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MUSIC

Trey Songz, OOIIO and Rubén Blades Release New Music

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RUBÉN BLADES

"Tangos" (Sunnyside)



The point of a tango album by Rubén Blades, one of the irreducible creative wellsprings of salsa, might best be illustrated by a new arrangement of his best-known song. Typically, “Pedro Navaja,” a colorful account of a scoundrel’s grave comeuppance, is set in the same punchy, percussive mode as on the classic original recording, which Mr. Blades made with the bandleader Willie Colón for Fania Records in 1978.

The version offered on “Tangos,” Mr. Blades’s elegant new album, sounds courtlier and more insinuating, opening with a shimmery flourish and proceeding in a deft sashay. The vocal performance is wry and confiding, framed by a cool drapery of bandoneón and strings. And a series of upward modulations, deployed in the original for a ratcheting of suspense, feels instead like a glide up a curved staircase — and a nod to an evident touchstone, the Weill-Brecht standard known as “Mack the Knife.”

Whatever lines can usually be drawn between the roles of a statesman and a showman, Mr. Blades has long treated them with studied disregard, insisting on a populist art with sociopolitical implications. “Tangos,” which follows his return to the salsa fold after a five-year cabinet term in his homeland, Panama, can be understood better as another bit of high-minded cultural exchange than as a genre experiment. It shares that much with other albums of his, like “Tiempos,” a chamber-esque foray from 1999, whose philosophical title track once again serves as a closer here.

Mr. Blades is in superlative form as a singer on “Tangos,” often seeming to hold something in reserve so that the natural instinct is to lean toward him. He’s also working with an exquisite musical backdrop designed by Carlos Franzetti, a longtime collaborator originally from Buenos Aires.

Mr. Franzetti made the inspired decision to arrange many of these songs specifically for the Leopoldo Federico Orchestra, a tango ensemble of unimpeachable authority. That mix of traditionalism and free license works handsomely: The interplay between voice and arrangement on “Ligia Elena” suggests a sensuous spin on the dance floor, while “Pablo Pueblo,” another tune from the Fania era, benefits from a statelier pace, allowing its lyrical pathos to breathe. Rather than attempt to emulate the great tango balladeers of yore, Mr. Blades finds ways of making his own music fit the bill. NATE CHINEN