



English



## RUBEN BLADES: THE CUTTING EDGE

Most salseros, if asked to identify the single most distinguished figure in the field, would probably unhesitatingly name Ruben Blades. While pursuing law, acting, and politics, Blades, in his intermittent periods devoted to salsa, has produced much of the genre's most innovative, ambitious, and socially relevant music.

Blades grew up in Panama City, where he acquired a law degree while singing with local Cuban-style bands. In 1974, he moved to New York and, forsaking the courtroom feel for the recording studio, joined the roster of Fania Records, which was then at its peak. Blades's charisma, razor-like voice, and boyish good looks might have guaranteed him some measure of success in themselves, but he had much more to offer. Unlike many singers, Blades is a skilled instrumentalist (guitar) and composer; many of the pieces he has authored or co-authored (sometimes in collaboration with Willie Colon) rank among salsa's most memorable and popular melodies and are full of innovative touches. His LP *Siembra* gained both critical acclaim and commercial success, selling over four hundred thousand copies.

Blades's music is particularly celebrated for his intelligent lyrics, which, departing from the normal telenovela (soap opera) doggerel and "hey, let's dance" clichés, embrace a variety of social themes with an incisive originality. Inspired by such writers as Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes, Blades has written songs about everything from disarmament to the environment. His 1980 recording of Tite Curet Alonso's "Tiburón" (Shark), an allegorical indictment of American imperialism, along with his denunciation of U.S. economic warfare against Cuba, incurred death threats from right-wing



Cubans in Miami, who banned his music from local radio stations. Perhaps Blades's most memorable songs are not the controversial political ones but those in which he strives to create, as he puts it, "a folklore of the city-not of one city, but of all the cities in Latin America." His "Numero seis" is a light-hearted lament about waiting for the subway, while "Te están buscando" is a Willie Colon-esque portrayal of barrio malevolence.

His most famous songs are epigrammatic character studies that personify, with a mixture of criticism and empathy, the vanities and travails of urban proletarian Latinos. The lyrics of "Juan Pachanga" portray a perfumed dandy whose suave exterior conceals an inner emptiness and loneliness; the song is also a driving dance tune, whose title is now the name of a Queens salsa club. "Pablo Pueblo" describes the monotonous, pointless, and joyless life of a proletarian worker:

A man returns in silence from his  
exhausting work, His gait is slow, his shadow trails  
behind. The same barrio awaits him, with the light at  
the corner, The trash in front, and the music emanat-  
ing from the bar....

He enters the room and stares at his wife and chil-  
dren, Wondering, "How long does this go on?"  
He takes his broken dreams,  
And patching them with hope, making a pillow out of  
hunger.  
He lies down, with an inner misery.

In "Pedro Navaja," another innovative clas-  
sic whose text is a sort of existential snapshot of bar-  
rio life, a petty gangster and a hooker shoot each  
other in an incident whose background is unknown  
and essentially irrelevant:

And Pedro Navaja fell mortally wounded to the sidewalk. Watching this woman who, revolver in hand, tells him, "I was thinking that this just isn't my day, and I'm sunk. But look at you—you're really shit out of luck." And believe me, folks, that although there had been a noise, No one stopped, no one was interested. No one asked what happened, no one wept. Only one drunk, stumbling over the two corpses. Pocketed their pistols, switchblades, and money, and walked on. And as he staggered merrily along, he sang, out of tune. The refrain that is the message of my song:

"Ay Dios, life is full of surprises!"

Blades has constantly tried to expand the horizons of Latin music. While he dislikes the word "crossover," he has tried to break barriers between the compartmentalized Latin and mainstream markets. Seeking to reach English-speaking Latinos as well as Anglos, he has recorded several songs in English, and his later LP covers include English and Spanish versions of his texts. Stylistically, much of his later music draws eclectically from reggae, calypso, merengue, and rock, and he has collaborated with artists as diverse as Joe Jackson, Linda Ronstadt, Lou Reed, and Elvis Costello. Blades, indeed, is the only salsa-based artist to have broken into the world-beat market, while maintaining his preeminence in the salsa world. Nevertheless, Blades has never really attained superstar popularity, a fact that he accepts stoically: "I will never be a superstar. My role is to be different, to do what others won't do, and as a result, my fortunes will always fluctuate."

