

Gangsta Rap Gets Spanked in Congress

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**on Axl Rose,
Eddie Vedder,
and Herself
by Dennis
Cooper**

**VANILLA
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REALITY CHECK

Politics by Marc Cooper

Late last year, Rubén Blades, the "King of Salsa," accepted his party's nomination for president of Panama. During a six day odyssey of nightmares and torments of the heart, the nation's favorite



PANAMA CITY, PANAMA — Rubén Blades is bunkered in a friend's hillside home graced with soothing skylights and an indoor waterfall. The perfume of floating gardenias gently spices the already fragrant tropical air, and from the plush living room sofa, we look out across the entire Panamanian capital, past the arsenal of high-rise towers in the downtown banking district, to the shining coastline condos of the wealthy, and on to the tin-roofed, two-story tenements of the poor. In this early February dusk, visibility reaches further, all the way to the U.S. Army's Quarry Heights Base, where the American invasion of this country was launched in 1989.



Salsa," accepted his party's nomination for president of Panama. During a six day odyssey of nightmares and torments of the heart, the nation's favorite son decides whether or not to officially enter the ring.



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"I didn't sleep last night. It was the worst night I can remember for a long time," Blades says, chain-smoking Marlboro Lights and downing diet Cokes, oblivious to the serenity of the scene. Though back in November 1993, the 45-year-old "King of Salsa" accepted the nomination of his newly formed Papa Egoro party for the presidency of his native Panama, in just six more days Blades will have to meet the formal legal deadline to make his candidacy official.

"I had this nightmare last night," Blades confesses. "I was running toward a group of people sitting on two benches like a jury, running with tremendous elation when suddenly I realized I was stark butt-naked. I stopped cold, *hermano*, and ran back the other way. I got up this morning and realized this is all about my worries over where our movement is going. That we have only 12 weeks to go is horrifying.

"I accepted the nomination, yeah. But I tell you



today, unless we get things in place in the next day or so, I can't see us flying, unless we just want to crash." Blades looks at me, and glances at a small group of advisers who have grown suddenly very quiet. His 71-year-old father, an ex-cop known as Skipper, glumly lights a Marlboro of his own.

"I haven't talked about this to anyone yet," Blades continues. "But I've been asking two questions for which no one has any answers: Where are we going to get the money we need to run a real campaign? And who is going run with me — not just so we can attract voters, but so we can govern the country? Everyone just assumed I would bring in the money and the people. 'Hey,' people think, 'Rubén did that film with Jack Nicholson,'" Blades says, referring to *The Two Jakes*. " 'Jack made ten million — Rubén



ANITA BACA

Clockwise from top left: Rubén Blades with vice-presidential pick, Manuel Manfredo (right); a woman on a campaign tour; Blades at a post-convention party in Panama City; that same day, Blades with a group of people in Puerto Armuelles, B. and newspaper clipping



and thinking hard — about politics for a long time. Now he is just six harrowing days from the moment of truth.

But the whole world seems to be closing in on Blades. He has so far poured \$100,000 of his own money into the pre-campaign. He has paid for the printing of his detailed 20-page political program with his American Express card. And he hasn't been able to perform in six months; while we speak he turns down a \$100,000 concert offer in Venezuela. Papa Egoro (which means Mother Earth in a local indigenous tongue) really is running on a shoestring.

Meanwhile, Blades's California home was trashed in the January earthquake, and his wife of seven years, Lisa, remained behind to restore order. He's about to miss a deadline in writing lyrics for a new joint album with the legendary Willie Colon, and he's not bullshitting me when he says that less than a week from the filing deadline he really hasn't fully confirmed who his first and second vice-presidential running mates will be. And worse, after leading every presidential poll during all of last year, Blades has suddenly slipped into second. Edging ahead is veteran politician Ernesto Balladares, candidate of the opposition, the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), which once served as political wing for Panama's jailed former strongman, General Manuel Noriega.

