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TORONTO'S WEEKLY NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT VOICE

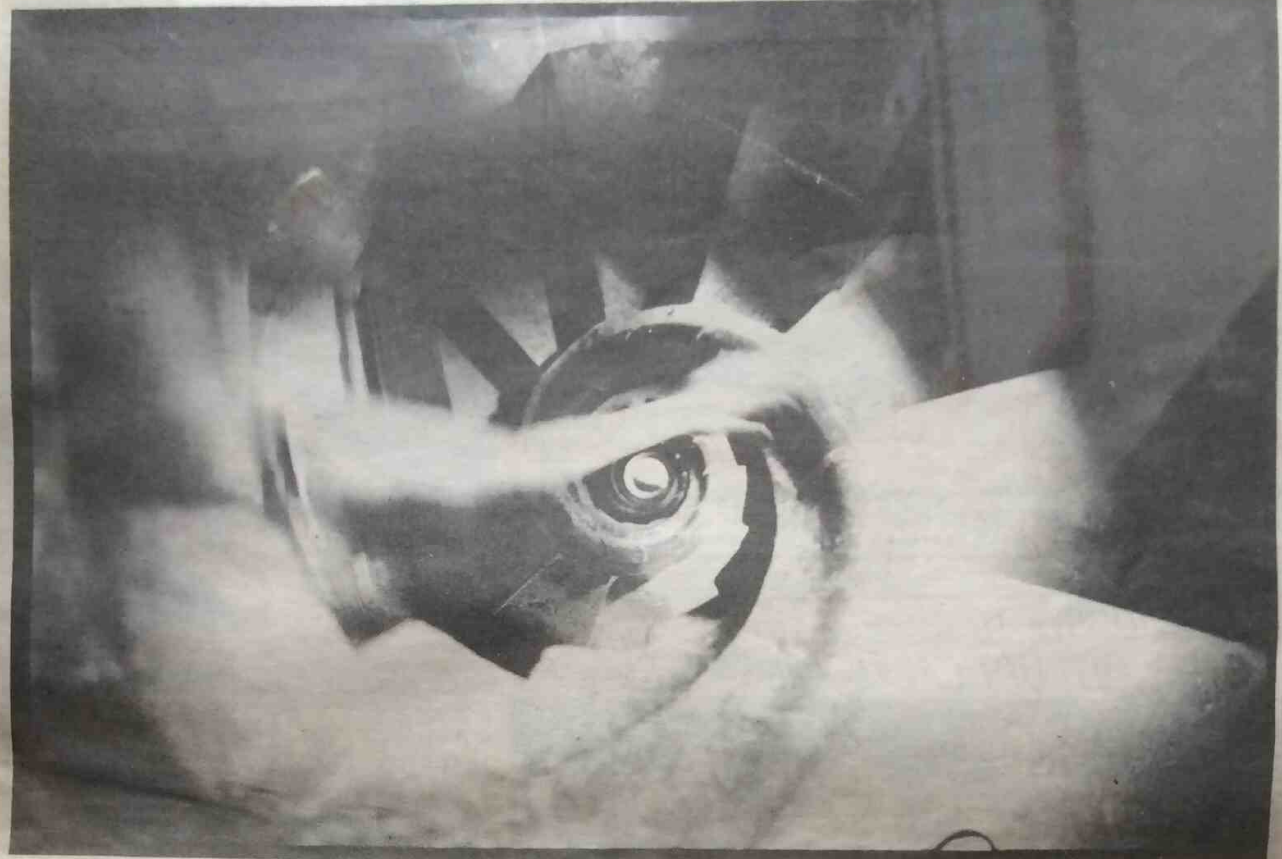
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NOW



**Ruben
Blades'
political
edge**



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RUBEN BLADES
 photographed by STEPHANIE CHERNIKOWSKI

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Ruben Blades' militant media

By DARYL JUNG

MUSIC

Latin hero Ruben Blades is a man of many faces — Grammy-winning salsa rebel, international lawyer, Hollywood star, journalist and Latin American activist. He claims he's just a regular guy, doing what he can to work his native Panama's "magic." Yet he approaches all his ventures with the grim determination of a revolutionary.