Since the early 1980s, Blades has devoted much of his time to interests other than music. In 1984, he left salsa to earn a degree in international law from Harvard, and he has also pursued a moder-

ately successful Hollywood acting career. His most prominent role was in the 1985 film *Crossover Dreams*, in which he portrayed a salsero torn between the integrity of típico Latin music and his commercial ambition to cross over to the Anglo market and break out of the local club scene. From one perspective, Blades's preeminence as a salsero is paradoxical in that his commitment to music has never been more than sporadic and part time, involved as he has been in law, cinema, politics, and other matters. But seen from another angle, his ongoing involvement with nonmusical endeavors may have much to do with his greatness, since it is precisely his broader vision that has distinguished him from the ranks of mainstream salseros who, however talented, cannot seem to transcend the provincial club scene. As Trinidadian author C.L.R. James wrote, "What do they know of cricket, who only cricket know?"

In 1989, U.S. President George Bush ordered the invasion of Panama in order to depose his former CIA employee, the dictator Manuel Noriega, who had been involved in drug trading. After the invasion, which caused hundreds of Panamanian deaths and some two billion dollars worth of damage, the nation's presidency fell into the immense lap of Guillermo Endara, a nincompoop under whose rule drug trafficking and corruption increased beyond the level of the Noriega era. Among those incensed by the invasion and its aftermath was Ruben Blades, who in 1993 returned to Panama to run for president, with the goal of rescuing his country from corruption and Yankee big-stick imperialism. His campaign failed, but Blades may yet return to politics. If running for president might seem far removed from singing, for Blades both endeavors have the same ultimate goal: "What I pro-

pose is to create what up to this point has been a mythical place: a Latin America that respects and loves itself, is incorruptible, romantic, nationalistic, and has a human perception of the needs of the world at large."

Excerpt taken from the book:

Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae

Written by Peter Manuel, Professor of music at the CUNY (City University of New York)

## Thoughts on "Tiempos"

Ruben Blades is back. After another extended period of devoting his prodigious talents to pursuits other than composing and recording, Ruben's *Tiempos* shows that his voice is still the most original and dynamic in the field of Latin music.

In many respects this is the same Ruben Blades that many of us have come to love and revere—the same provocative lyrics, memorable melodies, original arrangements, and razor-sharp voice. At the same time, this is in some respects a new Blades—even more eclectic, pensive, and suggesting a mood of sober searching—searching for the soul of the Americas, and for depth, meaning, and love in a corrupt world.

Blades' eclecticism reaches new heights with this recording. This is not a "salsa" CD. Instead, it takes our conception of "Latin music" to new horizons, incorporating the diversity of the Latin American soundscape in a way which is organic rather than haphazard. "Sicarios" synthesizes the humble twang of the Brazilian berimbau and the Colombian vallenato-style accordion with the cumbia rhythm heard throughout so much of the continent. "Puente del Mundo" returns to the powerful polyrhythms of Afro-Cuban music, while "20 de Diciembre" breathes new life into the traditional rumba guaguancó. Instrumental pieces like "Viento y Madera," which run like a lyrical thread through the CD, resist any stylistic categorization; they could

be seen as a new genre of Latin jazz, or even as reviving the spirit of compositions by earlier Cuban composers Lecuona, Saumell, and Cervantes, whose best work defied boundaries of "classical" or "popular." Meanwhile, the rhythms of salsa effervesce as a basic lingua franca in several songs, as in "Vida" and "Creencia," which capture some of the flavor of Blades' searing and hard-driving hits like "Juan Pachanga" of years past.

And yet, a pensive, lyrical, and understated mood pervades this recording. If this factor may keep it from reaching number one on the salsa charts, it may make it a classic in the spirit of songs like "Pedro Navaja." As always, Blades' lyrics are profound and incisive. Romantic themes surface in songs like "Tu y mi ciudad." "20 de Diciembre" is a moving elegy to the innocent victims of the US invasion of Panama in 1989. "Vida" and "Creencia," while set to crisp salsa rhythms, are philosophical ruminations on fate, faith, and human responsibility. And in songs like "Día a día," Blades' indictment of corruption and hypocrisy leads ultimately to a search for renewal and affirmation.

*Tiempos* is a recording whose appeal will be deep and long, rather than short and broad. It invites us to think as well as dance, and to expand our own conceptions of American music and American sensibility.