Panama's political catastrophes, compounded by the U.S. invasion, have made this coming May 8 election — the first truly free vote in 25 years — a do-or-die challenge for the nation. If there is ever going to be a moment for Rubén Blades, it is now. With the failure of Noriega, and the subsequent political debacle of the U.S.-backed government that succeeded him, the time is ripe for the sort of alternative Blades symbolizes. Some half dozen, maybe more presidential candidates will be on the May ballot, but the choices are starkly simple: You either vote for Noriega's old party (which has regained strength as living conditions decline); or for one of the incumbent "democratic" parties which in reality are near-private lobbies for the business elite; or for Blades. That's why Blades's presidential popularity — even before he was nominated, even before his Papa Egoro was registered, hovered at 20 percent. And in a country with a crowded field and no provision for a run-off election, you don't need much more support to win.

"Panamanians love boxing," Blades says, growing calm and sitting down. "So it's like I'm in the ring about to fight for the whole country. But then people want to see who your corner guy is, who your

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Now Blades is on his feet pacing. He lifts his T-shirt with its picture of an Indian saying "I SHIT ON



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Clockwise from top left: Rubén Blades campaigns with vice-presidential running mate Fernando Manfredo (right); a welcome sign awaits Blades in Puerto Armuelles, where he will speak to 500 people, mainly banana plantation workers, on his campaign tour; Blades pumps up supporters at a post-convention party in a thatched hut in Panama City; that same day, supporters beam as Blades treats them to a few songs at a local nightclub; in Puerto Armuelles, Blades autographs his records and newspaper clippings for Papa Egoro supporters.

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Now Blades is on his feet pacing. He lifts his T-shirt with its picture of an Indian saying "I SHIT ON COLUMBUS" and fans air on his sweating stomach. "I got up this morning and realized we are about to fight an entrenched establishment that's got whole political armies, laser weapons, tanks, AWAC planes, and we are standing here with a slingshot and water pistol," he says. "So while I have to be a source of hope for this movement, at the same time I have to bring down the ice-cold shower of reality."

Blades's rap now picks up tempo. Before me suddenly is not just the musician and songwriter who turned the salsa world upside down with some 16 albums, the performer who won two Grammys, or the actor who started out in the 1985 film *Crossover Dreams* and moved on to work with Robert Redford in *The Milagro Beanfield War*. No, here now is the Panamanian street kid who put himself through local law school, who got his Masters in International Law from Harvard (what he calls his "intellectual .45") while already a superstar, who has been thinking —

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"Panamanians love boxing," Blades says, growing calm and sitting down. "So it's like I'm in the ring about to fight for the whole country. But then people want to see who your corner guy is, who your trainer is, your doctor, your coach, before they put down their money. And that's why I've fallen in the polls. We haven't fully gotten across to enough people who and what we are."

Blades's identity has always been a blend of political passion and musical obsession. "My politics start with rock'n'roll," Blades says. "It was young people's music, it made you feel like doing the things that kids want to do. It made you different from older people."

Blades's brother was a drummer in a garage band in the working-class neighborhood of Carrasquilla where they grew up. Blades's mother, who recently died of cancer, gave Rubén a plastic Elvis guitar with a hound-dog decal for his 12th birthday. Musicianship didn't come naturally to Rubén, but he had a good singing voice and started working with his brother's band. Politics soon crept in.

In 1964, 21 Panamanians died in riots after Americans in the Canal Zone refused to let the Panamanian flag fly next to the Stars and Stripes. "Everything changed for me then," Blades says. "I had never questioned the U.S. or anything else, but then I became angry and got radicalized."

He persuaded his parents to enroll him in the National University—the veritable incubator of Panamanian student radicalism—and he slowly shifted his songwriting from bossa nova to his own brand of socially conscious music.

After finishing Panamanian law school and working at the national bank, Blades took off for New York, hoping to snare musical fame. By 1978, Blades's *Siembra* LP broke all sales records for salsa. By the early '80s, he had become the first salsa star to achieve anything close to a crossover to the English-speaking public. But what many of those gringo fans may have missed is just how consistently political Blades's product has been. In

For four hours, Blades sits in the living room as the sun settles behind the Panama City skyline, and articulately traces his vision of Papa Egoro as the prototypical "anti-party." Not antipolitical, in the know-nothing vein of a Ross Perot, but actually the opposite—an innovative attempt to elevate politics back to the level of shared civic duty, much as the Greeks saw it. "The community taking charge, taking power away from those who are the professional profiteers of politicking," says Blades.

