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The Pop Life

By Stephen Holden

Ruben Blades's 'Truth'

"Use your brain or someone will use it for you," sings Ruben Blades in "Chameleons," a salsa-driven rock song from his first English-language album, "Nothing but the Truth" (Elektra Records). "These are the times when mediocrity shines/and faith lives undercover," asserts a lyric that indicts shallow political image-making and warns, "Truth has child eyes and a right fielder's arm/ It never fails to get you."

The conviction that popular music ought to confront head on the complexities of modern life - from the harsh political and social realities of Central America to the subtleties of grownup relationships - infuses this very impressive album. The songs' range of subject matter is matched by a musical diversity that runs from a capella rock-and-roll harmonizing to turbulent Latin-flavored rock. "The Hit," a dramatic saga of violent death in the barrio, has the sprawling grandeur of one of Bruce Springsteen's mid-70's mini-epics. "The Calm Before the Storm," one of three collaborations with Lou Reed, echoes the stern, apocalyptic mode of U2. "Ollie's Doo-Wop," a scornful indictment of the Reagan Administration's Central American policy, is ironically cast as a sweet, late-50's street-corner ballad. "The Letter," a wistful pop-jazz samba, affectionately addresses a friend who is dying of AIDS.

Writing and singing in English, the 39-year-old musician, who was born in Panama, has sacrificed none of the fervor and poetic intensity that characterized his two earlier Spanish-language albums. The musical figure he cuts on "Nothing but the Truth" is a charismatic people's poet with a strong political conscience.

"This record was very, very difficult to make," Mr. Blades said in a recent interview. "From the beginning I knew it would be hard to market. At a time when music seems dominated by radio formulas, it's to Elektra Records' credit that they never told me what I could or couldn't do. I personally believe the record is going to be accepted by a public that is more intelligent than the record industry gives it credit for."

In addition to the album's three collaborations with Lou Reed, "Nothing but the Truth" includes two songs written with Elvis Costello.

"In collaborating with Lou and Elvis, we would begin with long conversations about a topic," Mr. Blades recalled. "Once we hit on an approach that interested us, we would begin to write. I was impressed with Elvis's discipline and clarity with which he translated thoughts into words. Working with Lou, every line was dragged out of our hearts in sessions that left us both exhausted.

"There are two themes that kept coming up on this record," Mr. Blades added. "One is the existence of love that is not articulated, and the other is violence. In some ways, that violence is caused by the inability to express affection and be vulnerable. You don't find many songs

like 'The Letter,' that deal with male friendship. But I felt very strongly about what is going on today with AIDS. It's not just testing the immunological defenses of bodies around the world, but our character, our capacity for compassion."

Photo of Reben Blades (Retna/Gary Gershoff)
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