Peter Manuel



- 
1. South Sea (Mar del Sur)
  2. Life (Vida)
  3. Paid Murderers (Sicarios)
  4. Rainfall (Aguacero)
  5. Wind and Wood (Viento y Madera)
  6. You and My City (Tú y Mi Ciudad)
  7. Belief (Creencia)
  8. Bridge of the World (Puente del Mundo)
  9. December 20th (20 de Diciembre)
  10. Hypocrisy (Hipocresía)
  11. Crossroads (Encrucijada)
  12. Illusions (Ilusiones)
  13. Day After Day (Día a Día)
  14. Times (Tiempos)

tiempos  
(Times)

I didn't write this album: I bore it. TIEMPOS (Times) has been difficult to produce. I have given it no less than two years of my life. During its creative process, personal and political circumstances affected my work. Such difficulties turned out to be helpful though, since they prompted me to find new directions and new talents that I brought into the project. I did away with some songs of the original sequence and wrote new melodies and lyrics. New arrangements and instrumentation were created.

The approved texts - both mine and from Romulo Castro, vital Panamanian singer/songwriter - were thoroughly revised and reevaluated, and the result is a more balanced product showing greater clarity and honesty. The reflective and melancholic tone in TIEMPOS was strengthened by the fusion of classics, popular and folk, and by the percussive support of Caribbean rhythms both from Central and South America. These combinations produced a kind of musical balance absent in my past productions and culturally more representative of the Latin American feeling. From the violin to the bombo legüero, from accordion to Caja Peruana, from berimbau to the Cuban conga drum, from guitar to the soprano sax, from piano to maracas and from the string quartet to the kettledrum, the diversity of instruments, the sensitivity and the technical knowledge of their players made it

possible to bring into each theme a treatment which shows respect for and adopts the text's intention. TU Y MI CIUDAD (You and my City), interpreted as a "chacarera", acquires a dimension impossible to create under the relentless beat of a Cuban "Clave". 20 DE DICIEMBRE (December the 20th) commemorates those fallen in Panama during 1989's invasion and finds in the Cuban guaguanco sound the energy and majesty only possible through this genre. Under the paradigms ruling today's recording companies, TIEMPOS is not "commercial work". To mix "salsa" with "chacarera" is anathema for the commercial broadcasting stations of America. Their formats are conceived to attract specific groups of consumers, which makes them exclusive by definition. It's quite unlikely that a radio station with a "salsa" format will program VIENTO Y MADERA (Wind and Wood), or PUENTE DE MUNDO (Bridge of the World). Then again, my intention was not to create a "commercial album" just to produce good music. I think it is suicidal to limit creative power willingly and insist on tired approaches which, through sheer repetition, en up plunging both artist and music into deep mediocrity and irrelevance. The artist, more than owing to the public, owes himself. The value of his, or her, contribution will be found in the sincerity of the work presented and not in the artist's interpretation of what others want to hear, or experience. Making music is not the same thing as making shoes, or clothes. It implies a different

process, another intention.

Without EDITUS, plus the excellent group of musicians who collaborated on this effort, TIEMPOS would have not materialized. The extraordinary capacity, delivery, technique, intelligence and sensitivity they showed go parallel with their noble human condition and education. Costa Rica is right in feeling proud about them. I thank God for having found them and for the opportunity to work with them.

Their contribution has enabled me to follow the path I started with LA ROSA DE LOS VIENTOS (The Rose of the Winds) and with my Panamanian colleagues: to create music for America, from Latin America and for the whole planet, one that can aptly describe the force of our rhythms and instruments, from north to south, east to west. The illustration on the cover says it all: I'm happy. Creo que puedo.

Rubén Blades

Panama, February 9th, 1999



Rubén Blades

Times (English literal translation of the lyrics)

1. South Sea (Walter Flores)  
(Intempo S.A.)

2. Life (R. Blades)  
(Rubén Blades Publishing)

No one chooses family,  
or a race when born,  
nor to be rich, poor, good, or bad  
courageous, or cowardly.  
We are born of a decision  
in which we weren't involved,  
and nobody can promise us results.  
When we are born we don't even know  
our name,  
nor which path we will take,  
nor what the future holds for us.  
Between our baptism and our funeral  
each one forges a path  
and with his decisions a destiny.

