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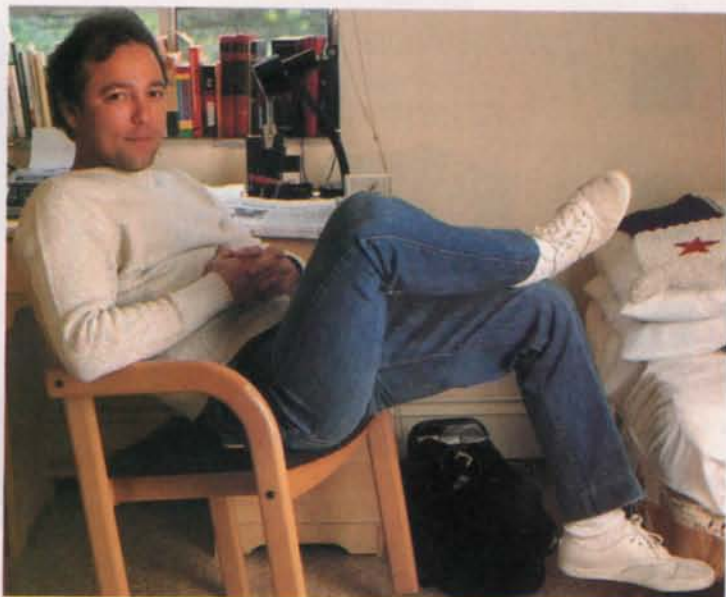
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The Red Mercedes, From Gail Parent's New Book



RUBÉN BLADES

Salsa Star With a Mission



□ "Whenever you see a Latin on film, we're either selling dope, using dope, or breaking into someone's home to get a Sony," says Rubén Blades, the Panamanian-born actor and salsa superstar who's never done any of those things on-screen—and never will. "No, they're not from Mars, the ones that are dealing dope in Miami," he says, sitting comfortably in his unpretentious hotel suite on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the on-again/off-again beard and mustache growing in yet again. "My point is, the attention of the entertainment industry has zeroed in on the corrupt side of one ethnic group and hasn't provided it with the same showcase to expose the good side, the working side."

That's why, although he's been asked several times, you won't see the thirty-eight-year-old Blades on *Miami Vice*, a show with its share of Latino coke dealers. But you will find him playing an ambitious musician in *Crossover Dreams*, a helpful orderly opposite Richard Pryor in *Critical Condition*, and, later this year, a gentle sheriff in Robert Redford's *The Milagro Beanfield War* as well as Whoopi Goldberg's police-detective partner in *Fatal Beauty*.

If he seems to be overly picky about his roles these days, it's because Blades, who is also a lawyer, journalist, record producer, tenor, and songwriter, is, more than anything else, a political animal. And if his star is ascending in Hollywood, that's fine, because it means he'll soon have the clout to raise the profile of the Hispanic population's "good side."

It's taken Blades some twelve years to begin to exert any kind of influence from

his soapbox. He was already a practicing attorney in Panama City when, at age twenty-six, he decided to become a musician full-time and emigrated to New York City, fertile home turf of salsa, that grafting of rock, jazz, and rhythm-and-blues onto traditional Latin beats. Slowly, Blades caught on, first as a singer for top salsa orchestras, later as the leader of his own band. And his songs revolutionized the music, their lyrics spinning tales "about the city, about relations between men and women, mothers and sons." On the international salsa circuit, he became a superstar.

It was, however, Blades's major-label debut—the 1984 Elektra release *Buscando América* (*Searching for America*)—that opened the Anglo door. The media gushed over their "discovery," with *Time* calling the album one of the year's top ten discs. Blades, meanwhile, had taken off for Harvard to earn a master's degree in international law. Soon after his graduation, *Crossover Dreams*, filmed some three years earlier, was finally released, revealing its lead as a natural actor. Since then, and between films, he has cut two more major-label albums: *Escenas* (*Scenes*), which won him a Grammy last February, and *Agua de Luna* (*Moon Water*), filled with visceral interpretations of the short stories of his Nobel laureate friend and fan, Gabriel García Márquez. Another, his first in English, is in the planning stages.

Obviously, Blades is burrowing deep into mainstream American show biz. He and the former Lisa Lebonzon, an actress he met in a New York restaurant three years ago and married last December,

This actor/singer/songwriter is also lawyer/journalist/aspiring pol...as well as perpetual booster of the Latino image and the good that Hispanics can do!

By Susan Korones

have even moved temporarily from New York to that epicenter of pop culture, Los Angeles.

Kind of makes you wonder when and whether he really will, as he's long intended, opt out and return to Panama to run for high-level government office. "I feel there is a master plan," he says, "but I don't feel the limits date-wise. My instinct will tell me."

It may be soon. Blades contends he'd be in Panama right now if his film career hadn't taken off. And he does sound homesick, even though he's made friends here with fellow musicians and among the sort of entertainment intelligentsia—people like Sam Shepard, Paul Simon, Christopher Walken, director Hector Babenco—he runs into at Columbus, a low-key West Side hangout he frequents on his trips east. In Panama, however, "I have friends who go back twenty, twenty-five years. They still have the same phone number. I take the work here as something I have to do, but there's a continuity there that's always been important to me. I miss it, and I'm missing it more and more."

Although Blades maintains that his life "has been a crusade against stereotypes," he admits to harboring some vestiges of culturally ingrained machismo. "Am I gonna tell my wife, 'You can't work'? No, that's ridiculous. But I'm not gonna let her walk down any street in the world in a see-through blouse. No, no, no. I'm a Latin, and that's it. My background makes me very conservative in certain areas."

Mightn't that personal conservatism roil his marriage to a California girl who came of age in postfeminist, post-sexual-revolution North America? "As anybody who moves into a different environment knows, there are concessions to be made, certain things you do and don't do," he answers. "But she has, politically speaking, the same awareness I have. She loves to read, write, act, dance—and I like that, too. So, spiritually speaking, we share many things."

"Of course, it crossed my mind: How comfortable would she be in Panama? But that was resolved by my taking her there. If she'd said, 'I can't deal with this,' that would have been the end of the relationship. The question is, Does she understand and respect our culture? She does, and that's the bottom line." ☐