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## SxSW 2018 Interview: RUBEN BLADES IS NOT MY NAME director Abner Benaim

By: **Jason Whyte** (<https://getreelmovies.com/author/jason-whyte/>) | Posted on March 10, 2018  
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"It's a film about salsa icon Ruben Blades, featuring Sting, Paul Simon, Junot Diaz, Residente, Gilberto Santa Rosa and many other stars from the Latin music world." Director Abner Benaim on RUBEN BLADES IS NOT MY NAME which screens at SxSW 2018.

***I hear you are back at SxSW this year! Tell me about what you have had here in the past, and your favorite aspects of the city.***

I was here once before with my film INVASION. I have only seen Austin during SXSW and I loved it. It's great to hear music everywhere and see people excited and making lines to see films at any time of the day all around.

***So how did you get into this business? Talk to me a bit about how you got your start and what you have worked on in the past.***

Is it a business? Not sure yet. But how did I get into this, I do know. I'm one of those who wasn't

supposed to be an artist, much less a filmmaker. Growing up in Panama I had never met a filmmaker, because there were none, so the dream of making films was really as crazy as saying you want to be an astronaut. But when I did, it all felt very natural, and I got a lot of support from family and friends, and the whole country really. The first feature I made, a comedy called Chance, beat Avatar at the time and became number one in the box office. It was the first Panamanian film to be shown in cinemas in over 60 years. That was 8 years ago. Now we have an average of five a year.

***How did this project come together for you? Give me a rundown from the preparation, to shooting, to post-production to now!***



The film started with my friendship with Ruben. I had been a fan of Ruben since I was a kid, and when I got older I understood how much I admired his work because of the impact he's had on most everyone I know, and not only in Panama, but all over Latin America. He's a kind of popular philosopher, and many people don't realize how far the messages of his lyrics have travelled, and how deep they have entered our collective consciousness. With this in mind, I looked for Ruben, and we became friends. We started to meet frequently and every time, the conversation was more and more interesting, his anecdotes never ending along with including legends like Lou Reed, Celia Cruz, Michael Jackson and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. So at some point I said to Ruben, hey, I'm a filmmaker, I cannot be standing here without a camera listening to all these incredible stories, watching you sing a cappella whole albums, as if that was something normal. So I proposed to him to start making a film about him. And he said yes.

The whole process took three years, give or take. Sometimes we would not film for a long while, waiting for the next concert or the next time we could meet in Panama or New York City. So the project was on, but we weren't shooting continuously of course. But the fact that time passes by allows you to reflect, and allows for a relationship to evolve between the filmmaker and the subject, and I think that shows in the finished film.

Duringn the shooting process I knew I was getting the elements I needed to make a film, but I was also trying to form my own idea of what the recipe to put those elements together will be. Watching the material and being acquainted with it and the feelings it gave me, together with my editor Felipe Guerrero, we let the narrative come from the strength of the material. I also tried to be very attentive to what resonated with me emotionally. It's such an impossible task to include everything in a life and career as rich as Ruben's so it was quite obvious that I needed to trust my instincts on what was important for me, and to understand that I cannot make a film about Ruben that fulfills everyone's expectations, so I opted to make my own, and to use as a test the simple question: does it have soul? Do you feel anything when you watch it. I found myself clapping to the rhythm of clave, stomping my feet, and in other moments crying, a bunch of times, in the editing room, so I guess the movie passes that test, at least for me.

Now I'm very eager to see how audiences react to the film.

***What keeps you going while making a movie? What drives you?***

The desire to see it finished is what drives me the most, and to be present when the magic arrives. Sometimes the magic comes at the time of capturing the images, sometimes in the editing room, or while designing the sound. Hopefully, there's a little of that magic everywhere, but that's seldom the case. There are so many tiny actions to make in order to make a film that it's very easy to get tired of it. For me, taking risks is one thing that keeps me going, because the risk of failure makes you stay alert, aware, and motivated on one hand, and the desire to see the risks you take pay off, to see them come alive and work well, that's a great motivator.

***What was your biggest challenge with this project, and the moment that was the most rewarding to you?***

Ruben is a very private person, and at the same time he has a very public persona, so it would get the feeling that I was getting to know him better, but at the same time always knowing that I don't know him at all, that you cannot figure him out. But that was a great test for me as a director. How does one come to terms with the idea that all one can do is paint an impression of a man, namely Ruben, in documentary form. Understanding that I could never really capture his essence, or his "life and work", but just a glance, an approximation. That's a humbling process because you have to allow for the film to take shape on its own, and let go of your desire to control. So I'm happy to say that I still haven't figured out Ruben Blades, I'm not an expert on him, and I am still as interested and as curious about him as I ever was.

***I'm about to get technical, but I would love to know about the the visual design of the movie; what camera did you film with and so forth?***

We used a Sony A7s with cinema prime lenses. The movie was photographed in a very casual way with very few imposed rules. And we exist in the film, meaning we, the camera & the crew, don't try to pass as invisible. But we also don't take protagonism. It was important for me that the film be as intimate as possible but maintaining the look of a well shot documentary film, and not to go into the home movie or reality TV look and feel.

***What are you looking forward to the most about showing your movie here in Austin?***

It's the world premiere, so it's the film's first encounter with an audience. It will be exciting to get reactions and feedback from those first people who see the film.

***After the film screens at SxSW, where is the film going to show next? Theatrical, online, more festivals?***

First more festivals, and we´re in talks with distributors and broadcasters for theatrical, online, everything, It should all happen fast in 2018.

***If you could show your movie in any theater outside of Austin, where would you screen it and why?***

New York is an important city for us because the salsa music revolution happened there. But Panama of course is also important because that's where Ruben and I are from.

***What would you say to someone who was being disruptive through a screening of your movie?***

I would ask them to be quiet if they´re being disruptive. If they want to leave quietly, I don't have a problem.

***We have a lot of readers on our site looking to make movies or get into the industry somehow. What is the ONE THING you would say to someone who is wanting to get into the filmmaking business?***

Do it without asking anyone in the world for permission. Not from your parents, or your teachers, or your peers, not even yourself. Just take the risk and start.

***And final question: what is the greatest movie you have ever seen?***


That´s a real hard one to answer. L´Aventura is one of my favorite films, and I have no clue why!


***RUBEN BLADES IS NOT MY NAME is an official selection of SxSW 2018.***


***Film Official site: [www.aperturafilms.com](http://www.aperturafilms.com) (http://www.aperturafilms.com)***


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