

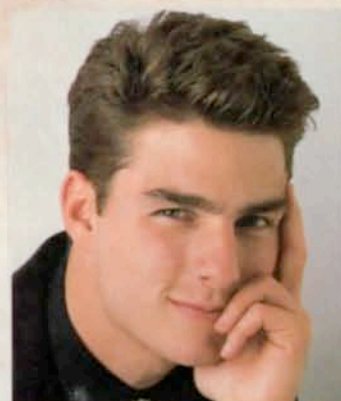
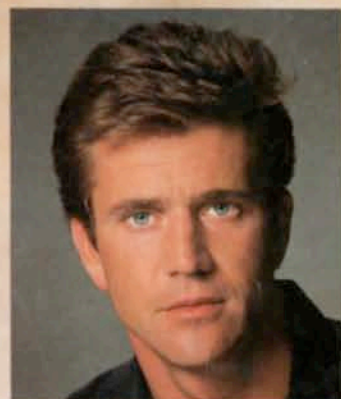
▶ LISA STANSFIELD, REGIS & KATHIE LEE'S NEW BABY ▶

US

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With three
films ready for
release, salsa
king Rubén Blades
has the world

GLOBAL WARMER

in his pocket
and Panama on
his mind

BY KAREN SCHOEMER

This summer, Blades stars alongside Aidan Quinn (below left) in *The Lemon Sisters*.

"I play Diane Keaton's boyfriend," says Blades. "It's the first time in my life that I play a leading man. I hope it worked!"

Rubén Blades is making himself right at home. The Panama-born actor/musician has just finished lunch at the posh China Grill restaurant in midtown Manhattan. He leans back in his chair, kicks up his feet and folds his hands comfortably across his chest. In his slightly rumpled button-down shirt and scuffed cowboy boots, Blades displays a charming irreverence for such hoity-toity surround-

ings. A globe of the world dangles above his head. It's just part of the decor, but it hangs there, slowing spinning, like a giant spherical halo.

The globe adds a fitting flourish to Blades' character. For not only is he equally at ease in the U.S. and Panama, but he has achieved an international renown that goes beyond the fields of acting (where his credits include *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Fatal Beauty* and *Crossover Dreams*) and music (his salsa albums have topped the Latin charts, he has scored films such as the recent *Q & A* and has collaborated with the likes of Lou Reed, Elvis Costello and Sting). Blades is also a lawyer, with a master's degree from Harvard, as well as a journalist and aspiring politician. And, at 42, he has practically just begun.

He recently released an in-concert LP, *Rubén Blades y Son del Solar... Live!*, and has a new batch of salsa material ready for 1991. This summer he'll be seen as a mystery man named Mickey Nice in Jack Nicholson's long-awaited *The Two Jakes*, and as a cabbie who falls in love with Diane Keaton — "My first romantic lead," he says gleefully — in *The Lemon Sisters*. Next up, he plays a detective in his first hard-core action film, *Predator II*, scheduled for a December or January release. "It's kind of gory in a way, but fun," he says. "I figured, 'Yeah, I'll be in a scary movie now.'" As if all this weren't enough, director Spike Lee nabbed him for a cameo in his upcoming film, *Mo' Better Blues*. Obviously, 1990 is a very big year for Blades.

When he speaks of his accomplishments, a certain pride creeps into Blades' softly accented voice. "I've worked with Redford, I've worked with Whoopi. I've worked with Jack Nicholson, Richard Pryor, Diane Keaton, Spike Lee," he says, almost as if hearing these names for the first time. "When you think about it, these are big names!" His credentials are all the more impressive when it's considered that he has never studied acting.

"He has an incredible intellect and he can be very intense," says Stephen Hopkins, the director of *Predator II*. "He's an interesting actor in terms of his style — he prefers to do less than more. It's not a matter of underacting. He'd like to have fewer scenes and make them more potent."

