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JUNE 21, 1987

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Dream

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EXECUTIVE EDITOR Susan Toepfer
ASSOCIATE EDITOR Jay Maeder
ART DIRECTOR Susan Reinhardt
PRODUCTION Harriet Lyons
ADVERTISING SALES MANAGER John C. Lescott (212) 210-1971

CAN'T SIT STILL

Ruben Blades, man, he's got things to do.

By DAVID BROWNE

MAYBE IT'S HIS CHARISMA, maybe it's just the open door, but no sooner has Ruben Blades settled into his bathroom-sized dressing room at the upper East Side studios of David Brenner's "Nightlife" than the parade begins. There's the "Nightlife" staff member, clipboard in hand, who exclaims, "Rehearsals were fabulous! The whole building is buzzing!" She's followed by the technician who's worked with Blades on other talk shows, the affable record-company executive, and the old Hispanic friend who exalts, "Damn, what a good year!" Members of Blades' band, Seis del Solar (Six from the Tenement), who will be performing with him tonight, shyly drift in and out.

Most surprising of all, though, is nostril-flaring Brat Packer Judd Nelson, also here to tape a "Nightlife" segment. "Ruben!" he exclaims, hugging Blades, then congratulates the salsa singer on his December marriage.

As taping time grows near, Blades is left alone in his room. Dressed in pleated black trousers and a black shirt, and sporting an incoming beard, he cracks open a pack of Marlboro Lights and calmly awaits the taping of yet another talk show. That he's hip to this backstage schmoozing shouldn't come as a surprise, not even to those who caught him on the salsa circuit in the mid-'70s. Still, Judd Nelson?

"People would be surprised at

how many people I know," he says in his sage manner. "Redford said I know more people than he does. He was only kidding, but I know what he meant."

Ruben Blades has made a career out of walking a very fine line. A streetwise Panamanian who left an attorney job in his native country to sing salsa in New York, he is also an actor, writer and intellectual. Last October, when he and his then-fiancée—blond, 25-year-old, California-bred actress Lisa Lebenzon—sublet his longtime upper West Side apartment and moved to a small apartment in West Hollywood, many were surprised. They shouldn't have been, for Blades does nothing but think ahead: to a career in movies, to eventually running for government office in his native country, to playing prestigious Carnegie Hall this Saturday.

He is an expert at gathering disparate forces around him. In New York in the late '70s, Blades wrote songs that sounded like typical salsa, but with lyrics that were something else: "El Tiburón" (The Shark) criticized U.S. foreign policy, while "Pedro Navaja" told of a barrio murder. By 1984, when he signed with the big-time Elektra Records and enrolled in Harvard Law School to earn a master's in international law, he had both hard-core salsa fans and effete academics on his side.

The advances continued. In the fall of '85, he released his second

Elektra album, "Escenas" (featuring a duet with Linda Ronstadt), and captivated film critics with a charismatic leading role in "Crossover Dreams." Last year, he appeared at the "Crack-Down" concerts at Madison Square Garden and at the Amnesty International benefit at Giants Stadium. His name popped up on hip albums by Lou Reed ("Mistrial") and Little Steven ("Freedom—No Compromise") and on the "Sun City" single and video. He landed a supporting role in Richard Pryor's recent "Critical Condition" and was signed to the part of a New Mexican sheriff in the Robert Redford-directed "The Milagro Beanfield War," set for release this fall.

No wonder, in light of all these projects, that the release of his latest album, "Agua De Luna," based on the short stories of Nobel Prize-winning writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, almost seems incidental, as does the Grammy which Blades won for Best Tropical Latin Performance.

"One of the things I've done in my life is to move in as many directions as I feel my talent can take me," he comments. "I'm not gonna become limited to 'this is what you're gonna do, this is it.' I know that has created confusion for those who market talent, but I'd rather do that than become the flavor of the month, and then be dismissed for the next flavor."

Yet, by embracing Hollywood, Ruben Blades may be entering the

'My biggest enjoyment is thinking of the future and what I am going to be doing once I go back to Panama. This is fun—I'm having a lot of fun breaking down stereotypes.'

ice-cream parlor. Naturally, this creates questions about crossing over, selling out. He emphatically dismisses such talk. "I've been hearing that for so long. When I went to Harvard it was, 'Now he's gone, never coming back. He's gonna go to Wall Street.' Then it takes them two years to say, 'Oh, he hasn't done it yet, I don't think he's gonna do that.'"

Or, as he says in his dressing room, "Nobody in Hollywood has called me 'Baby.' Nobody."

Then again, nobody in Hollywood is calling him—at least not on this sunny New York morning, when Blades, having returned briefly to the city, is rehearsing a new role: actor stuck in rundown Central Park West hotel room (the one with the

bathroom door that doesn't close all the way), waiting for a phone call confirming whether or not he will be co-starring with Whoopi Goldberg in her next film, "Fatal Beauty."

