

## Jazz Magazine June 1983 - translated from the French - corrections in [ ]

(Note: Translated as closely as possible, resulting in some clumsiness.

In France *Canciones del Solar de Los Aburridos* seems to have been titled *Tiburón*.

There must have been some transcription error resulting in saying the subtitle "est également le nom de la grand-mère de Carmen da Silva dans *Maestra Vida*."

The writer sometimes calls Carmelo Carmen. *The Last Fight* film title called *The Last Night*.)

### Dits et Cris - Words and Cries of Salsa: Rubén Blades

*After having studied the evolution of texts and "messages" of Latin-American music (Jazzmag 317), Jeanne Brody makes here the portrait of a young salsero whose "lyrics" are never insignificant...*

It's probably the language in which he expresses himself (Spanish) which values Rubén Blades to being relatively little known in France. But the words of the songs of this young Panamanian salsero, politically engaged, play an important role in his work. His most celebrated records are still all available from Sonodisc; Blades was also in the Fania All Stars which played the Paris Hippodrome in 1981; he appeared in *The Last [Fight]*, produced by Jerry Masucci, which should come out very soon on Parisian screens. Rubén Blades could well be a sort of Latin music messiah. He has the look: blond hair, light skin - except for Celia Cruz, blacks have never sold as well on the New York salsa market as whites. He has talent: *Siembra*, one of his records, was one of the highest-grossing salsa records of all time in the US and Latin America. He has charisma: onstage, his appearances are reminiscent the hootenannies at Carnegie Hall at the beginning of the 60s, where Pete Seeger and Joan Baez led crowds of young people with fists raised and hoarse voices, but "We Shall Overcome" is now replaced with "Siembra," an exhortation to invest all ones energies in the future of a united Latin America.

Blades doesn't look for glory for its own sake. This ex-lawyer of 35 years has plenty of other strings to his bow: journalist, good writer (as is said)... What's more, he confides, he doesn't particularly like the limelight. As he confessed to me, one afternoon in a Cuban-Chinese restaurant on 8th Avenue: "I wanted to know if I was right to assume that I could bring something to the people and they would accept it, but I was not looking for stardom. I always felt more comfortable in a supporting role, as part of a whole."

Whatever were his intentions at the start, the rise of Blades was rapid and spectacular. His first appearance on the salsa stage dates from 1970, in an album recorded by Pete Rodriguez *From Panama to New York Pete Rodriguez introduces Rubén Blades*. After having recorded it, Rubén returned to Panama. A few years later, Ray Barretto "rediscovered" Blades who had since returned to New York and was working in the mail room at Fania Records. Rubén recorded an album with Ray, before meeting his soulmate in the person of Willie Colon. Then aged 33, Colon, Puerto Rican born in New

York, had already made his name in the world of Latin jazz, and received several gold records (notably for *Cosa Nuestra* (1970) and a record with Celia Cruz, *Only They Could Have Made This Album*). Together, Blades and Colon recorded *The Good The Bad and The Ugly* (Fania 1975), *Metiendo Mano* (Fania 1977, gold record) and *Siembra* (1978) for which Blades composed and wrote the words of six tracks out of seven.

Two years later, Rubén Blades took one of the greatest risks of his young career in writing and recording *Maestra Vida*, a salsa opera in two parts telling the story of several generations of poor Latinos living in a slum which could appear in any Latin American city. The story turns around Rafael, grandson of [Carmelo] and Manuela da Silva, who asks an old man who knew his grandparents to tell him about them. The frame of the opera is thus constructed of flashbacks, making us relive the meeting of [Carmelo], the tough guy of the corner, and Manuela, the neighborhood beauty; the marriage which followed; the birth of their son Ramiro; the impossibility of [Carmelo] to find work; the poverty, the struggles, the corruption of local politics, the coups d'Etat which change nothing; rejection of parents by their children, who will even refuse to attend the funeral of his father; his remorse and, finally, his realization (and by extension that of Rafael) that life is a source of learning but learns nothing, and that finally nothing changes for the poor.

The album reproduces all the typical sounds of the barrio: noise of the beer bottles clinking in the corner bar, couples meeting on the occasion of a marriage... The music is very varied: "Manuela" is a typical bouncing salsa; "Carmelo," a gauganco floating above the voices of conversations in the street. "Como Tu" is a son montuno. There is a magnificent duet between Carmelo (Rubén) and la señora Anoland Diaz (Rubén's mother) in the role of Manuela, titled "Yo soy una mujer," a duet in which Manuela and Carmelo declare to each other their reciprocal and eternal love. Later, when Carmelo and Manuela are old and death is near, the music approaches the style of Nueva Trova (a popular contemporary Cuban style, which attempts to present the voice of the people as simply and directly as possible, and perfectly illustrated by Silvio Rodriguez or Pablo Milanes.)

