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Musician singing a new tune

Famed salsa singer Rubén Blades has put his music on hold to become tourism chief in his native Panama

BY LETTA TAYLER | LATIN AMERICA CORRESPONDENT
November 17, 2006

PANAMA CITY, Panama - Ask salsa singer and movie star Rubén Blades how he is adjusting to life as Panama's tourism minister and he grabs at his tie like it's a hangman's noose.

"I have to wear a tie," Blades lamented with a yank. "And shoes. I really don't like shoes."

As for performing, he said, "The only thing that I am singing now is the national anthem."

Two years after Blades traded showbiz for public office in his native Panama, the crossover star and former New Yorker is grappling with his toughest role yet.

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"Everything is excruciatingly slow," he said during a recent interview in Panama City. "Everything is bureaucratic."

Blades, 58, who is famous for his socially conscious songs, is one of only two celebrities to hold public office in Latin America. The other, fellow pop music iconoclast Gilberto Gil, is Brazil's culture minister.

In anything-goes Brazil, most citizens have supported what Gil calls his switch "from the stone thrower to the glass." But in tradition-steeped Panama, Blades isn't the only one having a hard time

adjusting to the Hollywood custom of unconventional stars assuming conventional posts. While many citizens hail his foray into government, others accuse him of selling out. Some media have labeled his disdain for protocol "grosero," Spanish for uncouth.

Combatting social injustice

Blades says he will weather the difficulties until he can improve living conditions in Panama, a former dictatorship where more than 40 percent of the population lives in poverty.

"My songs had to do with a critique of the environment in which we lived - one of corruption, mediocrity, a lack of solidarity with the poor," he said in English perfected during 30 years in Manhattan and Los Angeles. "But one thing is to write about Pablo Pueblo and his problems. Another thing is to be part of a government that is trying to end social injustice."

As Blades signed papers from his office in a mundane convention center, wearing wire-rimmed glasses and a dark suit, only his quizzical grin placed him as the obliging boobie in [Spike Lee's](#) "Mo' Better Blues," the soft-edged hood in [Jack Nicholson's](#) "The Two Jakes" and the conflicted cop in [Robert Redford's](#) "The Milagro Beanfield War."

But the six-time Grammy winner, who obtained a Harvard law school degree between gigs, is one of Panama's most famous citizens.

He made one previous foray into politics in 1994 when he formed the party Papa Egoró ("Mother Earth" in an indigenous dialect) and ran for president, placing third.

As tourism minister, he reports to his friend Martín Torrijos, who was elected president in 2004 on a pledge to combat corruption and unemployment and whose father was the late Gen. Omar Torrijos. Blades denies he hopes to succeed Torrijos when their respective terms end in 2009.

Full-time politician

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Blades has thrown himself into the job, suspending all performing and visiting his wife in Los Angeles, actress Luba Mason, only once every five weeks.

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He speaks of developing Panama's nascent but booming tourism industry "horizontally" in every province so workers don't migrate to Panama City or abroad for decent jobs.

With a songwriters' flair, he makes a fine pitch for this isthmus best known for the Panama Canal, which the United States built and ran through 1999, and for Gen. Manuel Noriega, who it ousted in 1989.

"All my daughters are beautiful," he gushed of Panama's beaches, islands, rainforest, indigenous tribes, multi-ethnic culture and duty-free shopping.

A fan of eco-tourism, Blades named high-rise Cancun as the sort of development he wants to avoid. Still, some critics accuse the Torrijos government of courting excess growth through a new law that lets foreigners develop tourist spots and vacation homes on Panama's islands and coasts.

Asked about the criticism, Blades burst into expletives. The law, he protested, promotes balanced and planned development so the land no longer falls prey to "speculators who descend like locusts."

It is not surprising that he draws strong reactions from this nation's 3 million people. The son of a percussionist-turned-detective, his rags-to-riches tale after he moved to the United States is legend.

He started his U.S. odyssey as a mailroom clerk at Fania Records in Manhattan, where he lived from 1974 to 1986 and became famous performing with salsa giants Ray Barretto and Willie Colón.

Citizen's mixed response

"Everybody has danced to his music and feels he is part of their lives," said Panamanian sociologist Marco Gandásegui. But now, he added, some Panamanians feel Blades has "worn out his welcome."

"If he cares so much about Panama, why did he stay away so long?" asked Panama City car-washer Miguel Chamatla, noting that apart from his presidential bid, Blades spent his adulthood abroad.

But secretary Verónica Arauz believes Blades "will make Panama into something more than just a canal." "He has the contacts from the United States to make things happen," she said, snapping her fingers.

Whatever his legacy, Blades is compiling rich material for his departure from office.

"I will write one song about government. Only one. It will be titled, 'Bureaucracy' but spelled 'burro-cracy,'" he said with a grin, using a Spanish word for donkey and asinine. "I guarantee it will be a hit."

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