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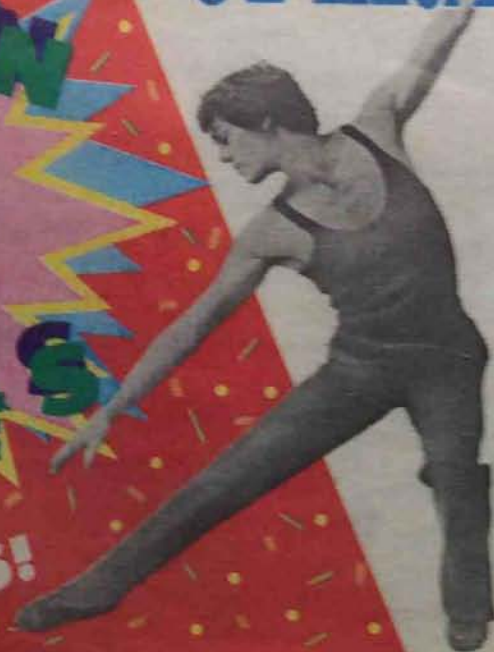
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**RUBEN
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INTO
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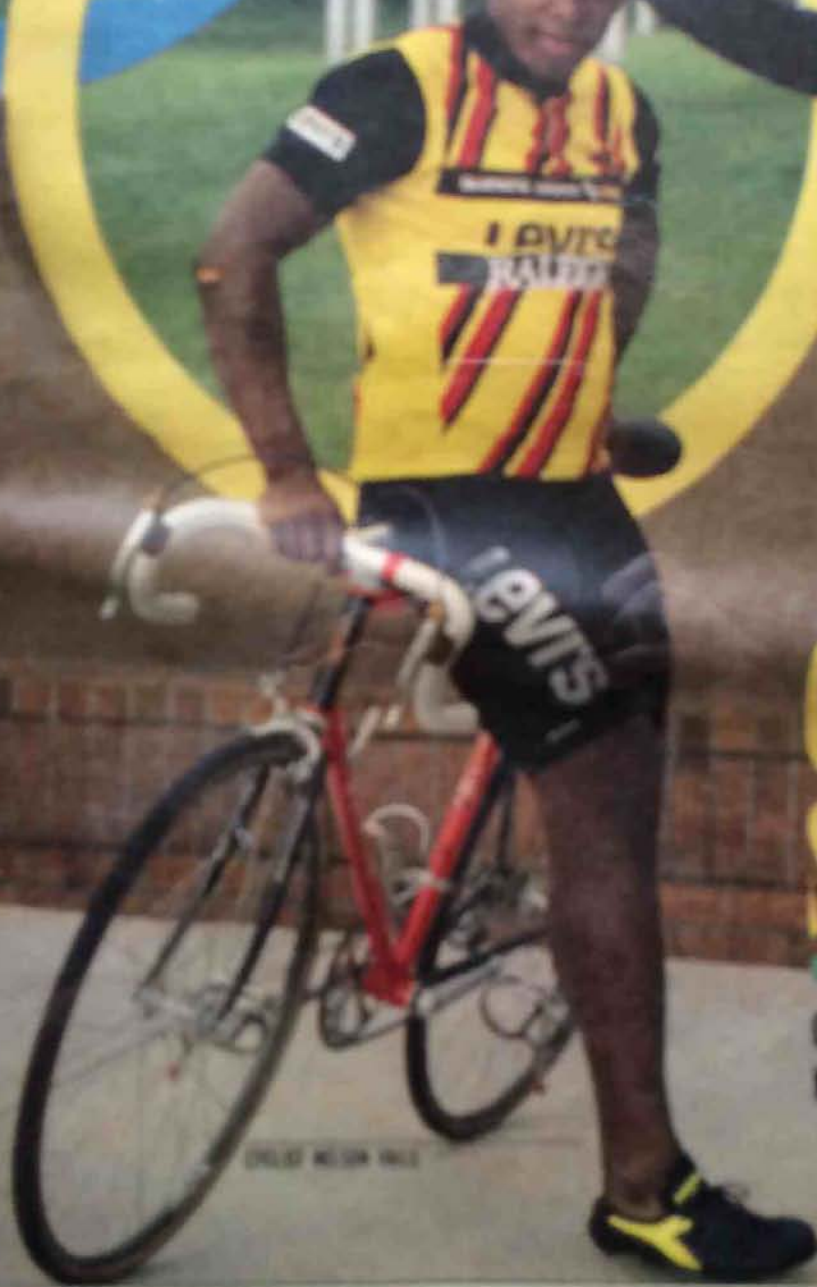
In Leisure