Blades' intuitive approach has clearly worked to his advantage. Whether portraying the wise, wry sheriff in 1988's *Milagro* or a desperate death-row inmate in last year's HBO movie *Dead Man Out*, Blades seems to fill up every physical and emotional inch of his characters, leaving no gap

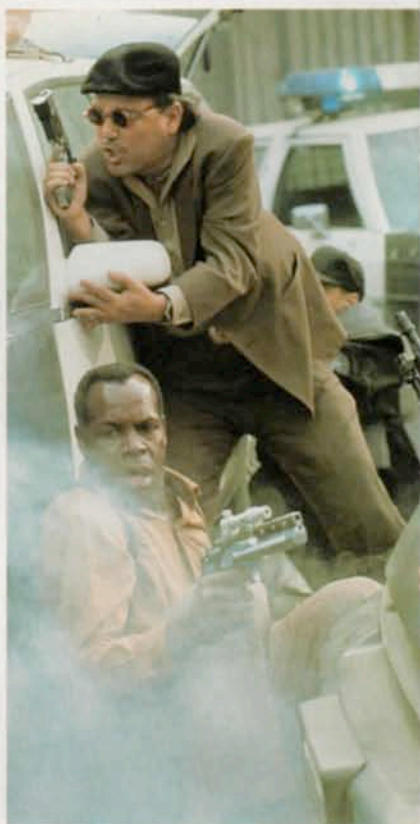


WARBERG/Miramax



MARCS/Universal

Freddy Fender, Blades and *Milagro Beanfield War* director Robert Redford (above, left to right); and Blades with pal Danny Glover in the upcoming *Predator II* (right). "A friend of mine once said to me that I was the most popular unknown he'd ever met," says Blades of his quiet fame. "And I sort of like that. Let's keep it that way."



FOREMAN/20th Century Fox

between actor and role. Blades attributes this, in part, to a little trick he taught himself a few years back. "I always try to add some kind of physical change to my appearance — just a little quirk," he says. For the sheriff, "it was his posture, the way he moved. With *Dead Man Out*, it was something I did with my eye." He leans forward, and his eyelid droops ever so slightly over his right eye. And for *Predator II*, he says, "I designed this look. I had a thinner mustache and very dark, round glasses and a sort of bebop hat. I didn't want people to know my nationality — whether I was Mexican, American or Oriental."

Blades may have hidden his identity for that role, but he is very much in touch with his Latin-American heritage. Since the U.S. invasion of Panama last December, he has performed benefits for his native country, and anger rises in his voice when he talks of the shady international policies that led to the military action: "There is a conspiracy of silence between the authorities of the United States and Panama. Many more people died than has been said. I know people that lost mother and father in the attack, children that were killed. It doesn't make sense. I cannot understand how they call this operation a success."

Blades, who emigrated to the U.S. in 1974 (he now lives in Los Angeles with his wife of three years, American actress Lisa Lebonzon Blades), was born in Panama in 1948. His father was a cop, his mother a former cabaret singer. They lived in a working-class neighborhood with Blades' four siblings and his grandmother, Emma, with whom he was especially close. "She was a painter, a poet, a playwright; she fought for women's rights. It's probably one of the reasons why I also try to do different things. She would read me books also — everything from *A Thousand and One Nights* to the *Aeneid* by Virgil."

By the time he was 11, Blades' biggest thrill was to buy and read books. He had his own little library — a plank bookshelf set up on two bricks — where he kept his treasures. But he also liked sports such as baseball and football. "I got in fights, I got dirty, but I also read," he says. "It was an interesting combination of education and street education." Blades began playing music at a young age, and worked part-time in a succession of local Latin bands all through his schooling.

When he was 25 and a law student at the National University of Panama, Blades' parents left Panama for Miami. "They went into exile because of Noriega, actually," he

explains. "Noriega accused my father of being a foreign intelligence agent. He got fired, and nobody would give him a job. My father's friends — *everybody* deserted him." Blades followed his parents a year later, moving on to New York in search of a music career. He worked in the mailroom of a small Latin-music label, but by the late Seventies was recording albums with salsa trombonist Willie Colón. The pair spent six years together, and then, in 1984, Blades made his major-label debut on Elektra Records with