He is trying to marry the humanistic liberalism and moderate leftism of his youth to an eyes-open pragmatism. "Communism collapsed not because of George Bush but from inside," he says. "Leftists in El Salvador and South Africa have learned this lesson and are making compromises. Now it's time for capitalism to learn the same lesson. If we don't find solutions to the sort of hunger and unemployment we have here, everyone loses because this system will also collapse."

And like stripping back the leaves on an artichoke, we finally get to the heart of the matter. What's got Blades spooked goes way beyond the question of money and running mates. It's rather a nagging suspicion that Panama has become too cynical for Blades's brand of new politics. In few other countries have political hopes risen so high so often, only to crash.

In Panama's recent history, after decades of elite, oligarchic rule, a 1968 military coup brought General Omar Torrijos to power. His authoritarian but populist government for the first time opened the political and social system to the 85 percent of the country that is black or of mixed race. His successful negotiation of the Panama Canal Treaty with President Jimmy Carter—securing Panamanian control over the waterway in the year 2000—brought a much-needed dose of national dignity to a country that always looked a lot more like a colony. But after Torrijos's death in a plane crash in 1981, the Noriega nightmare of corruption began. Voter



Voice of the people: Blades and the Papa Egoro hold a town meeting in the city of David.

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In 1981, Blades had to perform in a bulletproof vest at a Miami concert and saw his records banned from local radio stations, after being labeled a communist by right-wing Cuban exiles. A few years later, Panamanian censors outlawed one of his songs suspected of encouraging abortion. But Blades continued to bash what he saw as unfair and wrong. He participated in the Sun City anti-apartheid performance. His track, "Tiburón," denounced U.S. intervention in Central America.

No wonder that, by the mid-'80s, there was already public talk of Blades running for president of Panama. After all, he is the nation's second most famous person, and the guy in first place is serving 40 years in a south Florida jail. "I always wanted to do something politically, but I always thought it would be much later in life," Blades says. "I figured it would all be in place when I was about 55 or so." Unfortunately, Panama—with its deteriorating living conditions—might not be able to wait that long.

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But no matter what political future Blades describes, he keeps taking us back to his immediate personal political dilemma—to run or not to run.

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Some 65 percent of Panamanian families now find themselves below the poverty line, and one out of four elementary-school students suffers malnutrition. Hope for democratic prosperity has dimmed, and, as the Panamanian saying goes, General Noriega has been replaced by general discontent. President Guillermo Endara's popularity rating often dipped into single digits; nine out of ten Panamanians, in one poll, termed the government "corrupt."

"I knew back then the invasion wouldn't put things on track, that we would only go backward," Blades says. "That's why I didn't support either side. But, you know, the people really *hated* Noriega. They

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took a perverse pleasure in seeing him get kicked out. So, publicly, everyone said they thought the right thing had been done. But in the privacy of their homes — they cried. And still, as a nation, we have not yet cried together, so great has been the desire in the national psyche to dismiss the guilt, the pain that was the cost of Noriega's ouster.

"This great disillusionment, mixed with the arrogance of those now in power, creates the sensation among many people that things just *cannot* be changed. This is the contradiction inside every Panamanian today. Hope that something will change for the better. And cynicism that it will not."

Which leads Blades to his own doubts. "On the street people come up to me and say, 'Qué pasa, Rubén? We

On Thursday night, Blades's press secretary, a frustrated Ricardo Ledezma, calls to apologize: "There'll be no word tomorrow. More like Saturday or Sunday." Blades just can't yet line up the two establishment running mates he thinks he needs for added credibility. "We're sorry," says Ledezma. "For us this is a very difficult moment."

At stake in the May 8 vote is not just the consolidation of democracy, but the very identity of Panama. In 1999, this country must decide either to take over the Canal, as called for in the Treaty, and simultaneously end the decades-old presence of American military bases, or renegotiate.