Despite its musicality, this recording was little distributed on the airwaves, and was criticized as too pretentious, too orchestrated. Only perhaps the critic Tony Sabourin ventured to say that this record was a classic of power, of which the value would probably not be realized for a number of years. As for specialized managers and producers, they consider that *Maestra Vida* could well become one day a success on Broadway, the first for a work of this type.

In any case, *Maestra Vida*, it is Rubén Blades: "I write about the urban guy waiting for the subway to go to work and who sees the political posters promising change; change doesn't come, he sees how his wife and his daughter live, and he asks himself how long will I keep doing this crap?" Nearly all Blades' texts speak of people of the barrio, the struggles of the workers like Carmelo and Manuela, the marginal like Pedro Navaja, of Ligia Elena, the daughter of good family who runs away with a black trumpeter... "What Garcia Marquez does with writing, I do with song." So much so that certain characters

who appear in the first songs resurface some albums later: the drunkard who discovers the body of Pedro Navaja and the prostitute reappear in *The Last Fight* (1982); *Tiburón* is subtitled "Canciones del Solar de Los Aburridos," which is the name of the [?] grandmother of Carmelo da Silva in *Maestra Vida*. What's more, Blades has the advantage over Marquez of being able to communicate his message to the average Latino American, even if he doesn't know how to read. This guy listens to Latino music and Blades' message is clear:

[quoted lyrics from "Plástico" translated into French]  
*Oye latino oye hermano oye amigo*  
*Nunca vendas tu destino por el oro ni la comodidad*  
*Nunca descanses pues nos falta nadar bastante*  
*Vamos todos adelante para juntos terminar*  
*Con la ignorancia que nos trae sugestionados*  
*Con modelos importados que no son la solucion*  
*No te dejes confundir busca el fondo y su razon*  
*Recuerda se ven las caras pero nunca el corazon*

If you have not already understood it, Blades is somewhat apart in the world of salsa. First, his origins are unusual since his maternal grandfather was from New Orleans, and his grandmother from Spain. They met in Cuba where their daughter, Rubén's mother, became a pianist and singer. On the occasion of a tour, she married a Panamanian percussionist, of Caribbean and Colombian origin. Blades' paternal grandmother was a suffragette, a militant for civil rights, studied yoga, was a vegetarian, and a medium. Despite these artistic forbears, music was not particularly encouraged in Rubén's family. In Latin America, upward mobility was accomplished by professionals, therefore Blades' parents wanted him to become a lawyer or doctor. What's more, despite the intellectual atmosphere of the middle class in which Rubén grew up, his family was still very poor. Thus Rubén had, as he has said, "The best of two worlds: the streets, and yet, my mother telling me to study, to learn, to succeed... A number of my friends found death in street fights, or ended up in jail, while I was getting my law degree."

It is not only by his family antecedents that Blades was out of the ordinary. The difference from the current New York salsa musicians, who are transplanted Puerto Ricans or Dominicans, Cuban immigrants from the 30s or Latinos born in New York, Blades is first and above all a Latin American: "I am New Yorker by adoption, but the memory of Latin America is very fresh in my memory."

This persistence explains both Rubén's social and political preoccupations and the particular appeal that he has for the South Americans. Pedro Navaja, he explains, "could be Panamanian, Dominican, Venezuelan, Puerto Rican, Cuban... Otherwise, how to explain that a traditional Panamanian theme, recorded by a Puerto Rican (Willie Colon) who wasn't even born in Puerto Rico but in New York, could be a hit in Venezuela?" "Pedro Navaja" was so popular, that it is known by heart by all Blades' public, that it has become a theater piece in Puerto Rico, and that was one of the first songs to enter Chile after the takeover by Pinochet.

Rubén's Latin America is that of underdevelopment, of poverty, of ignorance and the political and social imperialism. Although critics reproach him for practicing political ideas which are neither hip nor marketable (nor, say some, sincere) Blades has proven, by his popularity and his record sales that they can be. What's more, his refusal to abandon the transmission of this message even under threat (release of his record *Tiburón* brought him threatening phone calls) seems to argue for his feeling of sincerity, like his efforts to actively combine politics and music. Rubén tried to organize a union type association (Latin Industry Music Association) in a sector which had stayed until then defenseless. He tried to use his privileged social status to encourage Latino New Yorkers to register to vote.