We are just another draw  
on a game that someone else started,  
and each one will bet  
according to the hand he's inherited.  
Life is a door  
for which you don't need to pay to enter  
and the soul is the ticket that, when living,  
is torn when you pay.  
And each step creates a footprint,  
and each footprint is a story,  
and each yesterday is a star

in a sky of memories.

And time's tide  
brings forth and takes away our contradictions,  
and between the returns and the good-byes  
mistakes heal.

And each friend is the family  
that we choose within strangers,  
and in between waiting and finding  
one learns through the years  
that only to our conscience  
does our spirit answer,  
and that gender is one thing  
and being a person, another.

No one chooses a family,  
or a race, when born,  
nor to be good, bad, pretty, ugly,  
innocent or guilty.  
From birth to death  
every life is a bet:  
from our free will the answer depends.

I dream of a different world,  
where our love never ends!

Fight for a different world  
where our love never fades!



3. Paid Murderers (Sicarios) (R. Blades)  
(Rubén Blades Publishing)

Be aware - the one riding the motorcycle  
doesn't get respect from cars -  
and from the buses? Better not even talk about that!

Relax, that when the time comes,  
if you don't lose control,  
they won't be able to capture us.

Stop with the nerves already and concentrate.  
It is too late to go back.  
One does what must be done  
when there is nothing left to say.

Remember the color of the car is white,  
it is European and brand new, and with official tags.  
They are five, three in the back and two up front:  
our man is in the picture  
that I just showed you.

Place yourself next to the driver  
and don't think about what's going to happen.  
We don't have time to lose:  
take off when you hear me shoot.

Today life will change.  
Today your life will change.  
Today my life will change.

I don't know if the guy is good or bad:  
all I know is that he had to lose.  
In the heavens is God almighty:  
on earth, the rule of the cartel.

I hope the machine gun  
doesn't get stuck again.

like the practice yesterday.  
Later, when we get paid for the job  
I'll invite you for a drink.  
Don't you turn me down. Don't.

I do not feel compassion for him.  
He never did anything for me while he was alive.  
If the choice is between him and I,  
it won't hurt me to watch him die.

Today life will change.  
Today your life will change.  
Today my life will change.

4. Rainfall (R. Blades)  
(Rubén Blades Publishing)

"North clear and South dark  
the rain comes, without a doubt".  
On tiptoe, so it doesn't hurt,

my memory brings the voice of my grandmother:  
"the years make us free or prisoners.  
A glass half-empty is also half-full.  
Life is a window or a garbage dump,  
according to the point of view that defines the pas-  
senger."

The water comes, the thunder announces.  
Blinking, the sky spills on us.

My grandmother's hand  
takes me through the rainfall  
to a different city.

where people lived without fear.  
Without bars on the windows,  
paid murderers or beggars,  
nor spiders making nests  
inside our hopes and dreams.  
The water is coming. Rainfall.

My city has become hard and it tastes like fire,  
a whirlwind of vultures saddening its roofs.

But my confidence grows  
when I see through the rainfall  
the face of my grandmother  
which makes me believe that I can.  
A dark clearing, gray silence.

Hope: leaf to the wind.  
It smells like water and today, once again,  
our neighborhood breathes sky.  
The water is coming, some other time.  
Grandmother: I think I can.  
Water is coming down!

5. Wind and Wood (Fidel Gamboa)  
(Intempo S.A.)

6. You and My City (R. Castro)  
(Saguán Publishing / Rubén Blades Publishing)

A reason for life made me love you.  
How many lessons my soul learned from you!  
I don't know what it was that I did to lose you.  
I didn't even realize when it happened.  
Today my disappointment can eat a priest.  
and in my harsh words I feel the lingering taste  
of hope not yet ripe:  
how do you get rid of this?  
Oh love of absent kisses, who watches over my  
loneliness.  
today I want to unlearn you  
and I don't know how to start.

I doubt what I know and I lie to myself daily  
because inside I feel you living in me.  
How to forget you if you are my calendar?  
Where to multiply myself if not in you?

The night is like a drink that I swallow alone,  
inside the four walls of my anguish.  
What I thought was eternal was in fact very short:  
when will this end?  
My love of empty kisses, finish dying out.  
I got here because I loved you:  
now I want to forget you!



7. Belief (R. Blades)  
(Rubén Blades Publishing)

We all have to believe in something.  
For something we must live,  
because without a reason to exist there is no hope.

