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Rubén Blades Q&A: Salsa's Crossover Pioneer Gets Emotional on 'Tangos'

By Judy Cantor-Navas | May 28, 2014 3:42 AM EDT



Rubén Blades takes an emotional turn with “Tangos,” a set of versions of his songs, including “Pedro Navaja,” “Pablo Pueblo” and “Juana Maya,” recorded with Argentine tango musicians. Blades brings tango’s characteristic drama to his classics without going over the top, for an album set to exceed expectations of the concept when it’s released on June 24 through Sunnyside Records.

The Panamanian singer/songwriter, actor and activist, still best known to many for the crossover success of his 1978 track "Pedro Navaja," recently announced that at the end of 2016 he will stop performing salsa music on tour. In a note on his Website, he wrote that he will continue to perform salsa concerts in Panama "specifically for tourists," adding that no other artist will be permitted to perform his salsa material, "even in tribute" to him. He also revealed he plans to return to politics in his native Panama, where he served as Minister of Tourism from 2004-2009.

Artists from Rubén Blades to Enrique Iglesias Voice Support for Venezuela, Criticize Gov't

Still, Blades told Billboard that he is currently recording three new salsa albums, with no definite plans for their release. In July, he'll appear at the Hollywood Bowl's Americas and Americans Festival, where he'll be backed by the LA Philharmonic conducted by Gustavo Dudamel. And in the fall, Blades will perform with Wynton Marsalis' Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra in New York. No tour dates with the musicians on "Tangos" have been scheduled.

Reached by phone, Blades spoke about the emotional power of tango, the eternal appeal of salsa, and the "90-year-old Cuban man" who lives inside of him.

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Billboard: Why a tango album?

Rubén Blades: There's something about the tango that brings even more emotion out of the lyrics. When I was singing the songs I felt a different type of emotion, I went somewhere else with the lyrics, even though I had written them and recorded them previously. A song works because of the lyrics of the song, not because of the rhythm or the genre, and a song can be approached in a more lyrical way in tango than in salsa. If you have a salsa song that can work as a tango song, than you can have a Caribbean sit down and speak to a South American and find things in common. It establishes a common ground.

You appeared in Robert Duvall's 2002 movie "Assassination Tango" – but what has your relationship with tango music been?

Tango was very popular in Panama at the time when I was growing up. In the fifties in Panama, the radio stations played all types of music. I was never particularly a part of the following of tango, I just liked it...most of all I recognized that the urban content and the approach seemed very familiar and very connected to the songs that I was doing, the kind of songs that I wanted to write -- the songs about the street. Although tango is pretty much a sentimental view of everything, whether it's a relationship between a man and a woman or a man and his mortality. The first time I played was in Buenos Aires was in 1983. The dictatorship was in position. We played with [rock group] Los Abuelos de la Nada at Obras Sanitarias stadium.

Tango singers are a pretty exclusive club. Did you find the experience intimidating at all?

I have to say that everyone was wondering how the whole thing was going to work. What I knew I wasn't going to do was I wasn't going to sound like (tango icon) Carlos Gardel, or pretend that I was a tango singer. As for the singing itself, it's a lot more difficult to sing tango because it has a different feel to it, the phrasing is different. What was difficult was to be able to express the song without having emotion overwhelm me. Because some of the things the [musicians] were doing were very emotional. I sang the songs live with the orchestra. It broke my heart when I heard [the music].

You recorded in Argentina?

We recorded at different times, in different places. We recorded in Argentina with Leopoldo

Federico and his orchestra -- he is a point of reference for tango argentino. An 85-year-old gentleman who has played with the best, who has been there through a very important part of the development of tango, so he lends an immediate credibility to what we were trying to do. [Blades' longtime collaborator] Carlos Franzetti was the producer and arranger. He is more known for jazz. I'm more known for salsa music, so I'm sure everyone at the beginning wasn't sure what was going to come out of that.

What other projects do you have in the works?

I'm working on three salsa albums now. Maybe they can be put out after I die or whatever, but I've just been recording, we'll see. One is a re-recording of "Cantares del Subdesarrollo" with brass. Another is all-new songs. And one is dedicated to my alter ego. He's the black guy that lives in every one of us. Mine is a 90-year-old-Cuban guy who's always sore at me because he wants to sing and I don't let him.

It's the 50th Anniversary of Fania Records, the original New York salsa label on which you recorded the album "Siembra" with Willie Colon, regarded as one of the most important Latin music albums of all time. Are you surprised at the longevity of the music that you and other Fania artists recorded in the Sixties and Seventies?

I'm not surprised, because of the quality of what they did. There was quality, there was excitement, there was talent; there was understanding of what was being done. And it's urban music. As long as the city exists the need for this type of songs will exist. The only difference is some people just use the songs for escapism. I used the songs also to document and confront the reality. Others just wanted to have a good time Friday and Saturday night before going back to work on Monday. But the songs all reflect the reality of urban existences, so therefore I'm not surprised that they have lasted so long. They will last as long as people last.
