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Behind-the-scenes frenzy turns

THE JACKSON TOUR

into a thriller—plus
an exclusive look
at the new LP



Michael and (clockwise from top left)
brothers Tito, Jermaine, Randy, Jackie & Marlon



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sativa. (The familiar name refers to the Cuban port of Guantanamo.) Machito's front line of trumpets and saxophones surrounds his rhythm section with sumptuous upholstery on this track, and overall, listening to the band is like riding in a smooth and powerful limousine. By contrast, Manny Oquendo's Libre is a festooned dune buggy. There are no soothing saxophones, only one trumpet and four brash, uproarious trombones. The rhythm section, fired by Oquendo's slashing, emphatic timbal drums, could make you want to open your collar in a blizzard (*Elena, Elena*), and the solos and arrangements are colorful and imaginative (*Little Sunflower*). Adding to the party atmosphere are the lusty background vocals that mass the voices of seven of Libre's 14 members. In both bands, the piano and even lead vocal are integral parts of the percussive locomotion. Spanish is a fast, taut, staccato language, and the dry, concise sounds of congas, claves, maracas and bongos mirror and enhance it. It's a language that shoots off the front of the tongue. That's why, when Libre's flutist, Dave Valentin, soloing on *Little Sunflower*, uses his throat to roll a gurgling guttural through his instrument into a note, it's startlingly, brilliantly out of context. (*Machito*: Timeless. *Oquendo*: Montuno)

—Eric Levin



Onetime backup singer Patti Austin is pursuing her solo career with a vengeance—and talent too.

▲ BUSCANDO AMERICA (SEARCHING FOR AMERICA) Rubén Blades y Seis del Solar (Six From the Tenement)

Salsa is growing beyond even the exuberant bounds of the quintessential style exemplified by Machito and Oquendo. Witness Rubén Blades. A popular Panamanian singer and composer who has collaborated with Willie Colon on three best-selling albums for the small Fania label, Blades has just released his first major-label disc. Do we smell "crossover"? Yes, but not in the usual sense of an artist abandoning his roots to woo a mainstream audience. With the broad distribution and promotion Blades will presumably have now, a mainstream audience may be enticed to cross over to him. It would be worth the trip. Blades is expanding Latin music, while preserving its rhythmic heart, by experimenting with instrumentation (vibraphone, guitar and synthesizer), opening up tight song structures and writing social and political lyrics devoid of rhetoric and slogans. When he enters Harvard Law School next fall, Blades will also be working on an album of songs based on eight short stories of the Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Blades' lyrics here are already condensed narratives about individuals—a priest gunned

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Rubén Blades and his Seis del Solar epitomize the sound of modern salsa.

down with his altar boy while giving communion; a philanderer who gets his comeuppance; a rightist police agent's banal morning, drying himself after his shower with a towel that reads "Disneyland." In *Desapariciones* (Disappearances), a neighborhood fills with the sounds of gunfire, speeding cars, marching boots. In one apartment, people, not daring to peek outside, huddle, watching a soap opera. Blades is a gifted melodist, and his musicians play with inspiration and skill. The album flies, as uplifting as it is ambitious. (Elektra)—*E.L.*

▲ PATTI AUSTIN

Patti Austin

Since she stopped concentrating on composing and backup singing and turned to a solo-singing career five years ago, Austin, 33, has been zeroing in on a workable style. She won a Grammy nomination last year for her duet with James Ingram, and this album's mix centers on mild touches of soul and funk with generous helpings of romance and easy, danceable rhythm. It includes the smooth *It's Gonna Be Special*, written by Clif Magness and Glen Ballard and produced by Quincy Jones (who was co-producer for the whole LP). Everybody's Doobie Brother, Michael McDonald, shows up on electric piano on the melancholy *Any Way You Can*, which he wrote with David Pack. And Austin gets up (or down, as the case may be) for *Hot! In the Flames of Love*, one of those Narada Michael Walden post-disco specials. This isn't an album for those who demand shrewdness in their lyrics: "Out in the street we'll feel the beat"; "Change your attitude/Why do you have to be so rude"; "I know in this world of people/There is only one for me." In fact, Austin, who has written such songs as *End of the Rainbow*, could do worse than to use some of her own material—none of which is on this album. She can do a lot with a little, though. Much of the art of pop music has to do with turning the ridiculous into the sublime, and she is getting better at it all the time. (Qwest)—*Ralph Novak*

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