Blades is flexible on that issue. "We personally don't want the bases here. But if 70 percent of Panamanians, as

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love you, Rubén, we are with you man," says Blades. "And then the other parties show up and start passing out food, hats, T-shirts, and cash. And then our people say, 'Hey, we still love you, Rubén, but we're going with the other guy. Why should I tie my dreams up to Blades's dreams when, in any case, my dreams have gone nowhere in 20 years? The other guys maybe don't have dreams, but at least they're passing out T-shirts.'"

Then Blades catches himself. "On the other hand," he says, reversing course, "our movement exists and

is currently the case, want the bases to stay, then any government in 1999 that ignores that fact is going to have the whole nation marching in the streets. What we propose is a national referendum on the future of the bases," he says.

The U.S. State Department has taken no position on the Panamanian elections, saying its policy is to not get involved in other countries' political affairs. But Blades says that a U.S. embassy political officer has come around to chat on three or four occasions, and Blades has had one

candidates for Papa Egoro. "Don't worry," he says self-consciously. "I've got a tux ready for Rubén's swearing-in ceremony."

In another corner, a group of Blades's young supporters volunteer in the final push to kick off the campaign. There's Gloria, the 21-year-old daughter of a military family, now the youngest candidate in Panama in her quest for a city council seat, drawn into Papa Egoro because of its commitment to women's issues (71 out of 100 criminal complaints in the working-class San Miguelito neighborhood allege rape or sexual assault.) There's Georgina, a young architect, disgusted with her experience working in government during both Noriega's and the current administration.

And most compelling is attorney Aida Batista. For her, Papa Egoro "comes at a time not only of national crisis, but also of great personal crisis for many of us." After studying abroad, Batista returned to Panama in 1987, just when the Noriega regime was in full crisis and battling the political forces now in power. "I felt alienated from both groups," she says. "The single most traumatic moment in my life was the U.S. invasion. To just hear that soldier, in a foreign language, giving me orders made me want to pick up a gun and fight. Not for Noriega, but for my country. This was the greatest existential crisis in my life. Noriega was gone, but here we had three new bandits put in power by a foreign army.

"Then I heard a whisper, really no more, of a new idealistic movement," she continues. "I heard from a friend of a friend of a friend, that maybe there was a meeting somewhere. Finally I found the group that became this movement. I went to a lot of their meetings because I was suspicious. Who's putting up the money here? I kept asking. Who's the owner of the movement? No one, they answered. No one. And it's true.

of the early support for the PRD is a protest vote — people leery of the party's reputation as a corrupt political machine — some of those ballots will now come to Papa Egoro. "We can really win now. The 'street' is solid Papa Egoro," says Nordström. "All we need is money."

Political scientist Orlando Pérez, expert on Panamanian elections working at the prestigious Cela think tank, agrees Papa Egoro could win, but that potential voters are not the same as votes cast. "I'm sorry to admit it, but Blades may be too advanced for Panama's political culture. He might have to attempt a more traditional leadership role. The masses here don't want to be asked what they are going to do to build a movement, but rather ask what any politician is going to do for them."

Director of the think tank, Marco Gandasegi, agrees. "Blades needs a bigger base. So far he's attracted artists, some intellectuals, some national businessmen, but hasn't made enough inroads into organized labor and small farmers. He has to decide, either you are an idealist or you are a real politician. Look, if you have a project that really is going to change the country, then it's your responsibility to make certain compromises."

With the clock ticking toward

Blades's final registration deadline, Saturday night passes and so does Sunday, and still his decision is in the air. But press aide Ledezma calls at 10:00 P.M. Sunday and tells me to come to the Papa Egoro office Monday at noon. Walking inside, I find the doubts are banished. Volunteers are enthusiastically stapling the party flags — a green tree against an orange background — to wooden poles. The plan is to caravan to the Central Electoral Office to file the official papers.

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Then Blades catches himself. "On the other hand," he says, reversing course, "our movement exists and has been growing because there is a sector of Panamanian society that understands we need once again to create the conditions for hope, no matter how weary, how wary we are. So this is not an ego thing — this is our movement at stake, our country at stake. I'm not going to lead people into a losing scenario out of personal vanity."

As our discussion draws to a close, Blades makes a date for us to talk at 7:00 A.M. on Friday — just 36 hours away. Friday at noon, I am invited to either see him formally register his candidacy, or to announce his withdrawal at a meeting of Papa Egoro's leadership. "No bullshit, man," he says. "Don't know which one it will be."

