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SPECIAL ISSUE

What does it mean to be Hispanic?



HISPANIC

SEPTEMBER 1993

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PANAMA'S PRIDE

A black and white portrait of Rubén Blades, a man with short dark hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

JOHN GOLDEN/STYLUS

BY IRENE MIDDLEMAN THOMAS

He's a modern day Renaissance man—actor, musician, singer, and poet. He's also a lawyer and the founding father of a Panamanian political party. Rubén Blades is a 45-year-old Panamanian who has achieved a Hispanic-style Horatio Alger success.

Blades was born in Panama City to a Panamanian father of British descent and an American mother born in Cuba. Although his family was poor, they were creative and resourceful. His father worked as a bongo player, baseball and basketball player, investigator, and detective; his mother was a pianist, singer, and radio soap-opera actress. When the multifaceted Blades is criticized for having too many irons in the fire, his answer is blunt: "I don't have to 'respond' to these criticisms. My achievements and continued success do it for me." He emphasizes that "people should be involved in what they're interested in and in what makes them happy and useful."



(l-r) Katherine and Dennis Hopper join Lisa and Rubén Blades at the 1991 Emmy nomination ceremony.

His accomplishments are sizable. As an actor, he has worked with Spike Lee, Richard Pryor, Robert Redford, Whoopi Goldberg, Joe Pesci, Jack Nicholson, Diane Keaton, and many others in films such as *Mo' Better Blues*, *Critical Condition*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Fatal Beauty*, *The Landlord*, *The Two Jakes*, and *The Lemon Sisters*. As a salsa musician, he's considered a pioneer and leader of the innovative *Nueva Canción* movement, which blends poetry and politics with sultry Caribbean rhythms. He has worked with salsa greats Willie Colón and Ray Barreto, and also has achieved success with his own groups, *Seis del Solar* and *Son del Solar*. His album *Siembra* is the biggest-selling recording in salsa history, and he has received two Grammys.

Academically, his background is striking. With a law degree from Panama's National University and a master's in law from Harvard University, this man—considered by many to be a potential presidential candidate in his native Panama—has passionate political ideas and aspirations. Blades, who bitterly denounces the U.S. invasion of Panama as a transgression of international law, says the action increased his determination to become involved in his nation's political arena.

In the meantime, he inserts his political views into many of his musical verses, which sometimes results in heated controversy, threats, and even censorship on the airwaves. But Blades has never been afraid of conflict and criti-

cism, even when jeopardizing his own commercial opportunities. "I'm not sorry I missed [out] on the millions of dollars, awards, and exposure [in] the Latin circles that others had and have because they sang...less controversial and more current material," he says. "I described reality in my songs at a time when others stressed escapism. My success came

"I described reality in my songs at a time when others stressed escapism. My success came as a result of my sincerity in presenting urban images, from racism and murder to hope and redemption."

as a result of my sincerity in presenting urban images, from racism and murder to hope and redemption."

He was quoted in a 1990 *Time* magazine interview as saying he will never be a superstar because his role is "to be different, to do what others won't do." Blades says he has always been repulsed

by celebrities who behave like members of an elite class; rather, he believes in staying as accessible to his public as possible. For example, his home telephone number was printed on the back of his early album covers.

Blades started out as a poor boy living in the San Felipe *barrio* of Panama City. He always loved to write and was an eager student. By the time he entered high school, he had launched his musical career singing ballads with El Conjunto Latino de PAPI AROSEMENA in his neighborhood of Carrasquilla. When he went on to study law and political science at the National University, he continued singing, this time with Los Salvajes del Ritmo. He recorded two singles with the group before his course-load and professors forced him to quit the band after his first year in law school.

His family had to leave Panama in 1973 when then-Col. Manuel Antonio Noriega accused Blades's father, then a narcotics investigator for the National Department of Investigations, of being involved in a CIA plot to kill Gen. Omar Torrijos. Noriega later claimed he had been "duped" by the CIA into falsely accusing Blades's father.

Blades stayed in Panama until 1974 to complete his law degree and pass the bar, and then joined his family in Miami. He soon went on to New York where he began working in the mail room of Fania Records, considered at that time the home of salsa music. "Once in Miami, knowing I wasn't going back to law, I opted for music, which was my biggest passion," he recalls. Blades had first been to New York in 1969, when he was fortunate enough to have recorded an album with Pete "Bugaloo" Rodriguez as well as *De Panama a Nueva York*.