magazine

July 22, 1984

New York Times

RUBEN BLADES
COOKIN' WITH SALSA



GOOD SPORTS

OLYMPIANS YOU
NEVER HEARD OF

PHOTO BY WILSON HILL

TUNING UP



PHOTO BY KEN KOROTKIN

SOMETIME IN THE mid-1990s, when he's about 45 years old, Ruben Blades hopes to run for president of Panama. He might do it sooner if he didn't have other things to do first, like consolidating his position as one of the world's most popular salsa singers and getting a degree from the Harvard Law School.

Blades is to salsa today what Bob Dylan was to folk music in the '60s, or Willie Nelson to country music in the '70s. He may not always sell the most records, and he may trigger debates about commercialism and authenticity, but no one denies that his work lies very near the heart of a major musical form.

At a time when Julio Iglesias and Menudo are making Hispanic music popular and even a bit trendy, Blades does it harder and better; instead of homogenized pop, he retains the jazz textures and Latin rhythms of the music's Afro-Cuban roots, and reinforces them with lyrics which move past the genre's traditional "let's party" approach into social protest and poetry.

Blades' string of gold and platinum albums, some recorded with Willie Colon, goes back to 1977, and he's now planning perhaps his most ambitious project: an album based on eight short stories of Gabriel Garcia Marquez ("One Hundred Years of Solitude").

All this has happened, of course, largely within the Hispanic market, and although it's estimated there will be 40 million Hispanics in the U.S. by 1990, anyone who wants to be very big in the world's biggest market must cross over ethnic and industry lines. That, therefore, is Blades' next step, and no one's betting he won't do it.

Enrique Fernandez, Latin music editor of *Billboard*, sums up Blades this way: "Like Dylan, Lennon and McCartney, who composed literary pop music that reached a large mass of newly educated people, Blades has fans among university students

RUBEN BLADES MAY BE THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR SALSA SINGER. HE'S CERTAINLY THE ONLY ONE SEEKING THE PRESIDENCY OF PANAMA.

BY DAVID HERSHKOVITS

and the educated who listen because it satisfies their literary side. His appeal is broader than among those who normally would follow salsa. He's good looking, a talented songwriter and well-educated, a very rare combination in any branch of pop music."

Blades' first crossover step was modest: a single song, "Tu Carino," in the movie "Beat Street." A bigger effort is his first English-language album, due out this summer, and although he modestly says he cannot yet write songs in English, there's no indication the English-speaking audience can expect any different (or softer) material than he's been doing all along.

His first major-label release in America, a Spanish-language album called "Buscando America" ("Searching for America," on Elektra), tells of urban Hispanic life from the South Bronx to Tierra del Fuego. Stark vignettes of "Despariciones" who vanished under Latin American dictatorships, girls contemplating abortion and priests killed by masked gunmen cut through politics to the human tragedy.

Songs and real life, to Blades, are connected—and even the lan-

guage in which he sings has socio-political implications.

Growing up in Panama in the '50s and early '60s, he recalls, he sang the songs of Buddy Holly and the Beatles. "I wasn't a TV kid. Everything we had was the movies and the radio. I saw all the Jane Powell and Busby Berkeley musicals. We were watching an America we took literally to exist as such. A place where everything was always right. Everything was in Technicolor. Everybody had a car. Everything always had a happy ending.

"Everybody grew up wanting to be a North American."

Until 1964, that is, when 21 students were killed and nearly 500 wounded by U.S. Marines in the Canal Zone. "That stopped us in our tracks," says Blades. "I started really examining for the first time and I discovered a lot of stuff. The

period coincided with the Civil Rights movement here and I saw pictures of dogs biting blacks because they were walking in a town. We never knew these things. We didn't see them in the movies. After '64, when we got our ass kicked, we started to be more informed."

One consequence, for Blades, was no more singing American songs. "Personally, I like Sinatra very much, still do, still remember some of his standards. But after we had all the dead and wounded, the people of my country would have died if I had continued to worship (the U.S.) without asking questions of this culture. It would have been totally out of line for me to sing English songs and pretend like nothing had happened."

