

Situating Salsa edited by Lise Waxer

Chapter 8

Memoirs of a Life in Salsa by Catalina Tite Curet Alonso (translated by Lise Waxer)

(excerpt)

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...

RUBEN BLADES

...In the following chronicle, originally published in two parts, Curet recognizes Blades as a friend and kindred spirit, referring to several of his hit songs and also discussing Blades's involvement in politics. Notably, Curet acknowledges Blades's "salsa with a social message" as an important contribution that smoothed out the rough, barrio-oriented edge of salsa prior to that time and got listeners thinking more profoundly about broad social issues of the day.

It was at the corner of Ashford and Magdalena Avenues, in the middle of Condado district.* There it was, although I don't remember the date anymore. The hour, yes, it was night, under the stars and out in the open, one of those hours that are good for getting into a long conversation which leads to a firm friendship. Rubén Blades has been that, a good friend made initially through our connection to Caribbean music, and then consolidated by the support of friendship itself. His dreams of triumph shone through in his gaze. First he had to complete his law studies in Panama, his native country, in order to venture forth and unleash the flood of inspiration that trembled inside him. His path was already laid out. He knew where he was going.

The animated chat continued on that corner. Both of us practically immobile alongside the relentless horns of cars locked in a traffic jam. They proved his streetwise philosophy that "corners are the same everywhere. "

Brazil and its music drew both of us. We talked about "over there" as if we had found ourselves on the sidewalks of Copacabana or on the streets of Ipanema next to the hexagonal Bar Veloso, where the poet Vinicius de Moraes and the composer Antonio Carlos Jobim, watching the exquisite girl Eloisa Helena pass by, wrote the famous bossa nova titled "Chica de Ipanema," which became popular worldwide.

Neither one of us even imagined that in time he was going to record

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my samba, "La palabra adios," and the hymn like guaracha "Plantacion adentro," based on an Amazon theme. It was, well, a happy encounter, seasoned with comments about how much good he could do for Caribbean

music, bestowing it with work that both of us, hopeful, catalogued as "high thought."

As we nonchalantly agreed, the learning exchange that night was on both sides, both of us pinned down at Magdalena and Ashford, a corner like any other, because after all, "corners are the same everywhere," although the surroundings change.

One resounding triumph after another. Salsa music and its many thousands of worshipers have come to accept the singer Ruben Blades without limits. Salsa with a social message has produced a string of hits, and also smoothed out the genre a little, making young people think about the issues of the moment, of the everyday path.

"Pedro Navaja," "Chica plastica "El Cantante," "Cipriano Armenteros," "El Tiburon," Ligia Elena," "El Camaleon," the work El solar de los aburridos and a world more of tunes from his pen and in his melodious voice -- all of them didactic and proclaiming his name as a singer-songwriter, perhaps the best of them all in the salsa business.

Nobody doubts his talent at producing hits now. The public adores him, it follows him and pursues him from one place to another. On many occasions he has had to resort to protection from police or security guards, since he is valuable property. Sometimes human affection, when en masse, can hurt the person who is admired. He has even made it to Hollywood films. Now he's quite international.

From that position as errand boy in the offices of Fania Records he went, without guide ropes, climbing the slope to fame, a steep trajectory that costs much hard work and much dreaming. Yes, the slope, the slope.

I understand him very well. The same here in this capital city of San Juan as over there in the city of New York; however many times we've met he's been the same. He hasn't changed a bit. We share opinions about each other's new projects, shaking hands and ideas whether we have time or not, given that his life has left him with few spare moments because of obligations and more obligations. He has traveled so much of late that he seems like a minister of external affairs. I don't know how he managed to take the time out to complete his law studies and graduate with a doctoral degree in law from prestigious Harvard University, but he hasn't let go of the music, the backbone of his life, the field where he conquered the public's love.

Within him stirred another social force. Politics! Some people do not tire of affirming that he wants to be president of Panama, thus

entering

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the public life of the homeland that he has lived far away from for obvious reasons, but that he has never stopped thinking about. And for his native isthmus, he wants the best.

"It's not that I want to be president, unless the position comes from the mandate of the people. Yes, I would like to form part of the government that settles many things that are not going well over there for the people on the bottom."

"Really?"

"Yes, but I'm no magician. It would have to be operating a group of leaders, people willing to struggle for the common good. Alone I couldn't do it, you know."

We were conversing this time in his dressing room at the Poliedro Stadium in Caracas. Backstage, we could hear ovations from the restless public, eager to see and hear him sing on the wide stage with his group Los Seis del Solar, tonight augmented by wind instruments.' ** He left for the stage then, escorted by security guards.

I stayed far back, observing his triumph. Every bit a great artist!
Suddenly I thought about the labyrinths of Latin American politics, where vendettas rule. And where to this day there's always been an inflamed rivalry that usually doesn't hold back, attacking, injuring, and even fatally eliminating the opposition. May God keep you, Ruben God keep you!

Note:

*: An upscale neighborhood and tourist zone in San Juan, Puerto Rico

** : Blades' group Seis del Solar was a small combo that featured synthesizers instead of horns; for the concert Curet refers to, additional wind instruments had been added to the ensemble.