



Rubén Blades. Photo by Eric Jackson

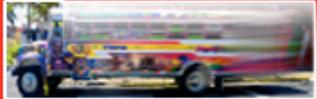
Blades on the person (not the persona)

by Eric Jackson

Rubén Blades --- isn't he the guy who got killed by the chupacabra on The X-Files?

Well, OK. Few educated Latin Americans believe in chupacabras, and almost no gringos of any description do. Yet why do so many otherwise sophisticated people confuse actors with the characters they play, the personalities of entertainers with the personas that they project from the stage? Blame it on show business and the mystiques that it creates as a relatively inexpensive but quite effective form of advertisement, of the "branding" of entertainers if you will. Attribute it to "celebrities" and the many boorish people who think that a person's fame gives others the right to intrude into his or her privacy or make demands that they would never consider making of some unknown individual encountered on the street. In any case, the Panama Jazz Festivals are educational events for up and coming musicians and while most of them will end up teaching or playing clubs in relative obscurity, fame is in the cards for some of them and a vital part of their education is an

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appreciation of the difference between the person and the persona.

Was this specifically what filled an auditorium, largely with young musicians, neither to see and hear Rubén Blades make music nor to show off his stage acting skills, but to be interviewed by Patricia Zarate? Were it no for his fame and persona, which are inextricably linked with his success as an entertainer in ways distinct from who he is, Blades would not have drawn this crowd. But let us not presume an audience of young doofuses --- these bright young kids were interested in Rubén Blades the person and to know if the lessons in his life might apply to some challenges that they might meet along their own roads through show business. There may have even been some in the room looking forward to a career in public affairs and interested in what Blades had to say about that, too.



Rubén Blades was born in Panama City in 1947 and grew up in San Felipe, then on Calle 13 Oeste in Perijil. "When I was a kid it was much quieter, much more tranquil. It was a different Panama."



Patricia Zarate asked him when he got interested in music. "I listened to a lot of radio," he said. "Music was always present."

"Music was not a commercialized product, like now," Blades explained, noting how the DJs of back then were not bound by strict genre playlists, that they might play something by Sinatra, then something from Spain. "There wasn't white music, black music, Latino music...."



"My mother was a singer," Blades explained, and she could play the piano but the places in which he grew up were too small for a piano.

His father was a police officer, but in 1973, he ran into some problems with one Manuel Antonio Noriega, then head of the Guardia Nacional's G-2 unit, or as Omar Torrijos used to describe Noriega, "my gangster." The Blades family relocated to Miami, except that Rubén stayed here to continue his law school studies at the University of Panama.



The law degree, he explained, was not a mere personal accomplishment. "It was a family diploma." Going to school and doing well "was a family duty," something that reflected on "the family's honor."

While Rubén was finishing his studies, his family set up their new residence in Miami --- but is it entirely accurate to describe it as "exile?" His mother was a US citizen, because her father was born in Louisiana. Thus it can be reasonably said that Blades was born into that broad and diverse spectrum that collectively are the Panagringos, a part of it that is culturally much more Pana than Gringo.

Meanwhile, he continued, "my family left Panama in 1973 but I stayed until '74 because I had to work on my thesis." It was about Panama's prisons, work that was hard to do during the dictatorship. "I went to Coiba --- not as a prisoner but as a student.... I interviewed prisoners after their work."

"I passed with good grades, became a lawyer, and left a few days later for Miami. I had a degree that wasn't good for anything."

He sought work with Fania, as a songwriter. By that time he had already composed

Pablo Pueblo, but Fania had no opening for a songwriter, or for a singer. They did have a \$125 a week opening in the mail room, which Blades moved from Florida to New York to take.

"I lived on pizza and soda for two years," he recalled. He kept a phone in his apartment, which nobody ever called. It was for his mother, in case of an emergency.

Finally, someone at Fania discovered the strange situation of somebody who worked in the mail room who could sing and was educated as a lawyer. After a brief return to Panama, Blades came back to New York, got his green card in 1977, and was around when Fania was trying to create new bands. A couple of the labels bandleaders were Willy Colón and Héctor Lavoe, former collaborators starting new formations.

Rubén did a song that Willy liked, El Cantante, and Willy convinced him to give it to Héctor, who made a signature hit and subsequent movie out of it. Meanwhile, the famous collaboration between singer Rubén Blades and trombonist Willy Colón was born. After he started working with Colón, Blades said, "the whole paradigm changed."

His first record had political content --- things like Pablo Pueblo, Plastico and Pedro Navaja --- and did not start out so well in New York City. Salsa up until that time had been mostly "safe" themes like romance and dancing, set to beats derived from Afro-Cuban forms. Singing songs against dictatorship was a commercial problem because much of Latin America was then ruled by dictators. However, the album soon became a hit in Venezuela, caught on in Puerto Rico and off his career went.

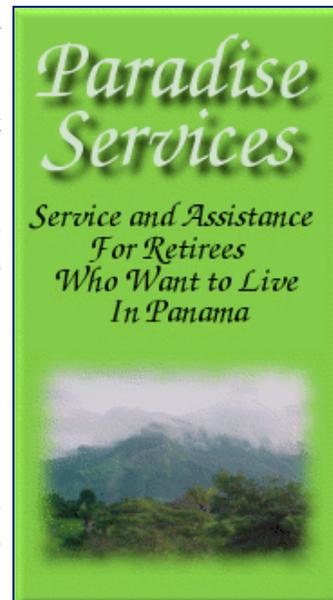
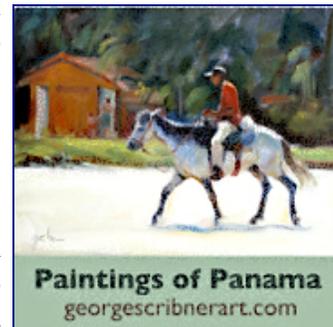
What was it about the process of getting into social themes --- why? was it some sort of strategy? --- Zarate wanted to know.

