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**Exclusive Interview
with Rubén Blades**

**The Endangered
Rain Forest**



Coffee Comeback

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Front cover: *A good, rich cup of coffee is back in vogue in the United States. Connoisseurs agree that a tasty brew must come from fresh arabica beans, produced mainly in Latin America. Silkscreen by Anne Laddon. (See page 2)*

Back cover: *With bold strokes and bright colors Colombian María de la Paz Jaramillo catches night revelers in mid-pose in her 1984 oil on canvas Couple. Courtesy Nohra Haime Gallery. (See page 40)*

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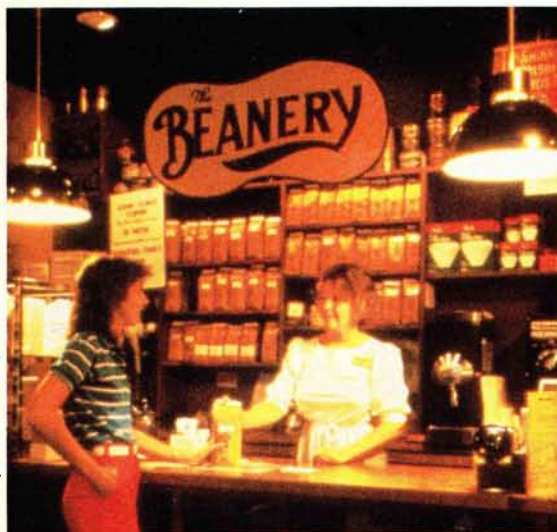
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UPFRONT



courtesy Coffee Development Group

If this issue has a unifying thread, it is a quest for quality in life and art. To start out, two stories, mine on page 2 and Steve Cohen's on page 8, tell the tale of modern man's pursuit of a quality cup of coffee (photo top left). Then Rubén Blades, the Panamanian *salsa* king, explains to contributing editor Robert Parker his ambition to improve the lot of the Latin American urban masses (page 15). And biologist Allen M. Young suggests the greater meaning of the beleaguered tropical rain forest in the total scheme of life on earth (photo middle left; page 24).

On the side of art, Susan N. Masuoka describes the quality lithographic work of Kyron Graphics, which draws artists from around the Hemisphere to the company's Mexico City studios (Mexican artist Maximino Javier's 1979 *The Magnate*, detail bottom left; page 20). We welcome Ms. Masuoka, a journalist working in the Mexican capital, as a new contributing editor. Argentine photographer Gustavo Gatto imaginatively finds stunning designs in mundane objects (cabañas at Mar del Plata, Argentina, detail below; page 32), while a young Colombian painter, María de la Paz Jaramillo, records the energy and color of nightclub life (page 40). Finally, Roderic A. Camp relates how Toluca, Mexico, converted an urban eyesore into a place of peace and beauty (page 60).

Keep in touch.

Wendell P. Carter



Allen M. Young



Susan N. Masuoka



Gustavo Gatto

The Vision of Rubén Blades

At the top of his career as Latin America's muse of urban conscience, Panama's young *salsa* king explores the "feeling of the Latin American city dweller—his anguish, his hopes, his happiness and his pain."

Interview by Robert A. Parker

His vision of the Americas begins in the teeming life of the cities. His expression of that vision through *salsa* has made him one of the most popular composer-singers in Latin America.

On a quick stopover in New York, prior to a year's sabbatical in Boston, Rubén Blades recently discussed the converting of his vision into music. It is also a search for justice and truth, a search for his own destiny and, according to his recent album, a search for America.

I'm searching for America, and I fear I won't find it.