His present careful steps toward crossover, then, are actually a re-crossover in a sense, and the truth is, Blades has never rejected English (or, for that matter, Americans—his

objection, he says, is to misguided foreign policy). He speaks English fluently; he has lived in New York for the last 10 years. "It would be foolish to cut myself off to culture," he says, and adds that even when he moves back to Panama, "I'll never leave New York totally. New York is like my girl."

If Blades' emotions seem conflicting, he's got the background for it. His grandfather was a Louisiana boy who went to Cuba with Teddy Roosevelt during the Spanish-American War, met a Cuban woman and stayed. One of their 22 children, Blades' mother, went to Panama as a teenager, met a man and stayed.

It's Blades' paternal grandmother, however, who made the strongest impression on him—and who, in fact, seems to have shaped much of his life.

"She was a very interesting, very special woman. She was obsessed with culture. She taught me how to read (using *Illustrated Comics*) when I was 4 or 5. She was a vegetarian in days when people weren't even dreaming about nutritious values of food. She was into Eastern philosophy and yoga.

"She married twice, divorced twice. She sent her daughters to school, didn't send her men because she didn't have enough money and figured that women needed education more than men. She was a painter. She wrote poetry. She wrote a play about Montezuma. She was one of the first women to graduate from high school in Panama."

Through her, he says, "I was always pretty much into culture. And that's why I think I ended up going to law school. She taught me the principles of justice and everything."

In a larger sense, she also taught him the general value of preparation. Nothing that Blades does is gratuitous; everything is pointed directly toward one goal: returning to Panama with the tools to shape his future.

After a summer tour of Europe, including a stop at the Montreux Jazz Festival, he will move to Boston in the fall to begin classes at the Harvard Law School. He already has degrees enabling him to practice in New York and Panama; these

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new courses will give him an advanced degree in international law.

As he talks about this in his upper West Side bachelor's pad, an interesting contrast pops up. Next to the neat stack of Harvard catalogs and applications is the latest National Lampoon, and it turns out Blades has a nearly complete collection back to 1973. Same with Mad magazine and Classics Illustrated. As he explains it, however, serious legal studies and pop culture are both incorporated into his master plan. It's called keeping in touch with youth.

"Twenty-one percent of Panama's population is 21 or younger," he says. "There is need of leadership there that people who are going to be voting 10 years from now can identify with. I'll be 45 then. I think I'll be ready to get involved in political office. What I need to do in the process is what I'm doing: this music and establishing myself on a popular base."

"I must also at the same time re-establish my credentials as a professional so I'm not going to be chastised or chased by people saying, 'He's only a musician.' Are you gonna have a guy sing your inflation down or sing your problems down? I'll have credentials and good credentials."

The whole idea of popular entertainer-as-national leader is not one Americans can chuckle at, of course, and indeed, Blades' political ambitions are not as far-fetched as they might at first seem.

In Latin America, it is not unusual for poets and others to participate in politics. Pablo Neruda, the celebrated Chilean poet, was a member of Salvador Allende's cabinet. Ernesto Cardenal, a respected poet before the Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua, holds a ministerial post in their government now.

Blades, meanwhile, visits Panama frequently and writes for newspapers there. He's outspoken in a way many South Americans cannot afford to be, through articles, appearances and songs, and for his trouble he receives the usual round of death threats. His response is brave, but not foolish; he will not, for instance, accept invitations to perform in El Salvador. "I don't want some guy with a mask to come

and shoot me because he doesn't like what I think."

The Corso, a well-known salsa club on the upper East Side, has a look of suburban opulence, with velvets and burgundies, gilded fixtures and high-priced drinks. It caters to a working-class crowd of Latinos: couples on dates, singles dressed to kill. Tonight, Panamanians, Puerto Ricans and other people from all over Central and South America are New Yorkers here.

Blades, running late when he walks in, stops at a couple of tables for brief hellos en route to his dressing room. It's a rare city performance date for him; he doesn't play clubs here much, he says, because of the low pay.

When he starts to sing, the audience is obviously familiar with his tunes. Some sing along and dance, others listen to the lyrics. "Desapariciones," for instance:

*Somebody tell me if you seen my husband, the woman asked
His name is Ernesto X; he is 40 years old, he works as a watchman in a used car dealership
He wore a dark shirt and light pants
He left the night before yesterday and he is not back yet*

This is serious stuff, fitting material for a man who calls himself a "people's poet," and the connection between song and life is underscored when Blades' playful between-songs banter is interrupted by a fellow Panamanian who expresses concern for his safety when he speaks out like that.