Before his arrival in New York in the mid-70s, Blades' background is sketchy at best. A product of a generation of educated, middle-class Latinos, he was a lawyer for a bank and a pop star in Panama, but poor recording facilities forced him to move to the States.

His grandmother is said to have been a vegetarian Rosicrucian who practised levitation and instilled in the young Blades a strong work ethic. His father was a drummer, a detective and a basketball star; his mother a singer, pianist and radio actress.

The events of January 1964, when 21 Panamanian students were killed in a riot arising from American refusal to fly a Panamanian flag in the canal zone, incited Blades to pursue Latin American music with a nationalist fervor. He promised never to sing in English again.

In New York, he worked hauling crates of records and organized other latin musicians against the exploitative practices and ghetto-mentality of the record business. He wrote essays on art and politics in the Latino newspaper *La Estrella de Panama*, while slowly catching on as a singer and band leader. His first job was a vocalist for the Ray Barretto band, and the rest is history.

Sizzling band

It is, of course, the musical Blades, with his sizzling band, *Seis del Solar*, that's coming to the Diamond tonight (Thursday) for two shows, late in a 22-city tour of North America. His concerts are legendary among latin fans for taking the Blades hybrid of Afro-Cuban salsa to the limit. His material is topical and angry, addressing the evils of U.S. intervention in Panama through the eyes of characters like martyred priests, political police and abused or pregnant teenagers.

And while his stage presence can approach stand-up comedy, the music is serious, sexy and beautiful. It is all designed to "reinvent

**RUBEN BLADES
and SEIS DEL SOLAR**
Thursday, June 25
7 and 10:30 pm
The Diamond
410 Sherbourne

Latin America on its own terms." His shows, like his other endeavours, are "about culture in the city."

"We hadn't really toured in the United States last year," says a reserved Blades from his home in New York. "Because we did an extensive tour in Europe — we went to eight countries. But it's strange. We've been to Germany four times but Canada is the one country on this continent where we haven't performed. So we're very curious and look forward to meeting people there."

Broken vow

Blades is touring to promote his third album on Elektra, *Agua de Luna* (Moon Water), his musical interpretation of short stories by Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez. But he eagerly anticipates his next album, due out in the fall, on which he will break his vow of the early 60s — the LP will be his first in English.

"As an artist, I have things that I would like to say also to audiences who don't speak Spanish," says Blades. "Now the problem I had with that was that unfortunately, today, whenever a latin artist attempts to write an album in English, it is immediately construed as an effort to abandon their audience and rush into this mad chase of the golden dream on the other side."

"That kind of put off the fact that I was interested in collaborating and doing something in English, which I had never done. At this point, I think that, after three years of working in Spanish while continuing to explore different avenues of music, I am mature enough to write in English. And I'm very happy to say that the album is going to be a very good one."

As it should be, with Elvis Costello, Lou Reed and Sting all contributing heavily to the writing process. Will this collaboration extend to appearances by these rock legends on the album?

"It will be hard to get Elvis over here to play on the record, but Lou lives around here so he definitely is going to perform on it. I met Lou during the filming of the *Sun City* video. Since we are both New Yorkers and we are both characters with the same sense of humour, there's a real affinity there."

Blades also shares a rebel image with Reed, musically and politically. But Blades does not consider himself a "political writer."

"I do not belong to any political party, and I do not identify myself with ideologies. This is not because I am afraid to be identified with anything — I've always been very outspoken. It is because there has not been a political ideology that has been sufficiently clear or



STEPHANIE CHERNIKOWSKI

Salsa rebel Ruben Blades, through his involvement in Latin music, film and politics, strives to reinvent the Hispanic image. But he refuses to sacrifice his integrity to media visibility.

lucid or effective for me to embrace.