Close up, Blades' 38-year-old face looks doughy and his hair is wavy but thinning, yet his eyes are oval-shaped and probing. He's dressed in baggy blue jeans and a navy-blue workshirt under a Sundance Institute sweat shirt, the latter a reminder of the four months he spent in New Mexico filming "Milagro." (Sundance is Redford's company.) He is talking about the film as, on cue, the phone rings. It is not the call he has been waiting for. "One thing I really don't like in life is indecision," he snaps. "That really, really bothers me."

While he waits, there is time to talk about his other concerns, chiefly whether his long-standing band will hold it together while he pursues his film career. "Agua De Luna" had to be recorded in two weeks, between "Milagro" breaks, an experience he calls "very uncomfortable." And there is the English-language album he will soon record, for which he will co-write songs with Lou Reed, Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello and possibly Paul Simon. It's his first clear stab at a market that has been even more stubborn than Hollywood—the rock

continued on next page

PHOTO BY DEBORAH FEINGOLD/OUTLINE



audience. The new album, a semi-concept work meant "to represent the feeling of a city musically," may finally cross that barrier. (But just to make sure he doesn't wander too far, he says he'll follow that project with "Antecedent," a homage to his roots, with horns replacing the synthesizers used by Seis del Solar.)

"It's not a cynical move, like Julio Iglesias recording in English," comments Howard Thompson, the British A&R director of Elektra Records. "It should be fantastically interesting, like Paul Simon's album is. We want to get people where they think."

"Ruben's almost too good to be true," adds collaborator Lou Reed. "He has very ambitious goals in terms of what the songs are going to be about."

But what Ruben Blades is most eager to discuss today is not music but movies—and politics. He sees "Milagro," based on a John Nichols novel about rural New Mexicans who combat developers, as having a dual role. "What I think Redford did was to present a story in a way where it would become a showcase for Latins, for Latin actors and actresses, and allow us to work on a project with Anglos that is big budget," Blades says. "It's not gonna be an earth-shattering, barrier-breaking project, but I got to work in a role where I don't have to be cutting heroin or coke in some seedy apartment."

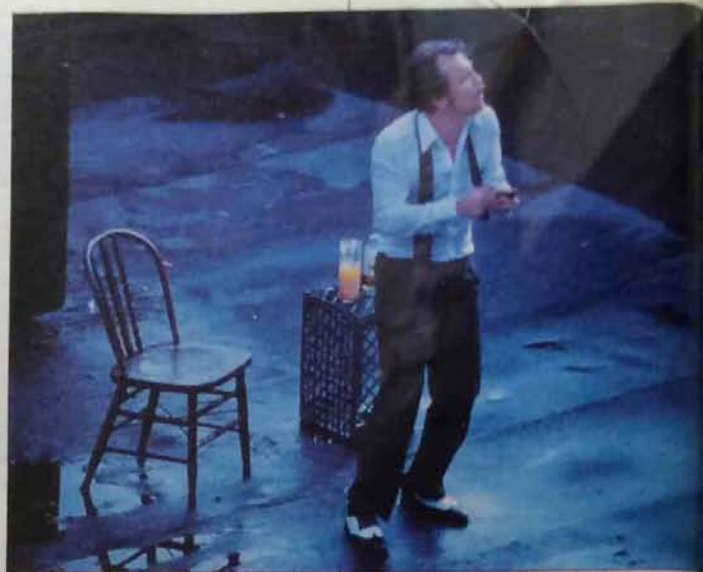
This, he says, is one of the princi-

pal reasons he moved to Hollywood. "I had a lot of questions in terms of why it is that there's not more of a Latin presence in film and why, when there is, it's the guy who breaks through the second-floor window to steal your Sony. I really feel it's my duty to push and see if we can get roles other than junkies or drug dealers, and I've been very vocal about it. The Hollywood establishment today would never dare put a black in a position where blacks were being placed in the '40s, because they know everybody would jump on them. Yet, today, we have the Latins. 'Oh, you need a low-life or a whore or some Latin fool?'—there we are."

At the same time, he acknowledges that his temporary relocation was not entirely altruistic. "In reality, to work with Robert Redford would allow me another step in the ladder in terms of visibility. If I do a good job, I'm gonna be noticed."

This is Ruben Blades the politician, the man angling to please all sides while holding onto his integrity, vision and pride. It is a role he has been gearing up for all his life. One of five children born to a musician father and a radio-actress mother, he learned English from Elvis Presley records, began to sing American rock with Panamanian bands—and meanwhile decided that eventually he would run for public office.

