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RUBEN BLADES

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RUBEN BLADES

Forget Eddie Palmieri. Forget Ray Barretto. Ruben Blades is
by John Morthland



Photo by Stephanie Chernikowski

the new name to remember when it comes to the salsa scene.



Ruben Blades walks a fine line, and wouldn't have it any other way. When he arrived in Manhattan from his native Panama a decade ago, he quickly established himself as the first salsa singer to write his own material; he was also the first to inject politics into his music. Now, after a series of path-breaking albums on small salsa labels, Blades has released his first album for a major label—*Buscando America*, on Elektra—and stands a chance of being the first salsa artist in years to reach a non-Latin audience. The trouble is, he's not so sure he wants to—he'd rather be a unifying force for Hispanics around the world. And then again, he may have outgrown *that* audience musically.

Half street hipster and half intellectual, Blades relishes the paradox.

Buscando America ("searching for America") is in Spanish, so most Americans won't understand the lyrics, and it contains his hardest-hitting batch of songs yet. But it's also experimental music, far enough outside the salsa mainstream to alienate some of his old fans.

"I never thought of a crossover in terms of North American audiences," he says. "I had the lyrics translated into English for the cover because I'm always obsessed with clarity. I think one of the major problems we have today is lack of communication,

"I'm a city writer and I write of people's lives, and I try to touch everything."

and I believe it's everybody's duty to make the effort to be understood. We Latins only have ourselves to change the stereotypes, *Scarface* and things like that. We gotta show the intelligent side of the Latin American."

Since Prez Prado first hit in the early Fifties, several salsa artists—Joe Cuba, Ray Barretto, Eddie Palmieri—have attempted to reach the Anglo market while still holding on to their Latin base. But none enjoyed more than minimal success, and Blades thinks he knows why.

"I was born and raised in Panama, and when I left at 26, I was already formed, for good or for bad. My notion from the giddyup was that I am going to write songs that are internationally supported. The biggest salsa markets were New York and Puerto Rico, but Latin America, that was always my thing. But for the guys from here, even if their families are from Puerto Rico or whatever, you cannot forget the fact that they are American citizens. Therefore, all the measures they have of success are going to be measured by this country's standards. That's why everybody would love to be in Las Vegas, or on Johnny Carson. But they aimed their albums at a North American audience they didn't really know, and they wound up with a bad hybrid that didn't please either Latins or North Americans."

Salsa ("sauce") is the Afro-Cuban music of the Forties as interpreted by New York Puerto Ricans. It is dance music more than anything else, yet it is a conservative form that young Hispanics tend to shun the way young blacks do blues. Blades doesn't even like the term; he prefers "urban music," and with *Buscando America*, he sets the idiom on its ear. Crisscrossing Latin percussion remains at the bottom of his sound, but this music is more for listening than for dancing. His six-man band *Seis del Solar* ("Six From the Tenements") leaves out the traditional salsa brass section. Blades deftly weaves snatches of doo-wop, reggae and even doomy, Springsteen-like power chords into the various Latin musics that shape his sound.

Then there are the songs. "El Padre Antonio y el Manoguillo Andres" ("Father Antonio and the Altar Boy, Andres") is



based on the murder of Salvadoran Bishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. "Desapariciones" ("Disappearances") describes the mysterious disappearances of citizens in a police state similar to Argentina. Most chilling of all is "GDBD," a recitation which uses as background only the burbling of a musical sculpture Blades discovered on a traffic island in Times Square. The "song" details a typical morning in which a man rises and readies himself for work amid the petty indignities (the towel is too small to wrap around himself) and small pleasures (the smell of fresh coffee) we all share. It isn't until the end of the piece that we realize the man is a secret-police agent preparing to make political arrests.

"GDBD" was inspired by Kafka. "He upsets me very much because of his brutal and accurate description of society's little mechanism, the bureaucracies, the unseen things," Blades explains. "The thing that distressed me most is that I had such similar feelings but had never expressed them with such accuracy. When I read someone who's done it—and a German at that—it made me aware of two things. The first is that we're all basically the same everywhere, which I find comforting. But the tough thing is that these things really happen. You identify with this guy in a lot of ways, and then you find out what he does for a living and you go, 'Oh my God, how could I compare myself to him?' And

that's the whole point of the song: we're all capable of that."

Blades reads a lot. Though fond of Brazilian music and such pop singer-songwriters as Springsteen, Paul Simon and Joe Jackson, the walls of his roomy Upper West Side apartment contain no rows of records. Rather, there are bookshelves full of fiction in Spanish and English (Blades and Gabriel Garcia Marquez are planning to collaborate on a musical project, and the singer writes fiction heavily influenced by the Nobel Prize winner), and political books. One shelf contains work by S.J. Perelman, Russell Baker, Fran Leibowitz and Woody Allen. Blades talks of returning to Panama to run for political office in 10 years; a recent poll showed him third in popularity among his countrymen, behind Roberto Duran and the President. And in the fall, Blades will attend Harvard Law School.