"But as a Latin American, I am constantly aware of the consequences of politics in our lands and our lives, so I don't see how anyone from there who writes music cannot somehow be influenced by the political events exploding around them."

"I don't use music as a way of forwarding some sort of proselytizing notion. I just have to reflect on the things that happen around me and present not only my opinion but the view of the person in the street and whose life is being affected on all levels, not just the political — also their feelings and their need to love and their need for anger."

"Life in the city. That's what I like to write about."

Clubs closing

The latin music scene in New York, which launched Blades and has held back other would-be latin stars like Barretto and Willie Colon (pronounced ca-lone), could be a topic for a Blades composition. It is under severe economic pressure, musicians are "working but disillusioned," many latin clubs are closing, and record labels are folding.

"It's not such a good scenario here," Blades admits. "But when I think about it, it's so crazy. The music has so much to say, and so many people depend on that release. I think it's just a temporary phase, to be honest. There's bound to be a resurgence."

"There will be a new generation, from the young blood as always. It's just a matter of the younger artists doing something more than going through the motions. Something is brewing right now, and we'll see the results in a short time."

Blades regards his own popularity as a double-edged sword, but agrees it could be a great boost to

his fellow latin musicians' chances for success.

"One of the things that I have to be very careful about, though, is not to become the token Latino. I'm very aware of that possibility. Maybe some people would like to assume that role because of the ensuing visibility, but I don't want visibility at the expense of my character or my integrity. I try to keep the doors wide open so other people can go through them. I have to be careful not to become the *only one* doing it."

"I've always just wanted to show that latin music is so much more than just an escape form. There's so many stereotypes attached to musicians. So many people think of popular music as some form of lesser art manifestation."

"Not only have we managed to change that perspective somewhat, in the interim the tests that arise out of notoriety or success have been successfully faced by me. I have not changed my character because of success, and I regard that as a personal triumph of which I am very proud. I look at all of the magical opportunities I have had with this band — to sort of look into our hearts as we play — and I realize it has been a wonderful experience."

Legal learning

But Blades finds gratification in many other areas. He's appeared in several films, including *Critical Condition* with Richard Pryor, and this fall he'll appear in two big productions, Robert Redford's *The Milagro Beanfield War*, and *Fatal Beauty* with Whoopi Goldberg. Between shooting schedules, he found time to attend Harvard law school.

"I went there in 1984 and got a masters degree in international law. I've never practised in the States because I would have to go through

the bar. But I never really planned to anyway. I just like to do things that interest me, and I felt that after so long without the discipline of academic teaching, I needed it to reinforce other areas of my life."

"So I took two years off from music and went to school. I simply like to tackle things in this manner. There is much more that I want to do."

"It is the same, of course, with the movie roles. Not only is it part of my desire to try new things. It allows me the versatility to express different points of view and explain more the Latin American position. That way I can dispel some of the misconceptions that exist here and abroad about Latin Americans. I simply like to tell the truth and do different things. I try to be busy."

Despite his continuing commitment to boosting the Hispanic image, Blades' "ultimate message" is a personal one.

"It is enough for me to be known as someone who was not afraid to try," he says. "In spite of the darkness of the times in which we live, there's always the opportunity to create some light if we work in that direction. I think it is a time to assume responsibility and to face life as opposed to escape from it."

"Also, more than anything, I'd like to be known as somebody who wasn't swallowed up by the trappings of fame and somebody who didn't just get involved in music or movies as a way of indulging their own fantasies. I think the notoriety and the visibility people get from music is a great vehicle."

"And what we do with it, especially in these times, can help at least to bring another perspective, or another opinion, or another colour to a world that is in need of solutions."

"I'm not saying that I have them, but at least I like to make the questions while I can."

JAN THORNHILL

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