Following the 1964 Canal Zone riot, which left 21 Panamanians and



three American soldiers dead in a dispute over the 1903 canal treaty, Blades bitterly turned away from American pop, turned to Latin music and entered the University of Panama. When the school closed after a student rebellion in '69, he made his first trip to New York; the University reopened, he returned to earn a degree, and then landed a job as a Bank of Panama lawyer. Finally, in 1974, he came to Manhattan to stay, taking a job in the mail room of Fania Records and joining the bands of Ray Barretto and, later, Willie Colon.

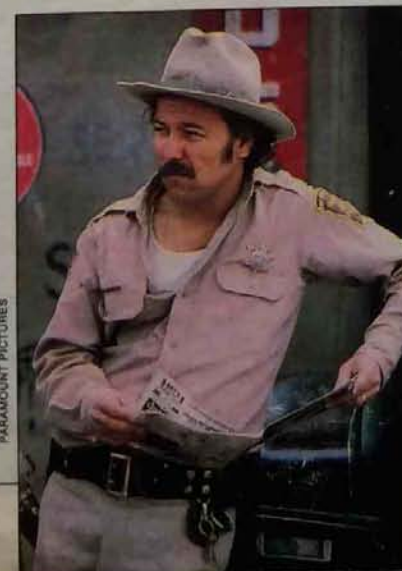
It's not the least surprising that Blades eventually plans to run for office. The man can talk his way around anything, and charm your pants off in the process. He is unquestionably sincere, even when using the corniest lines to describe his political ambitions. "I can tell you that the biggest enjoyment I have is the enjoyment I feel, the widening smile I feel inside of me"—he puts his hands on his stomach—"whenever I think of the future and what I am going to be doing once I go back to Panama. This is fun—I'm having a lot of fun breaking down stereotypes. But the biggest smile is the one I'm gonna get once all of this is put into perspective."

But that is all in the future. Right now, Blades wants some immediate gratification via a phone call from Hollywood, and it's not forthcoming. "Actors, all they do is wait," he says. "I have other things to do. I



'ROUND RUBEN

Counterclockwise, from top left: Blades won critical raves as Rudy Veloz, the singer who forsakes his Latin roots, in the 1985 film "Crossover Dreams"; his second album, "Escenas," followed, featuring a duet with Linda Ronstadt; last year he was the orderly who became Richard Pryor's sidekick in "Critical Condition"; this year he's a rural New Mexican sheriff battling developers in the Robert Redford-directed "The Milagro Beanfield War"; he sings salsa for migrant workers in New Jersey; and in Hollywood he talks rock with Elektra president Bob Krasnow as wife Lisa takes it all in.



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cannot sit around to see what's gonna happen with a film. I got other things to do.

"I'm telling you, man—I'm glad I got something else to do, because the waiting around is..." His thought is interrupted by the ringing of the phone. It's his office. No news yet. Blades harumphs and waits some more.

"Well, we got a guy on the show tonight," begins David Brenner, "he's like a Renaissance man." Following that auspicious intro, pianist Oscar Hernandez pounds into "Muevete (Move On)," a cooking number from Blades' "Escenas" album that calls for nations of the world to "finish off evil." Blades, looking sharp in his black suit, starts singing. Slowly, the other instruments come in—synthesizers, percussion, harmony singers—until the song kicks into third gear. Blades' shoulders start moving with the music, the feet start tapping; he is transformed from a studious sophisticate into a sexy Latin singer, and all eyes are on him. In the darkness to the left of the stage, Brenner, seated at his desk, bobs his head with the music.

"I gotta ask you something," Brenner begins the interview. "One of the ambitions I have in life is to hear a Spanish song without the word 'corazon' in it." That inane question aside, the interview goes smoothly. The audience is clearly on Blades' side; in fact, when the taping

ends, they swarm the set, and Blades patiently signs every last autograph.

Back in the dressing room, as Blades is wrapping his black jacket back in a plastic bag, a "Nightlife" staffer pulls the "Ruben Blades" sign from the door. "Do you want this?" she asks.

"Oh, yes, Ruben will want to keep that," says his wife Lisa, stuffing it into her bag.

One is reminded of something the singer/actor said earlier. "We're talking, I'm telling you these things, you're like, 'Ooh, wow, what a guy.' The bottom line is you follow my background. You're gonna be moving on, and in three years or one year from now, we'll see each other again. And I won't have a pointed shirt and shades and I won't be saying to you, 'Hey, David, baby, how are you? Let's do lunch.' You can tell when somebody changes like that."

But with his suave, articulate charm, will we be able to tell? Ultimately, that remains the puzzle of Ruben Blades. A few days after the Brenner taping, he shoots back to L.A. to begin work on "Fatal Beauty" (yes, the call came through). More work in Hollywood, but still the talk of heading a South American nation via a union of students and workers. Will he pull it off? Like Ruben Blades in his hotel room, we'll have to wait for the answer. ■

David Brozine writes the Monday Sounds column for *The News*.