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is currently the case, want the bases to stay, then any government in 1999 that ignores that fact is going to have the whole nation marching in the streets. What we propose is a national referendum on the future of the bases," he says.

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When I visit Papa Egoro's spartan offices the Saturday before the Monday filing deadline, Blades is presiding over one more marathon meeting aimed at making up his mind. But everyone else is clearly decided. A four-man delegation of Indians finishes up the paperwork for a local chief to run for mayor on the Papa Egoro ticket. An attorney in his 30s, Jorge Lau, barefoot in swimming trunks and tank top, combs over the list of 800 national, regional, and local

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"We are already winners," Batista says. "The most important thing is our idealism. The mere existence of this party itself is already a miracle."

As I prepare to leave the Papa Egoro office Saturday evening, Blades's second in command, Carl-Fredrik Nordström, joins me on the balcony. He is ecstatic. There's been one more fracture in the governing coalition's fragile electoral alliance. That's good news for Papa Egoro. With the incumbents running more than one ticket, there's even less reason for anyone to vote for them, meaning Panamanians will look closer at the opposition tickets: the PRD and Blades. And given that much

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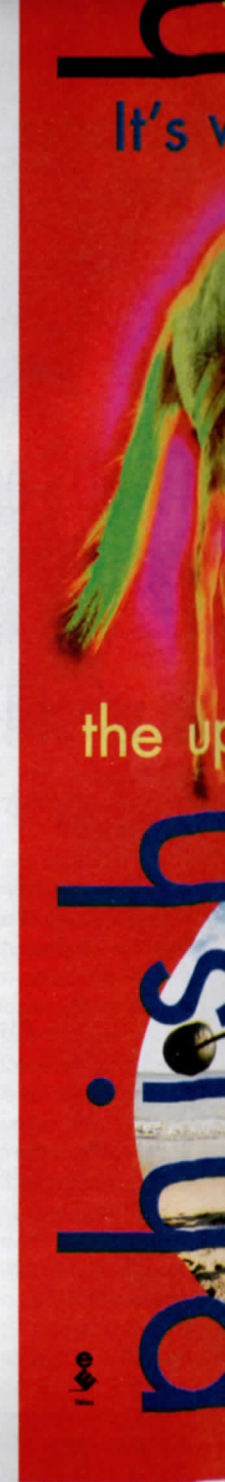
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Not that all of Blades's doubts have been satisfied. He couldn't get the candidate he wanted to represent the party in the capital's mayoral election. But two very establishment vice-presidential candidates are on board: the respected Fernando Manfredo, a former subadministrator of the Panama Canal; and architect Ricardo Bermúdez, a longtime friend of Blades's and a picture of genteel respectability.

"We can't lose," Blades tells me, "because we are running with the best of intentions. To have not made a go of it, to not have run would have been to lose it all."

Money, of course, continues to be a problem. "But we are not worried," says Blades's top adviser, sociologist Raul Leis. "The other parties will

(continued on page 106)



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 es are systematically destroying the sexuality, the family
 e lives, and the spirit of the Muslim people who live in Bosnia-
 .'' These were the findings of Feryal Gharahi, a Muslim
 ice chair of Equality Now, who traveled to Croatia and Bosnia-
 in February 1993, and again in June '93, to document the
 rape and forced pregnancy as a part of a Serbian genocidal
 nsing'' policy.

n Gharahi met had been raped by Serbian soldiers and then
 e rape of two girls, aged 13 and 17, in front of their parents.
 was just one of tens of thousands that are accumulating
 ges on. The shame of Bosnia's women is turning to anger
 e that, despite international exposure of the atrocities, no
 en taken to help them.

nia-Herzegovina has been systematic, *under orders*. The
 ho issued these orders, such as the Bosnian Serb leader,
 adzic, must be brought to justice. In May 1993, the United
 urity Council established an International Tribunal to
 ose responsible for war crimes in the former Yugoslavia.
 r later, no one has been charged.

deleine Albright, United States Ambassador to the United
 nited Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, and urge her
 ing she can to accelerate the work of the International
 to ensure that war criminals such as Radovan Karadzic are
 cuted.