Though raised in a musical family—his West Indian father was a percussionist, his Cuban mother a pianist—his earliest influence was his paternal grandmother, a Rosicrucian, poet, feminist and vegetarian who taught him to read when he was four. At six, he was studying Picasso and Cubism. But he grew up mostly on the streets of Panama City, singing cha-cha and rock & roll in English. Then in 1964, students attempting to raise the Panamanian flag next to the American flag in the

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Canal Zone were attacked by U.S. police. After three days of rioting, 21 were dead and 500 wounded.

"Until then, I was as pro-American as the proudest citizens of the Ozarks. I had always thought the best North Americans that ever lived were the Latin Americans, because we received the ideal notion of the United States through movies and music. For us it was a wonderful land that could do no wrong; we didn't have to deal with racism or economic injustice. When this happened, I started re-evaluating, trying to educate myself not about the good things, which I already knew, but about the bad things. That's when I started my hard trip to reality, facing the fact I would never have blue eyes or live a Hollywood notion of life. I made a conscious decision to write and sing in Spanish, because that is what I was."

Blades came to New York in 1970 to cut one album, but returned home to finish college and law school and take a job as attorney for the Bank of Panama. He quit the music business until 1974, when he came back to America to stay, working first in the mail room at Fania Records, the leading salsa label.

"I had given six or seven years of my life to getting an education, because that was essential to me and to my parents; my mother had once told me that I was going to either wind up in jail or be President. But now I felt it was time to pursue the music seriously, because I felt that popular music would play an important role in Latin America. I felt it was an effective way of stating cases, of presenting the truth, the people's sides, the people that didn't have a television or newspapers or magazines or any of that media. Because they all had sounds, and those sounds were as important as anything I could do in a court of law. Getting my degree was like having a .38 intellectual gun."

In 1975, he began singing with Ray Barretto, whose band played some Blades' material—but only the more standard boy-girl stuff. The next year, Blades hooked up with fiery trumpet player Willie Colon, and the team shot to the top of the salsa scene. "Willie was definitely responsible for presenting my music to an international audience," Blades says. With Colon, Ruben began testing his topical material. "Plastico" chided the Latin disco scene while calling for solidarity and pride among Hispanics from all nations. "Pedro Navaja," from the smash *Siembra* album, was an ingenious Latin reworking of "Mack the Knife." The anti-interventionist "Tiburón" caused anti-Castro militants in

Miami to organize a boycott which got Blades' records banned from local radio.

On his own, he cut the ambitious *Maestra Vida*, two albums tracing three generations of an urban Latin American family. But despite his equal billing, Blades felt somewhat inhibited in Colon's band; the music was still locked into old forms, and there were also inevitable difficulties in having two such big names in one group. So, two years ago, Blades struck out on his own.

"I'm a city writer and I write chronicles of people's lives, and I try to touch everything. That means I touch on politics, but I always take a position that has to do with sense, a general sense of morality. That gives me the independence to be critical of anything. I won't play Cuba or Chile, and when I was banned in Miami, I felt I had been hit without having a chance to hit back.

"What I wanted to do on this album was write about the feelings of Latin America today, the despair, but at the same time the hope and anger and everything. The last song, the title song, is meant to be an anthem. I felt like the contents of the album were so strong and so upsetting that we had to come up with something, even at the risk of sounding corny, that would put in hope, so as to leave people with an up, and not with a down, feeling.

"I also feel that we're establishing, once and for all, a new musical direction. I wanted to present a background that wasn't confined to the same wasted, used-over-and-over approach of Forties Afro-Cuban music," he adds. "My feeling is that we have to incorporate what we have today. In the beginning, it may be hard to take for people accustomed to the same formats all the time. But I guess that for each person I lose, I will be winning three or four more. Latin music has always been subjected to a ghetto approach which prevented others in the society from participating. They would have loved to connect themselves to this city experience, but did not have an intelligent way to make the connection."

Blades doesn't think he's *quite* found it yet himself; when he does, the final result should be a mix of reggae, salsa and rock, and he may adapt a Kid Creole-like alter ego, Panama Blades and the Gamboa Road Gang, to pull it off. Until then, he likes best to tell of the evening he played an advance copy of *Buscando America* for a friend. The man was speechless for a few minutes after the album ended; then he turned to Ruben and said, "You know, you're not gonna be playing dance clubs anymore." And *that*, grins Ruben Blades, is as good a review as he could have possibly hoped for. ●

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