



Anita Baca for The New York Times

The floundering presidential campaign of Rubén Blades in Panama contrasts with his success as a salsa singer and actor.

## Panama Likes Rubén Blades But Not, It Seems, as Leader

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PANAMA — A sense of wonderment descends on Rubén Blades as he sets out late in the afternoon from his sparsely furnished apartment in the Casco Viejo district, a stone's throw from the neighborhood where he grew up.

Girls in high-school uniforms muster the courage to approach, hoping to catch his eye. Elderly men leave their shops, crossing the street to exchange a word. Mothers lean from their finely wrought balconies for a peek at him. Shirtless young boys drop their street games to cry out his name.

Wearing jeans, a T-shirt and a straw hat, the salsa singer, Hollywood actor, Harvard-trained lawyer and now presidential candidate scarcely breaks stride. Still, he finds a special way to acknowledge each passer-by.

"What's happening?" he says in a street-tinged Spanish to one. "Hey, brother," he says to another. For the girls, there is a wave and friendly grin that quickly sets off giggles.

A Valuable Asset

77 days left. I don't know how we are going to do this."

The mood quickly passes, though, as he contemplates the alternatives to forging ahead with the race. "If we didn't run, it would have been a battle between two evils," he said. "It would be just a matter of which one won. This campaign is aimed at dismantling a system that believes that corruption is a necessary evil."

Since he is no longer a favorite, Mr. Blades looks to his music for another asset it has given him: a sense of timing that he now says he must count on, given his lack of funds, for his message to carry him over the top. In this instance, Mr. Blades is referring to a strategy that scorns the polls and awaits the final days of the campaign before launching a blitz of appearances, concerts and other events.

If this fails, the singer said with a remorseless smile, "I'll go back to my band and dust them off and say, 'Boys, let's hit the road.'"

### A Valuable Asset

All of this is immensely refreshing to the man who would change Panama's long-standing political equations, based in equal parts on well-stocked party machines, unbridled corruption and military machinations.

"I have a very easy contact with people," he said, speaking as if in warning to those who write off his anti-campaign for its dearth of public events. "People here know me by my first name."

Many had said that after 20 years away from his homeland, Mr. Blades, who returned late last year to head the ticket of the newly formed Papa Egoro, or Mother Earth Party, was too much the outsider to be a serious candidate in the presidential elections in May. In fact, although his name is sometimes pronounced BLAH-dess here, the proper pronunciation is the English one; the Blades family traces its roots to the English-speaking Caribbean island of St. Lucia.

But as each stroll serves to remind him, his star recognition has been a valuable asset. Months of pre-campaign polls showed him to be the runaway favorite to succeed President Guillermo Endara, who cannot run for re-election. The other major candidates are Ernesto Pérez Balladares and Rubén Carles. Mr. Balladares is a member of the party of the former dictator, Manuel Antonio Noriega, and Mr. Carles was the comptroller in the Endara Government before he resigned to run for President.

### 'I Really Love Home'

Recent weeks, however, have been much more sobering for Mr. Blades.

Dropping out of the lead in the polls and apparently losing steam, his campaign has been a difficult baptism for Mr. Blades. Recent polls show him in third place with only 9 percent of the vote.

He says his money is running short, and a pugnacious press often seems to be waiting behind every door.

Mostly, however, the 45-year-old Mr. Blades is realizing how much he enjoys his privacy.

"I really love home," he said, almost mournfully, reflecting on his absence from his wife, Lisa Lebenzon, who is also an actress and is in Hollywood.

"We are very private people," he said. "We read a lot. We don't go out much. You know, our dog, flowers in the garden, the whole thing."

But for skeptics, and there are many, attitudes like these reflect nothing so much as the quixotic flavor of his candidacy.

"We like him, but we are not sure how serious this is," a woman said, reflecting an attitude toward Mr. Blades that is widespread here. "A campaign for President is not like a concert, where you just sell tickets and everyone shows up."

Even Mr. Blades sometimes speaks of his candidacy in the past tense. The pessimism is fed not only by his decline in the polls, but by campaign coffers that he says contain "not even \$100 that I know of." There are also worries about his own post-political career.

"We ran out of time," Mr. Blades said, contemplating the harbor through the bay windows of his airy, high-ceilinged new apartment. "There are only