Blades' success has diverse explanations. First, the words of his songs are perfectly in accord with the structure of the music. Willie Colon's arrangements combine the best of the traditional Latin American rhythms bringing in a very modern feeling. Willie Colon travels and listens to very diverse music traditions, basing in his own version of salsa folkloric Puerto Rican elements and rhythms coming from Panama, Brazil, or from jazz (Colon is until now the only salsa artist to have used a synthesizer with success - on the occasion of the international salsa concert in Madison Sq Garden in 1980.) The style of the pair Colon/Blades is very recognizable: with his lightly nasal but agreeable tenor voice, Blades passes easily from the soft tone, carefully articulated and neutral New York intellectual to the popular speech in the streets of Latin America. Onstage, the Colon/Blades association ignites attendance. The greatest part of their public (New Yorker, Latinos or Spaniards) know the words of the songs and repeat in chorus with Blades.

Last but not least important, Blades' topics are borrowed from a daily South American reality: the bus driver who takes his girlfriend with him to work; the Latino with light skin who tries to pass for white, but whose friends heckle him asking where he hid his grandmother; the conversations over a beer, in the corner bars, or the wolf whistles by men when women pass.

More seriously, it is necessary to say also that for his Latino public - especially composed of young people of the Spanish Third World - Blades expresses the preoccupations of an entire generation. One of the first slogans of the Cuban revolution was "Révolution et Pachanga": Blades is the personification of this slogan. Even if the hopes of this generation are not realized and if the powerful neighbor of the north has succeeded up to now perpetuating the division of Latin America, the dream remains. In his great hit "Plastico" (*Siembra*), Rubén criticizes Latinos who are left overwhelmed by superficial values of an imported society. The song draws its title from the shirts and pants of synthetic fabric worn by numerous Latinos, whose bright colors, loud, are so beautiful under the hot sun of the Caribbean, and that are so cheap and bad taste once transported to Fifth Avenue. At the end of the song, while the chorus repeats the last line of the couplet ("one can see the faces, but not the hearts") Rubén Blades makes the appeal: "Panama - Present! Puerto Rico - Present! Mexico - Present! Cuba - Present!" up to "Nicaragua without Somoza - Present!, the barrio - Present!, the

streetcorner...." And the voices fade out. "Tiburón" is even more committed to this. The theme which gives the title to the album, which seems at first to speak only of a fish (shark), makes its meaning progressively through the couplets to the end which leaves no doubt:

[quoted lyrics of Tiburón translated into French]

*En la union esta la fuerza y nuestra salvacion*

*Ponganle un letrero que diga en esta playa solo se habla espanol*

*Si lo ven que viene no se duerman mis hermanos pongan atencion*

*Palo palo pa palo pa' que aprenda que aqui si hay honor*

*Pa' que vea que en el caribe no se duerme el camaron*

*Pa' que no se coma a nuestra hermana El Salvador*

*Y luego a trabajar en la reconstruccion*

Rubén Blades is an exceptional phenomenon: the quality of his work permits him to have audacious political positions. He is equally conscious that he is, in the US, against the current: "This country is entering into a period of xenophobia; we are going towards a period of affirmation of whiteness, towards nationalism. It's not by chance that the Ku Klux Klan was acquitted in the Greensboro affair and that Reagan was elected: it's a sign of the times."

-Jeanne Brody-

### Discographic Reference

*A Las Seis* (Los Salvajes del Ritmo) 1969, Discos Isthmenos Panama

*De Panama a Nueva York* (Pete Rodriguez) 1970, Alegre

*Barretto* (Ray Barretto) 1974, Fania

*The Good the Bad the Ugly* (Willie Colon) 1975, Fania

*Homenaje a Tito Rodriguez* (Fania All Stars) 1976, Sonodisc SLP 493

*Metiendo Mano* (Willie Colon/Rubén Blades) 1977, Vaya

*Siembra* (Colon/Blades) 1978, Sonodisc SLP 537

*Maestra Vida* (Rubén Blades) 1981, Sonodisc SLP 576 & 577

*Tiburón* (Colon/Blades) 1982, Sonodisc SLP 597

*The Last Fight* (Colon/Blades) 1982, Sonodisc SLP 616