"I was interested in describing common phenomena," Blades answered. While he said he has nothing against sexual themes, dance music or things without much of a social content, he wanted to sing and compose about "unity in the face of urban life. Nobody was producing that."

Blades said that he does not accept censorship, and in a standard sense he didn't run into much of that in the United States. But there were people who said his music was "too complicated" or "too political." "It wasn't a commercial strategy --- it actually caused me a lot of problems." That was especially the case in Florida, where the Miami Cuban exile leadership actually liked Latin America's right-wing dictatorships of the time, and where Blades was thus called a communist.

The formula didn't package well for instant commercial success. At none of the record labels with which he worked --- Fania, then Eletkra and Sony --- did he have a producer. "It was very difficult." But Blades was playing a different game. His subjects "are human, they have no expiration date --- this was my bet." Although his first Grammy came for Escenas, he cited his later Amor y Control as the example of how his better stuff has had little radio play but has nevertheless grown slowly into noteworthy commercial and cultural success.

With Willy Colón --- and with a bit of experience when younger in Panama, including in English with the Theatre Guild --- Blades got into acting in independent films. The first venture had Colón playing the gangster and Blades as the singer. Then there was a very low-budget black-and-white film, The Super.



After that came the call "to the big leagues." The CBS news magazine show did a profile on him, and with that exposure opened up all manner of possibilities.

And so he went back to school.

Understand that Blades was talking to an audience largely composed of students who formally study in an underdeveloped academic setting where the concept of education is the one sits in a classroom listening to lectures, paying attention and taking notes, memorizes as much of it as possible, regurgitates it at examination time, and after some years of this one receives a piece of paper that certifies a person as educated in something or another --- which the naive then perceive to be a lifelong meal ticket once a job is found in the specified field. However, Blades was also speaking in the context of a jazz festival that is part of a project founded by people who believe that Panamanian education is profoundly broken and who are creating formal and informal opportunities for people to learn outside of the usual setting.

"The process of education never ends," Blades advised the kids and adults in the room. But when he went back to school after his exposure on 60 Minutes, this was one of the formal phases of his education. He went to Harvard Law School and came away with an LLM.

Also with the new exposure and the new opportunities for acting work, Blades became a union man. He joined the Screen Actors Guild, which he said had the best health care benefits of any labor union. One of the few Latinos in the guild at the time, he got a better choice of acting roles. "It gave me a much greater international projection."

Part of that international projection was political, in causes like the 1986 Amnesty International Conspiracy of Hope tour, in an ill-fated 1994 presidential campaign, in five years of as Panama's tourism minister, and in some music with noteworthy lyrics. Blades believes in some things, but not in ideological music: "Generally it isn't honest --- it has to support something." On the one hand, Blades has been a politician, but on the other he thinks that politics contaminates humanity's arguments.

Blades described Tiburon as "an anti-imperialist song," but applicable to whatever country in which it is found, giving as examples China, Russia and the UK in the Malvinas Islands. But particularly in Miami, the tendency for people reading other meanings than his into his work can be a problem. Caminando, he noted, is about a prostitute but when other people do it, the song takes on other meanings. "I have to be very careful, because I can create an emotion I don't know."

It gets all the harder with a shifting point of view. Blades was 17, living in the barrio, when he wrote Pablo Pueblo. "When I was 20-something, my economic reality was completely changed." Then when he took five years off to serve in government, "people were asking 'Is Rubén Blades dead?' --- not quite." Now, back in private life, "I have to go to the trenches again." But that's just him, and just at the moment. To the adults and minors in the audience, he advocated important changes via government and the need for a "vocation of service."

If we don't replace the corrupt, Blades argued, they will stay on in their positions of power. He called for more people to get involved in government, but not because it's a lucrative career. While he said that his five years in government were necessary for him, they were not for the money, the he left politics with debts, but less egotistical. On a national and personal level, he disputed the inferiority complex: "In Panama we have a lot of capable people, more who are capable than who are incapable."

There is a tour upcoming, and this or that acting gig. Except for those five years off, there long have been. But what is Rubén Blades up to in his life these days? He said that he's working on a documentary about the role of music in people's lives in different countries. "I have to write," he said. Part of that process is reading, about lots of things. He noted Jonathan Weiner's Love, Time and Memory, a book about genetics, as some of his recent reading material.

In those cross-cultural explorations, he has noticed Punjabi music that sounds like it has a merengue beat --- which prompted an exchange with Patricia Zarate about the connections between India and Spain by way of the Roma as

cultural influences from the former to the latter. Blades also noted the modern effects of the ancient Celtic migration to Europe, from which both the Irish and Spain's Galicians (among others) descend and which echoes in the music of today.

So did the kids get it? Will they be more inclined to be public citizens? Will their curiosity range far afield, while still taking notice of that which is near? Will they read things other than what gets assigned to them in school? Those seemed to be the main lessons of the day, even if nobody was giving a written exam in which the Blades lecture counted for 25 percent of someone's grade.

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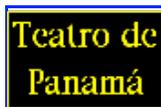
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