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# ONE ON ONE FAMMA

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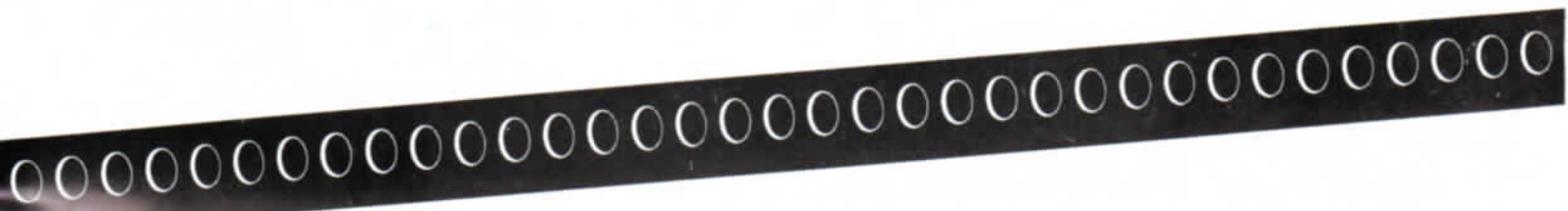
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EXCLUSIVE:  
RUBEN BLADES  
the artist who would  
be president



# RUBEN BLADES



by **Robert Dominguez**

If there is one person in the entertainment industry who can be labeled a modern-day Renaissance Man, it would have to be Ruben Blades. Never mind the hip-swinging, elbow-flying ecstasy this Panamanian salsaer elicits from a concert crowd, Blades is also a formidable and respected actor. It seems like he's in every other Hollywood release, appearing in at least four films within the last year-and-a-half and scoring the music for a fifth. He recently did a one-night stand with his band at The Ritz in New York City and was seen in April in *One Man's War* on HBO. Blades is also producing a film in Panama for which he has written the screenplay and plans to direct.

On top of that seemingly exhausting schedule, Ruben Blades is also a driven patriot. He is actively involved in Panamanian politics and makes no secret of his burning ambition to run for president of his homeland. His international exposure as an artist and his Harvard law degree are assets that he feels should help him realize his goal.

It was tough, but Fama finally caught up with one of the hardest working men in show business as Blades was taking a break from rehearsing with his band in a Westside studio. He was a receptive and willing subject, eager to discuss his artistic career and his political ambitions, but that easy smile and gentle demeanor could not conceal the fiery drive within him.

*For a long time you've made your living as a singer, and now you're a respected actor. How hard was it to make that change?*

"The hard thing about the business was that in order to be an actor I had to leave the music behind. It's hard because acting has its own different set of rules. You spend a lot of time waiting because the actual process of the work itself is very interrupted, as opposed to when you perform and do a concert in two hours where you

play and you're out. Acting is weeks of being in character and you don't see the immediate results. The satisfaction isn't the same as what I get from music."

*Does it frustrate you as an artist?*

"No, it doesn't, because I do get to express myself, but it's very different. And I'm very sorry that I can't do both things. One will have to be done at the expense of the other and that's tough."

*So will your singing career suffer as a result?*

"It has suffered in that I spent most of last year working in films and I didn't do music. As a result, the fans are deprived, and the band does not play. That's the tough part -- either I'm acting and I have to leave music, or I'm in music and I have to leave acting."

*You're one of the few Latin artists that has been able to successfully cross over to the American mainstream. Do you consider yourself an inspiration for other Latin performers attempting to do the same?*

"I believe that everything you do in life you have a student for. Everybody is always learning from what you do and what you don't do. Since we have very few people within the Latino community that have achieved a national standing, whether in arts or politics, people do follow-up and study closely those who, like myself, have acquired a certain standing nationally or internationally. So whether you want it or not, you are an example. I am very aware of that and I try to conduct myself in the best possible way so I can achieve an influence on others."

*You can be considered a modern-day Renaissance man, with your successes as a lawyer, musician, actor, writer and producer. What drives you to succeed?*

"If I had to come up with one answer, it's that I am trying to destroy some stereotypes. That's the connecting link between all the different things that I do. We all have a duty, to ourselves and to our community, to express ourselves, whether it is politically or artistically or as a human being. I also think that

some of us have an obligation, because of our background, to serve the best we can in different categories in order to destroy the idea that you cannot do certain things because you are from a certain geographical place or you are from a certain background. I have never made my world small or let people make it small. I try to challenge myself to bring the best out of me, always."

*Do you think we are witnessing a change for the Latino society here in the United States?*



"Yes, and I think it's for the better. In the arts, there are more actors now than ten years ago representing the Latino community, and obviously it's because there's more work, which has

politics." In some places life is only

*How serious are your presidential aspirations in Panama and do you have a timetable for running for office?*

"I would say the timetable is this decade, and I cannot be more precise at this moment. I am, however, taking all the steps needed in order to create a presidency in Panama, and more importantly, to begin the creation of the infrastructure that is going to support the work that we hope to be able to do in Panama. As far as in what capacity, I still don't know whether it will be best for me to act as an organizer or as a participant. I want to leave open all possibilities. I guess the people of Panama will determine where I will be most effective. Whatever I end up doing in Panama is going to depend on the support of the people of Panama. My ambition is to serve my country, not to serve myself."