But then, personal exchanges are not uncommon in salsa clubs, where musicians tend to mingle with their audience. Later, as Blades shakes hands, chats and signs autographs, he flashes a friendly, sincere manner which should serve him as well in politics as it has in music.

"We just love him," says Donna Stewart of the Panamanian Consulate. "He's like a roving ambassador for Panama. He is very highly regarded by the government."

Someday, if all goes well, he may be the government. □

David Herzkovits is a New York freelance writer.

TALES OF NEW YORK

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He hung up, and thought: What? I'm not a reporter any more. I can't leave the city desk unmanned. *I'll be right over?* He glanced at the wall clock: 3:37. The desperate caller's voice moved around his head. What the hell, Wilson thought. Why not? He called the station house closest to the address, gave a woman cop the information, then picked up a sheaf of copy paper, folded it in three the way he'd done it for so many years long ago, and shoved a handful of pencils in his pocket.

Then he was out in the rain, head down, the wind blowing hard off the river. There were no cabs. He walked, his shoes swelling, his hair plastered to his skull. When he arrived at the building, a four-story tenement, he saw no cops. Maybe they've been here already, he thought; maybe they came in, colared the guy, and are cooling him down at the station. Maybe not, too. Take a look. Go ahead. The vestibule door was unlocked, and Wilson moved upstairs through a narrow hallway, dimly lit with flickering blue fluorescent bulbs. He could smell a backed-up sewer, decaying garbage. On the top floor, he stopped, squinting to see 3-B in the darkness. He walked slowly to the end of the hall.

Then the door was jerked open, and a small wiry black man was there, with a pistol aimed at Wilson's chest.

"I'm the reporter," Wilson said quietly. "I talked to you a little while ago."

"How do I know you a reporter, huh? How I know that?"

Wilson showed him a press card, trying to control his hands.

"Get in here," the man said, and shoved the gun into Wilson's kidneys. They walked into a cramped three-room apartment, where chairs, a table, lamps, pictures were scattered everywhere, as if they'd been assaulted. A bar of yellow light came from the bathroom, and in the light, he could see a 10-year-old girl sitting on the floor, shivering in a bathrobe. Wilson took out the copy paper and a pencil.

"That's your daughter?"

"Yeah, she was left here all alone, with that whore out running around. I come here, and she's all alone. That ain't right."

Wilson steadied his nerves with the fundamentals: names, ages, occupations. Married, separated or divorced? What school do you go to, sweetheart? What time did your mother go out? How long have you been separated, Mister Butler? The man talked angrily, waving the gun, which looked to Wilson like a .22. The girl whispered. Then the phone rang. Butler's eyes widened and he hurried to the kitchen, yanked at the wall phone, shouted "Who's this?"

Wilson glanced into the street. Three squad cars were there in the rain, blue lights twirling.

"Yeah, I don't care, man!" Butler shouted into the phone. "You better come in shootin', 'cause I ain't comin' out, you hear me? I'll shoot everybody! I'll—" He turned to Wilson. "You called them! You called the damned cops! You called the man!"

Wilson suddenly grabbed the girl's hand, and whirled, moving her to the door. "Run!" he shouted. "Get out of here!"

The girl frantically opened the door, and a bullet slammed into the plaster wall, and then Wilson was bent over, rushing clumsily after her. He heard Butler screaming, he heard a papping sound, he heard voices on the hall, he heard a girl crying; then he heard an old editor shouting "copy boy, copy boy," heard Chinese bugles in the darkness; heard the sizzle of electricity in the Sing Sing death house; heard sirens and fire engines, artillery and ambulances; saw a million flash bulbs blinking, saw old men weeping as Roosevelt's hearse went by, saw Nixon smile a wolf's smile, saw hoodlum's stone eyes and Lee Harvey Oswald and junkies and Sugar Ray Robinson and cops at a station house and Castro at the Hotel Theresa and a floater being pulled from a river and a jumper on the Williamsburgh Bridge; and then more paps, and whiteness, and a ringing sound; and then the reporter saw and heard and felt nothing at all.

Pete Hamill's Tales of New York appears every Sunday in the Magazine.