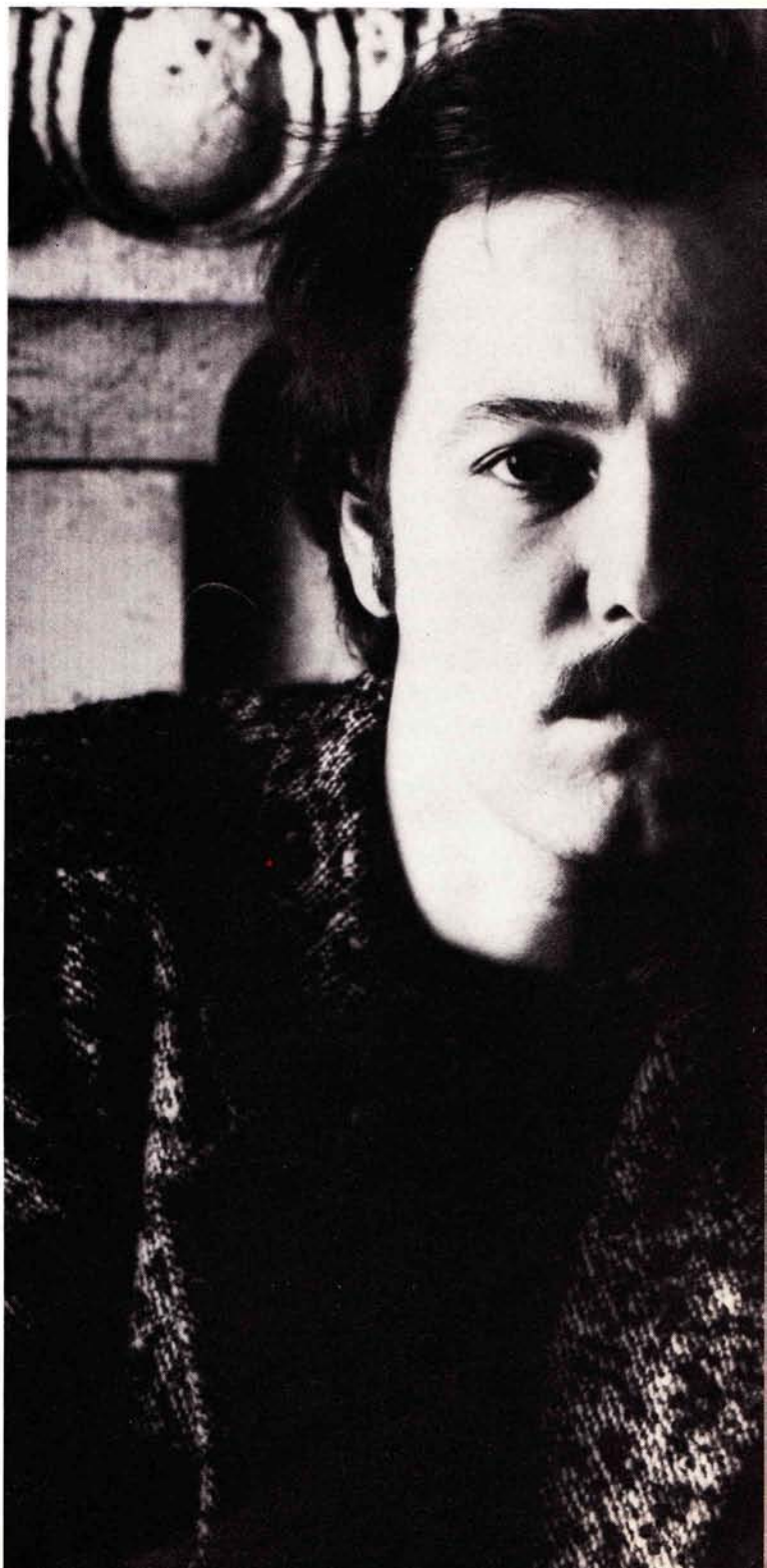
Its traces have become lost amongst the darkness.

I'm calling for America, but it can't answer me.

Those afraid of truth have made her disappear.

Rubén Blades is driven by the vision of a perfect world. Still idealistic at age 36, apparently uncorrupted by success, he is attending Harvard Law School this term in order to add a master's degree in law to the law degree he earned in Panama. Why? One's eyes are drawn to the clear expanse of his forehead, wanting to penetrate to the mind within. Is all this simplicity, is all this sincerity real? Exposing one's palm is a sign of openness in body language. As Blades talks, he places one palm flat on the table, he moves it in circles in the air, he turns it upward at eye level and looks across the surface.

Blades (pronounced like the blade of a knife) has introduced sharp-edged social and political comment to a musical style, the *salsa*, that flourished in the 1940's. That *salsa* was danceable music from African and Caribbean origins. Blades has revolutionized the lyrics, preserved the beat and liberated the instrumentation by using vibes and synthesizers instead of brass. The result he terms "urban music." It expresses, he says, "the feeling of the Latin Amer-



Caroline Greysnock/1984

ican city dweller—his anguish, his hopes, his happiness and his pain.”

Even when he studied law in Panama, Blades saw a connection between his social concerns and the musical world. “I felt that popular music would play an important role in Latin America. I felt it was an effective way of stating cases, of presenting the truth, the people’s side,” he says. “Because they all had sounds, and those sounds were as important as anything I could do in a court of law.”

When Blades arrived in New York City in 1974, his goal was to create sounds in the media capital of the world that would draw attention to Latin American social issues. He succeeded. Joining forces with Bronx trumpet player Willie Colón, he produced a series of records that explored *salsa*’s musical horizons. One album, *Siembra* (Planting), is reportedly the all-time, best-selling *salsa* record. Another, *Maestra vida* (Life Teaches), offered a Latin opera that told a three-generation saga of the Quiñones family.