When there is faith,  
from its summit  
you can see beyond failure.  
Quicksand, the feeling:  
a unicorn spattered with blood.  
I learn and unlearn suffering,  
and fall, but get up again.  
Between fantasy and reality  
I build a supernatural realm,  
and argue there, my daily mistakes,  
and because of this, hope to be forgiven.

In every town in all religions,  
vice and virtue fight.  
From time immemorial the Good faces the Bad,  
and the debate is never solved.  
The road is made by faith.  
You can't live without faith.  
Praise be to love, Hosanna!

8. Bridge of the World ( R. Castro)  
(Rubén Blades Publishing)

A green strip of earth  
which, being absent, I carry inside:  
waves of the North and South unite in your center.  
Red, blue, white dawn,  
was born of a watermelon slice;  
an immigrant's soul was your seed,  
and the Indian's blood formed your shore.  
Stone of heaven! Water of moon!  
NGobe Bugle, Emberá, Chocó, white, black and  
Kuna:  
profiles of a hope that doesn't fade.

A paradise was bought with  
beads of glass, clothes, fabric, and mirrors:  
source of youth for an old empire.  
The light inside your heart  
transformed to a steel road,  
and turned our people to shadows of what they once  
were.  
When will we be hands, instead of fingers?  
With 'claro oscuro', with a guitar  
with celebration and mourning!  
Pieces of hearts made up your land's surface.  
We will always be here, even if we are far.

On the bridge of the World  
Abiá Yala bin sógue  
("Love to indigenous America" in the Kuna lan-  
guage)

9. December 20th (R. Blades)  
(Rubén Blades Publishing)

Chorrillo went up in flames, like Berlin.  
An intense fire, which even lighted zinc.  
Santa Claus brought for Christmas  
bombs for Avenue A.  
Because they're close to the station,  
the neighborhood and the Ismael records burned.  
In the shadows, a general  
surrenders his machete, without fighting.

Now and always, let's remember.  
Now and always, friends.

The confusion was infernal,  
flares rained, sent from the sea.  
How many died? I do not know.  
Boy Jesus, you say it.

It is preferred to avoid talking about it,  
a national trauma not yet healed.  
It will never be resolved  
without facing the past.

Now and always, let's remember.  
Now and always, friends.

10. Hypocrisy (R. Blades)  
(Rubén Blades Publishing)

Society disintegrates.  
Each family is on the war path.  
Corruption and bad government  
make the city a living hell.  
Screams and accusations,  
lies and betrayals,  
make reason disappear.  
Indifference is born  
Conscience is lost,  
and there is no ideal that doesn't evaporate.  
And everybody swears that they do not understand

why their dreams today turn to shit.  
And they speak to me of the past in the present,  
blaming others for the problem  
of our universal hypocrisy.

The heart becomes a trench.  
Its motto is to save its own skin first.  
And this way, the face of a friend  
melts into the face of an enemy.

The media  
augments the confusion,  
and the truth is a lie and vice versa.  
Our disillusion creates desperation,  
and the cycle repeats with greater intensity.  
And lost in the cacophony  
the will of a people drowns.  
And in between the insults and the Ave Marias,  
I cannot distinguish between the prisoner and the  
jailer  
inside of the hypocrisy!

There no longer are Lefts or Rights:  
there only are excuses and pretexts.  
A beaten rhetoric,  
for a planet of ambidextrous people.  
There is no familiar union,  
nor social justice,  
nor solidarity with your neighbor.  
Evil is born from this,  
and official abuse  
ends closing our path.

And everybody insists that they do not understand  
why today's dreams turn to shit.  
And we speak of the past in the present,  
letting our future get lost,  
and living within our hypocrisy.

11. Crossroads (R. Castro)  
(Saguán Publishing / Rubén Blades Publishing)

In front of the precipice there is a trace of reason,  
which may help us to find the solution.  
But it is useless, our decision,  
if the game is fixed,  
by the owners of the ball,  
and here I am, with you,  
trying to clarify the situation.  
A crossroad asks for clear answers  
from a broken family, from a shattered Nation.  
On top of the disgrace of a brutal corruption  
the hope of a nation lives, and resists.  
And now we have to win back life, the memory  
and the love of America, and here I am,  
trying, believing that it is not too late to speak.

Our crossroad: fight or retreat.  
We either are a broken family, or a saved Nation.