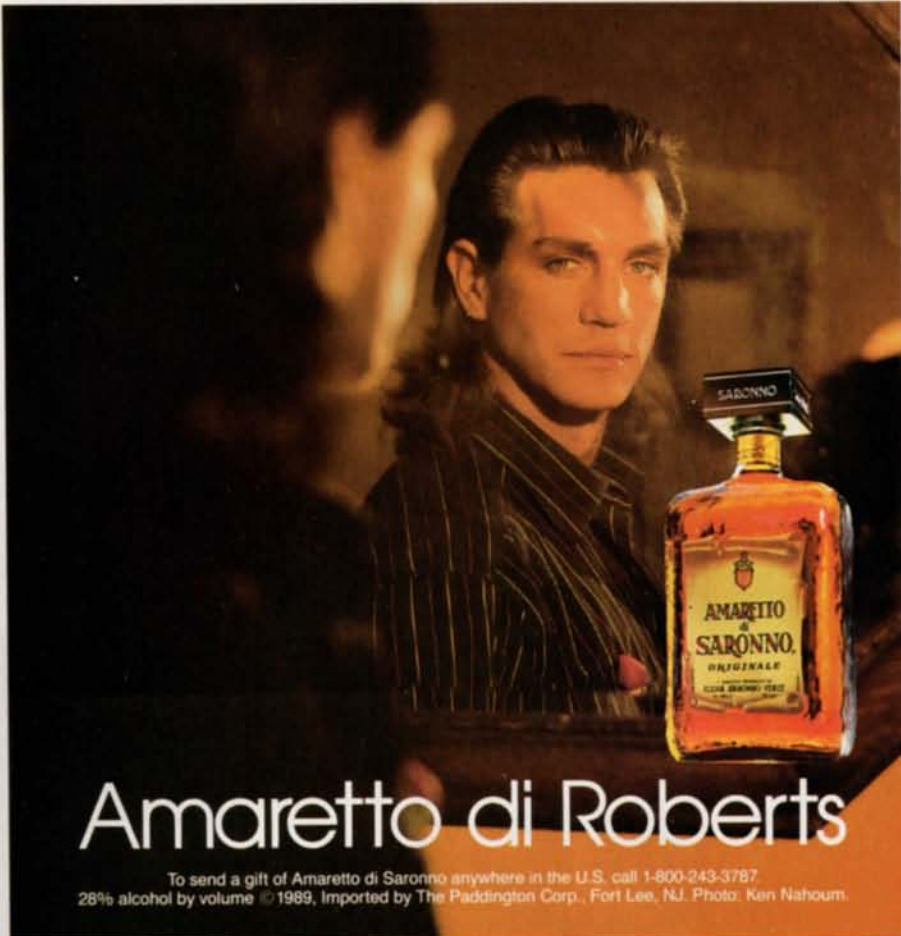
**'I've worked with Redford,
Jack Nicholson, Diane
Keaton, Spike Lee.
When you think about it,
these are big names!'**

Buscando América (translation: "Searching for America"). Since then he's released five more albums and earned two Grammy Awards. In 1985 he made his film debut as an aspiring Latin superstar in *Crossover*

Dreams. And by the mid-Eighties, thanks to his ever-growing fame, Blades was able to safely send his parents back home. "I had become increasingly popular in Panama and abroad, and that made me believe they would, in a way, be protected," he explains.

Blades himself speaks of returning to Panama and getting politically involved there, a task he knows will be "a monumental headache. It's not a decision I find appealing, but I do find morally necessary. I must participate because the alternative is to watch everything go to hell." In the meantime, he hopes to eventually slow down his frantic work schedule so that he and Lisa can start to raise a family. And after *that*, perhaps a few years down the road, will come Blades' ultimate challenge.

"If I'm still recording — and I say this because I don't know exactly where I'm going to be in terms of Panama and how fast I'm going to end up there — it will be truly different from anything I've ever done," he says dreamily. "It would be the creation of a true American music. By that I mean music from the *continent* of America, an integration of music from Canada all the way down to Paraguay. I would sing in four different languages — French, Spanish, English and Portuguese. I'd like to do that." His lips curl into a smile, and, above his head, the world keeps turning. **US**



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