**OW WORKS FOR THE CIVIL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND
 TS OF WOMEN AROUND THE WORLD.**

REALITY CHECK

(continued from page 81)

spend a fortune just trying to clean up their image. But people *like* us. They see Papa Egoro as clean and honest. So we have sort of a \$5 million advantage." Public opinion polls back him up: While the incumbent parties' disapproval rating is astronomical and the PRD's is more than 25 percent, Papa Egoro and Blades's negatives are barely 4 percent.

That popularity bursts into cheers and applause, chants of "Rubén! Presidente!" as soon as we hit the shopping center where the election office is quartered upstairs. Blades has forgone his usual T-shirt and jeans in favor of a sharp-cut double-breasted green suit, its hue just a shade off from his eyes. He strides forcefully through the crowd, smiling broadly, shaking hands, all the time answering every question thrown his way from the frenetic mob of reporters who cling to him like our own dripping shirts in the 95-degree tropical heat.

His clothes, his bearing, the tornado of attention swirling around him—Blades looks like a movie star. But here now, in Panama, the reporters, ever respectful of Blades's other identities—lawyer, political leader, maybe soon to be president—are careful to preface each question with "Doctor"—"Doctor Blades." And it seems to fit.

Blades calls me after the sign-in

ceremony and says he wants to meet one more time and explain his decision to run. We convene the next morning, back in his friend's hillside home, and Blades once again wears shorts, sandals, and a World Cup T-shirt. He looks tired from the day before and says, really, a lot of the problems that made him waver over the last week have not been solved. He admits he had even written his letter of resignation from the campaign. So what, in the end, made him run?

"The scenario changed this weekend because I realized there was something bigger out there than my personal problems and doubts," he says. "This election is the last chance for Panama before this place explodes. A full 35 percent of our people are under 14, and it's not their fault that things are how they are. So I owe it to them. They don't have the luxury that I do to decide yes or no. They have to sit and suffer in silence." He considers, "Okay, so I have to sacrifice for the next eight to ten weeks of the campaign. But if things don't change here, the people will have to sacrifice for the rest of their lives. The only risk I take is the risk of winning." ☉

AIDS

(continued from page 84)

some other reason, but the obvious question is: If they're falling, what else is going wrong?"

Dr. Haynes Sheppard, AIDS researcher and California State Department of Health Services immunologist, points out the normal CD4 count in the uninfected population can in fact vary widely—from as low as 300 to as high as 2,000. "What you usually hear is that normal is 1,000," says Sheppard. "But 1,000 is the median of the normal distribution of the CD4 count that has a curve that starts at 400 and goes out to 2,000."

He continues, "What's important and what has always been a marker of immune progression is the rate at which the CD4 cells are lost. Someone who loses half his or her original count in a year is progressing much faster than someone who loses 10 percent."

But, I ask him, is the person who starts with 500 "more immune suppressed" than the person who started with 1,000?

"Well, that's something we're beginning to look at: whether normal people prior to HIV infection, if their normal CD4 count is toward the lower end of the distribution, do they then end up progressing to AIDS more rapidly? I can't give you an answer because we really haven't looked at the data that way yet.

"My laboratory manager is a perfect example," says Sheppard. "HIV-negative, perfectly normal 50-year-old male. We measure his counts as a normal control and he is almost always around 400. And if he got HIV-infected tomorrow, he'd be a candidate for AZT therapy, prior to any progression whatsoever."

In 1992, discoveries of cases of

so-called idiopathic CD4 lymphocytopenia (ICL), in which people became severely immune suppressed and even died, though they were not infected with HIV, made researchers look more closely at the T-cell ratios of HIV-negative people. The ICL cases served as a reminder that severe immune suppression can occur independent of HIV and that HIV-positive people are not the only ones with low T-4 cell counts.

Dr. Robert Root-Bernstein devotes several chapters to non-HIV-related causes of T-cell depletion in his book *Rethinking AIDS* (Free Press). He scoured the medical literature and found T-cell ratios identical to those of AIDS patients in many categories: cancer patients, transplant