Working in the mail room, Blades made his connections and finally began to sing with Ray Barreto's band, the beginning of his career as a full-time musician. In fact, Barreto auditioned him while Blades was on break from the mail-room job. From 1977 to 1982, Blades sang with trombonist Willie Colón's band, replacing Hector Lavos. Blades's music is typical of his first two albums, *Metiendo Mano* and *Siembra*, in which his heroes are *barrio* inhabitants. He sings of the working class—their sweat, beer, toil, and pain. With their intoxicating rhythms, his songs are stories geared toward the masses, yet they end up sneaking into the clubs of the wealthy as well. Blades says he is obsessive about

the honesty of his lyrics. "I don't write for anyone," he said in a Sony Music International biography.

Blades left Colón and his band after achieving much success with them. Blades began to experiment with basic salsa, replacing the horns with synthesizers and adding bits of jazz, 50s doo-wop, and rock to the standard salsa formula. He continued to write lyrics of political revolt and haunting images, inspired by Hispanic writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes.

Blades's new style helped him experiment with the group Seis del Solar, with whom he worked solely with the vibraphone or electronic marimba and the synthesizer. The group recorded politically charged albums, including *Buscando América*, *Escenas*, and *Agua de Luna*, the last of which Blades considers to be his darkest album lyrically. Seis del Solar was then replaced by Son del Solar, a group of nine musicians with whom Blades recorded *Antecedentes*, *Caminando*, and *Amor y Control*. *Amor y Control* contains three emotional songs honoring his mother, who was dying while Blades worked on the album. Not all who heard Blades's music delighted in it, however. In 1980, radio stations in Miami banned the play of "Tiburón," an allegory for superpower interventionism, and Miami stations have blacklisted his albums since. Panamanian censors banned radio play of the song "Decisiones" from his 1984 album *Buscando América* for allegedly promoting abortion.

In 1984, Blades took a sabbatical from the stage to attend Harvard and earn a master's degree in law. He graduated in 1985, and in 1986 he married actress Lisa Lebenzon.

Blades turned from music to acting around 1979, he explains, "because of the problems caused by the censorship of my themes at times, and because I refused to continue to accept the way business is conducted in the salsa field." His film career began with *The Last Flight*, a production he prefers not to remember. Then came *Crossover Dreams* in 1985, a well-received film that was the first English-speaking production made in New York with Hispanic talent, production, and most of the capital. Growing involvement with the cin-

ema impelled the Bladeses to move to California, near Hollywood. Blades continued to be the nonconformist celebrity, working without a manager, publicist, or secretary. He has no official biography and doesn't issue official eight-by-ten glossies. "Right or wrong, I make my own decisions," he says. "There's no obsession for publicity, awards, and notoriety in my being... As for the



Lou Reed and Rubén Blades

Hollywood establishment, they respect me. That's all I need."

In the 1990 *Time* interview, he said,

"There's no obsession for publicity, awards, and notoriety in my being... As for the Hollywood establishment, they respect me. That's all I need."

"I will always be viewed with suspicion by some, though not by all, because I move against the current." Rather than concentrating on being a "star," he is dedicated to fighting ignorance and intolerance throughout the Americas, and to promoting truth, justice, and the Pan-American way.

As Blades continued to work steadily in Hollywood, he also kept producing albums. *Escenas* featured Joe Jackson and Linda Ronstadt singing in Spanish, and

in 1988, *Nothing but the Truth*, his first English-language record, was released. The album featured collaborations with Lou Reed and Elvis Costello, among others. It was a commercial failure, as well as an object of controversy for his Hispanic fans. Some of them were irate at what they saw as a crossover work. Blades shuns the controversy of such crossover projects like *Nothing but the Truth*. If non-Hispanic artists, such as Paul Simon, can sing in Spanish, why can't he sing in English, he argues.

Blades's passion and idealism are not only fostered in his music and film. His obsession with justice, equal opportunity, public health, education, ecology, governmental ethics, and Panamanian independence also have enticed him into the political arena of Panama. His movement is called *Pápa Egoró*, which means motherland in one of the native Panamanian languages. The party speaks for those Panamanians who are not represented by the current government or by other existing parties. He has won thousands of supporters already and has the results of numerous polls to prove it. As to when he plans to achieve his political goals, he has said only that it will be in this decade. "I'm not pursuing the presidency of Panama. [Rather], it seems as if it's the other way around," he says.

His party will probably nominate him as its candidate for President. But will Blades accept the nomination? "It all depends on if the Panamanian people and our movement can mobilize to create the program that would permit us to govern effectively from 1994 on... Panama can't run on charisma and can't stand another letdown... We need to have a program on a national scale that is the product of national consensus."

If he is elected, he says, he does not know what will happen with his "other" careers. But he won't stop singing and writing, even if only for his own benefit.

In the meantime, this jack-of-all-trades, master-of-many continues to search for more projects. He paints with watercolors, reads, and works on his endless goals—as an actor, musician, poet, politician, singer, and writer. Blades has so many goals—and enough talent and energy, it seems, to achieve them all. ■

Irene Middleman Thomas is a freelance writer based in Denver.