12. Illusions (C. Vargas)  
(Intempo S.A.)

13. Day After Day (R. Blades)  
(Rubén Blades Publishing)

Every day I wake up thinking that I hear your voice.  
Every day, still, our good-bye hurts.  
Whoever hasn't made mistakes hasn't tried.  
Whoever hasn't forgiven has never loved.  
And whoever has never sinned, has never lived.

Every day nostalgia pushes me forward.  
Every day our distance advises me to forget.  
You and I, each with a piece of the truth  
and sharing the same heart,  
which we broke in two, every day!

Even though I tried it a thousand times,  
I can't drown what belongs to your soul,  
in order to forget!

Every day I wake up wanting to be better  
and I go to sleep, every night,  
with my contradiction.  
Living between a rock and a hard place  
I face yesterday's horizon,  
And from it, you appear.  
Every day!



14. Times (R. Blades)  
(Rubén Blades Publishing)

Life is an imprint of triumphs and failures,  
made up of pieces of love and pain.

Time is a rosary,  
its beads the memories,  
a garden of emotions of what was lived.

There is a time to laugh, and another to cry.  
A time to leave, and another to return.  
There is a time to live and another to end.  
there is a time to die and another to start.

When the time comes when I'm at the end of my  
road,

I hope my smile says that I accept what I was.  
The material things, I will leave them with you,  
only what I learned will come with me.

There is a time to give and another to receive,  
a time to think and another to decide.

There is a time to forget,  
and another to understand.

There is a time to win,  
and another to lose.

There is a time to suffer  
and there is a time to love.

A time to feel and another to forgive.  
There is a time to live and another to end.  
There is a time to die and another to start.



