the previous announcements he made about retiring from touring: He is not abandoning the stage.

“Not that I solely changed my mind,” Blades says in a recent email exchange from the road. “People are the ones that are making me consider to extend my welcome a bit more. When was last time a ‘salsa’ album got Album of the Year at the Latin Grammys [his *Salsa Big Band* took the title in 2017]? Who else is playing the type of repertoire that we are doing at present? Songs like ‘Juan Pachanga,’ ‘Amor y Control,’ ‘Ara-Yue,’ ‘The Way You Look Tonight,’ ‘Cuenta del Alma,’ and ‘Mack the Knife?’ It’s a very special repertoire and I don’t see any other ‘salsa’ or Latin singer going thought these types of songs in one set. I quit now, who’ll pick this up?”

Blades is known for his straight talk as well as for a canon of songs ingrained into the collective consciousness of Latin America, which he began writing as a pioneer in the then-nascent salsa scene of 1970s New York. The Panamanian singer-songwriter, Harvard law school graduate, politician, activist and actor has experimented with different styles of music over the years, and took an extended break in the mid-2000s, when he was Panama’s Minister of Tourism. But he has always returned to salsa. Two years ago he announced he intended to stop performing his best known songs, except for at some select concerts in Panama, and embarked on a farewell tour. He is still touring.

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Blades will celebrate his birthday tonight (July 16) at Le Bataclan in Paris. He will play in five Spanish cities and London this summer. Dates in Chile and Colombia are set for September. He says that he will tour with the Roberto Delgado Big Band, the musicians from the *Salsa Big Band* Album thereafter as much as his schedule permits. Blades, who has taken periodic acting roles since starring in 1985’s *Crossover Dreams*, will also be filming episodes of the fifth season of *Fear the Walking Dead* sometime this fall.

“Probably Anglo-Americans know me more as an actor than as a musician,” he says of his role as plays Daniel Salazar in the AMC series.

Maybe he has reached more American homes through *The Walking Dead*, but it is “Pedro Navaja,” his salsa song inspired by “Mack the Knife,” that appeared on *Siembra*, his historic 1978 album with Willie Colon, which brought Blades global fame. “*Sopresas te da la vida, la vida te da sorpresas*” remains one of the most-vocalized choruses of a contemporary Latin song by audiences throughout the world.

“The reason a song survives, overcomes time and fashions, rests in its truth, its capacity to appeal to people because of the story,” he says. He is talking about “Pedro Navaja” but could be referring to “Buscando America,” “Pablo Puebla,” or another of the classics that have brought him a following of several generations. “My audience has been renewed because of it. Young people, whom you’d not expect to support a 70-year-old artist, re-discover my lyrics [and] recognize their personal situations and surroundings in them.

“The writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez once told me that I was not just writing songs: He said I wrote chronicles. So, instead of writing about escapism and the usual love platitudes, my interest was the city, the urban drama, sort of a musical journalism with a tinge of literature thrown in. All of that which made the city interesting for me continues to exist today for a new generation. That is why ‘Pedro Navaja’ continues to be appealing where other songs no longer are considered hip, relevant or even danceable.”

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Blades 70th year is to see the premiere of a documentary about him on HBO (the date has not yet been announced.) *No Me Llamo Rubén Blades (My Name is Not Rubén Blades)*, directed by fellow Panamanian Abner Benaim, follows Blades as he visits his childhood neighborhood in Panama, and re-traces the path of his singing career that started with New York’s Fania Records. The film offers a rare look inside Blades’ Manhattan townhouse, where he reveals his collection of comics, and accompanies him on tour. Most importantly, the film allows him to tell his own story, and those of his songs.

“I did not want to do it,” Blades says of the documentary. “But then friends like Paco de Lucia died unexpectedly and that made me consider the need to provide a testimony, however limited by a documentary’s scope, of events which involved me.” Blades says that he also plans to write an autobiography to “set the record straight” about his life and legacy.

Looking forward, he’s excited about the possibility of the release of a live album of a previous concert in which he performed with Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Jazz orchestra, and the idea of a subsequent tour.

“I can’t pass up such opportunities,” he says. “Not while I still have a voice to try and do it right.”

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