

Ruben Blades interviewed at New Orleans Jazz Fest's Allison Miner Music Heritage Stage



Ruben Blades & Roberto Delgado Orchestra performing at the Acura Stage after his interview at the Allison Miner Music Heritage Stage, all at the New Orleans Jazz Fest at the Fair Grounds in New Orleans Friday, April 25, 2014.



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Ruben Blades, interviewed by Dan Sharp on Friday (April 25) at the **Allison Miner Music Heritage Stage at New Orleans Jazz Fest 2014**, was sparked to storytelling by several songs Sharp played over the PA. It was a unique tactic by the interviewer, and it worked well. An appreciative crowd gave the pair a standing ovation at the end of the presentation. "Boy, you did your homework," Blades said at one point to Sharp, a Tulane University faculty member. It was the ultimate compliment, given Blades' stature.

Panama-born (but with Louisiana roots, revealed during the session to be a grandfather from Baton Rouge), Blades has a resume that would overrun a **Jazz Fest music cube**. A singer and songwriter and Latin-music icon, he ran for the presidency of his home country in the 1990s and later served a multi-year term as Panama's minister of tourism. He has worked as an actor in films with Robert Duvall, Johnny Depp and Denzel Washington, among many others, and appeared on Broadway in Paul Simon's "The Capeman."

Blades' presentation included a brief-but-credible Brando-as-Don Corleone impression. He also recalled the formative influence of witnessing New York City summits between Latin-music greats and jazz lions, performing in politically dicey Central and South American settings, finding the compositional sweet spot when combining topical lyrics with danceable rhythms, the early impact of doo-wop records, collaborations with various well-known musical names (including Lou Reed and Elvis Costello), and an artist's obligation to his audience.

"When you're honest, there's a chance you'll connect," said Blades, who later Friday **performed on the Acura Stage with the Roberto Delgado Orchestra**.

Sharp opened by playing a song by Jongo Trio, which, Blades recalled, he first heard on cassette as a young man. The song's story was about the son of a single mother, and his work selling oranges to support the two.

"They opened my mind," Blades said of Jongo Trio. "It was instrumental in my approach to social themes in music.

"That was 1965, so I thought, 'This is really powerful. This is part of a story that is seldom brought up in terms of popular music.' They were doing it in Brazil. I thought, 'Why can't we do it in Latin America?' That's a direction I took from the beginning. I was marked by other people I admired."

The second song was one of Blades' own, "El Padre Antonio y Su Monaguillo Andres," or "Father Antonio and His Altar Boy Andres."

"Actually I wrote it because I was angry," Blades said. "I write pretty much when I get pissed and am upset about something."

The song's story was inspired by the broad-daylight murder in 1980 of San Salvador Archbishop Oscar Romero, after a sermon in which he decried human-rights abuses by the Salvadoran military.

Blades referred to a portion of the lyrics that describe the murder, and concludes with these lines:

"But the bells still ring, one, two, three

for Father Antonio and his altar boy, Andres"

"The whole point of the song was (that) the bells keep ringing," Blades said. "I don't think it's an original thought, but it's a good one: Death really begins when you forget. As long as you remember, it continues to live, whatever it is you're thinking of."

Song three: "Plastico," which concludes with Blades singing name-checks for Latin American countries, to which various audience members responded.

The roll-call "had never been done before" on a record, Blades said.

"The people at the record label wanted to cut it," he said. "They felt it was a waste of time. I said no. There was a purpose to that, to make everybody feel included, let everybody understand we are part of the same place. To this day, whenever we do that, people react.

"We are all related one way or another. That doesn't mean you can start borrowing money from people, but we're pretty much all related."



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