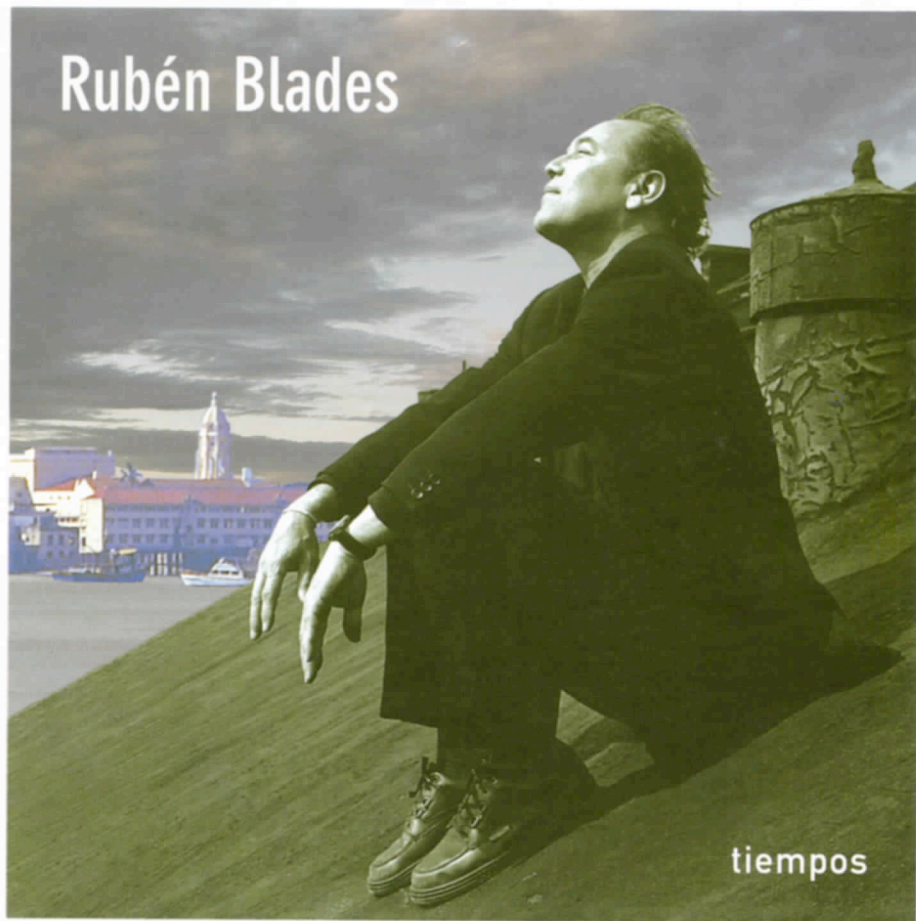
Fotografias por: Xavier Guardans

R  
U  
B  
E  
N



B  
L  
A  
D  
E  
S

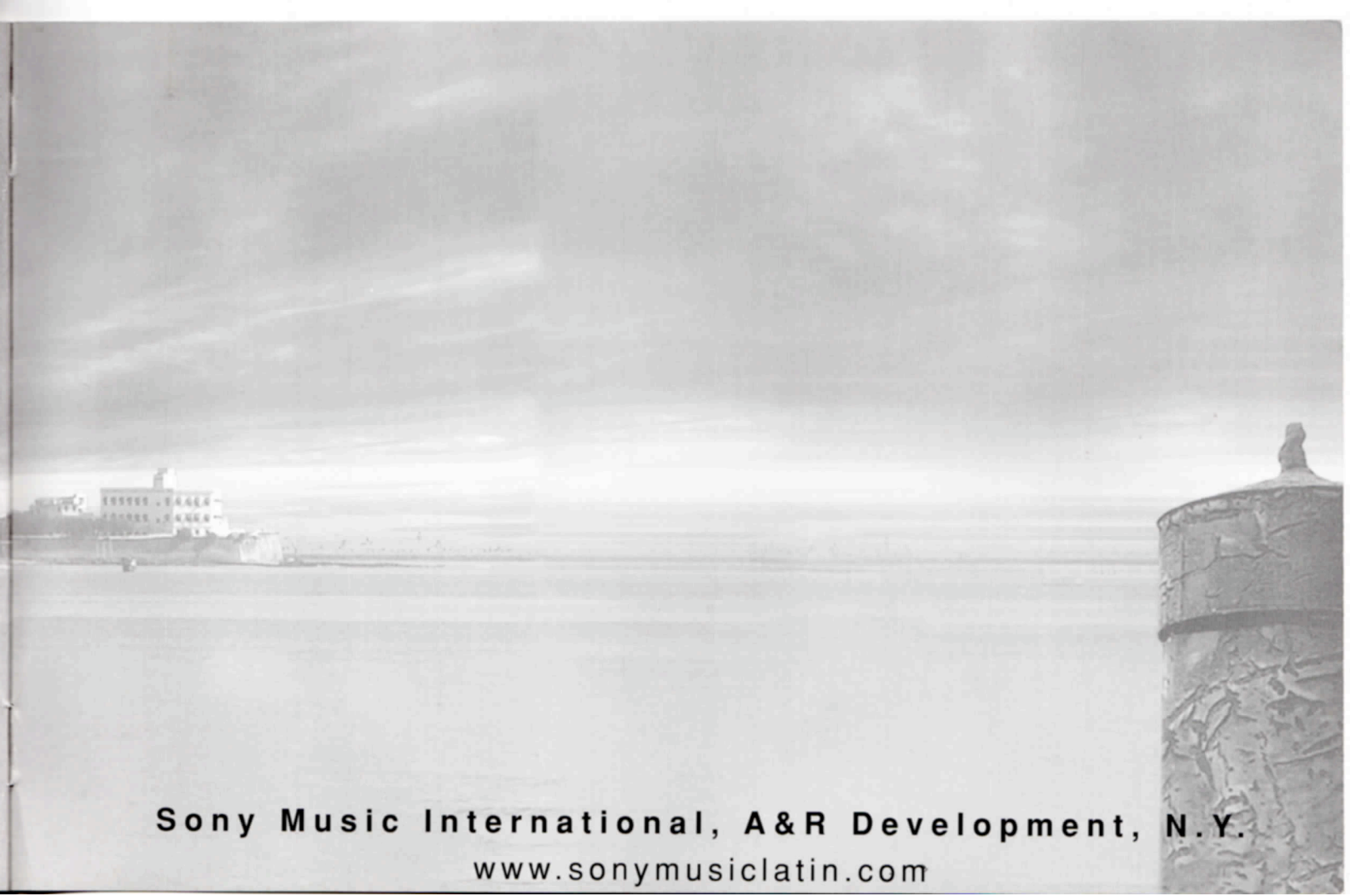
Rubén Blades



tiempos







**Sony Music International, A&R Development, N.Y.**

[www.sonymusiclatin.com](http://www.sonymusiclatin.com)