*Supposing you succeed in politics, do you feel you can ever go back to entertainment?*

"I'd like to make a parallel to the Renaissance, where people who lived in that enlightened period saw no contradictions in the fact that their leaders would also pursue artistic endeavors. We have degenerated to where people tend to be suspicious of people who have artistic inclinations; that they're loafers, that they don't have intelligence or seriousness. I think that we can serve in different capacities, sometimes simultaneously. Why not? I have no problem with that, just like when I went from law to being a musician to being an actor, and then go from that to being a 'social worker' in Panama. Afterwards I could resume my career as a musician or as a producer, as long as I'm consistent in serving my country."

*Let's talk about your acting. You've appeared in a good number of films in the past year. Do you see yourself as a supporting actor who gives depth to a film through his character portrayals, or are you a*

that will result in a stronger political presence, because as a Latino community we have a lot of differences that exist."

*Does the film you're writing touch on these Latino issues?*

"Yes, I'm writing it in Spanish and I'm going to shoot it in Panama. We have to understand that we have a public in Latin America that is worthy to be addressed with the same quality and effort that one would want in the United States. Why not do a movie in Spanish, directed towards Latin America, and then have Anglos, Europeans, Asians -- whatever -- just read the subtitles? I want to contribute to my background, I don't want to all of a sudden disappear into the U.S. mainstream and turn my back on the audience I have in Latin America. I want to present a point of view from Latin America to the people of the U.S. and abroad."

*Isn't that a gamble?*

"It's a gamble in that it may not be a commercial proposition but there are certain things you really can't limit yourself to doing because you're considering what the economic consequences are going to be. It'll be shot in Panama with a Panamanian crew and the expenses will not be as high as they are here. I'm confident I can collect the investments necessary to do this movie."

*Will this film have a political theme?*

"I don't see how you can do anything in Latin America without a political influence, unless you do a cartoon. What I won't do is be heavy-handed. It will be a movie about people; it's a movie with a human point of view. It's not a movie with a political message for the 'politically correct' people of the world. I'm not going to jump onto any soapbox. I always avoid that kind of thing because then you become very pamphletary, demagogic, and all of a sudden the rhetoric is controlling everything and you're talking platitudes and nonsense. There's going to be humor, tears -- it's life with because in Latin America life is

created new presences. We just don't have one person; there's more than one role. That seems to indicate there's a lot more attention being paid to the Latino segment of the population of the country. We have been growing in numbers, if not influence, and that's a sign of changes to come. I think you're going to find more and more interest coming from the powers-that-be that control the economic and political process in this country, because economically we are showing that we have a lot of

strength and they are beginning to measure the impact of our expenditure. But I don't think we're yet at a point where there is a change of attitude in the Latino community



*leading man waiting to happen?*

"I have a lot more fun as a character actor because those roles are far more interesting. I also never exploited whatever sexuality I may have through my work as a musician and I have a problem with the artificiality that is attached to the leading man persona. I remember the examples of Jean-Paul Belmondo in France and now Gerard Depardieu, who are two actors that do not fit the traditional mode of the leading man. That freedom of casting that is characteristic of France, and to a degree Italy, has not spilled over to the United States. Yes, you have Dustin Hoffman, but there is still the concept of the 'pretty face.' That perhaps makes the leading man role less rounded and less interesting. The emphasis is more on what kind of sexual projection the studio heads feel 'so-and-so' can create, instead of 'what can this person do with this role?'"

*Has your acting followed some sort of intentional career path?*

"I never had a plan in my career as an actor. It was more or less a situation that I took as an alternative to music and as such it's been very erratic because I've done some roles that made some people wonder why I did them, like in *Fatal Beauty* and *Critical Condition*. I did them because it gave me a chance to work with people I always wanted to work with, like Whoopi Goldberg and Richard Pryor. It was realizing fantasies of mine working with people I admire. Later on, when I started to realize that



there were consequences for these choices, where some people may not take you as seriously because the movies were not challenging enough or the roles were not designed to showcase my abilities as an actor, that's when I started to become more selective."

*Has fame become a burden?*

"No, I don't feel a need to be recognized physically as an actor every time I go out on the street. Some people, especially leading men, create expectations about themselves, their sexuality and their looks that I find would interfere tremendously with my life. It's interesting that I have a lot of visibility in both the Latino and Anglo

communities, and yet I don't get bothered by people. They see me on the street and say hello, or hesitate because they're not sure it's me because I change a lot from role to role, but they have a rapport with me, they see me as 'normal.' They respect my normalcy, and I don't get mobbed. I like that. I'd like to keep it like that."

*Are you amazed at how far you've come, or did you always know you'd end up accomplishing these things?*

"I always knew that I was going to be able to do these things. But I was always very aware of my limitations. I knew that I had to learn not to measure my contributions through the eyes of others. To me the big thing was to try. That's the definitions of failure -- not to try. So, I thought if I try and I'm really disciplined and I prepare myself, I'll be fine. I am surprised at

how well things have gone because I'm aware of how difficult what I have done is."

*What would you like the legacy of Ruben Blades to be?*

"In terms of music, that I upheld the importance of it in Latin America, that Afro-Cuban music is a strong vehicle that can serve outside the Caribbean as a storyteller; and the fact that if you have discipline, if you stay away from the pitfalls of drugs, if you don't let hope die, if you keep an integrity about what you do in life, you will have the opportunity to succeed. That's the main thing I believe that I have been able to show."