This past summer Blades crisscrossed Europe and the Americas with his musical group, Seis de Solar (Six from the Tenement). He now records for a major label. His next project is to translate into songs a series of short stories by Gabriel García Márquez. And he plans to make a record in English soon.

For a recent conversation in the Fifth Avenue offices of Elektra Records, he was dressed in jeans, dirty white sneakers, a dark jacket and an open shirt. Blades appeared to have just stepped in off the barrio streets he identifies with. But he also had shaved off his moustache, as if to project himself as less Latin, more broad-based, less image-conscious, more exposed. He spoke slowly in lightly accented English.

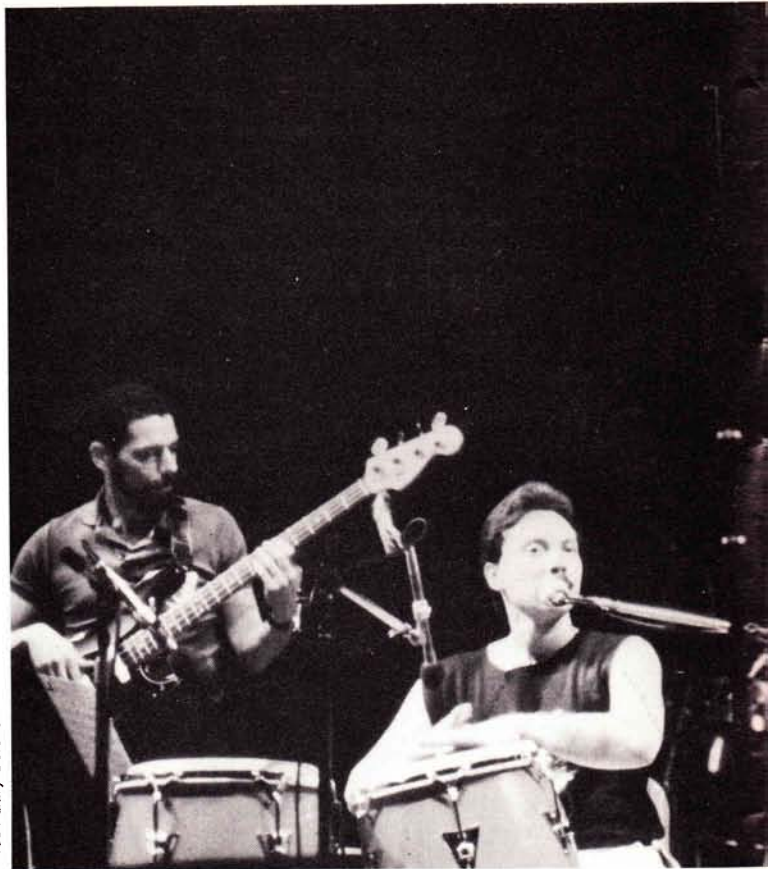
The “new” Rubén Blades is a serious young man challenging the traditions of more than the musical world.

Why did you enroll at Harvard?

It’s a way for me to reestablish myself in law, keep my credibility as a professional. It’s also going to be healthy for me, after 10 years in New York City, to face a new ambience, new challenges, new people. They are going to demand things from me that are different, which is good. You tend to grow complacent when things are going your way. And it will be good to be just a person again, not a performer.

Was it to be a performer that you originally came to New York?

There were two reasons. Technically, I wanted to create the music I heard inside me and perform it the way I heard the sounds. And I also wanted to find



out things about myself. I had lived with my family all my life. I needed to know if I could survive on my own. I did not want to end my professional career and move into the mainstream of Panamanian society. I didn’t feel ready to be married and have children. Nor was I ready to smother my artistic desires. I had seen friends of mine do that—and die, emotionally and spiritually. And coming to the U.S. was, of course, part of the dream of every one of us who was raised after World War II. Some of us had become more realistic about the U.S. after the Canal riots of 1964. I, myself, had realized it was ridiculous for me to perform in English, when I should be more interested in finding out things about myself as a Panamanian. But I also came to realize that a government and its people are different, and I never let any bitterness cloud my relationships with North Americans.

Why did you settle on salsa to express your ideas?

It wasn’t just me. Many of us gravitated toward music that was more dynamic and down-to-earth. I, myself, felt Latin ballads were pretentious and untruthful. *Salsa* was the most dynamic alternative we had to rock, which was in English. What I did was move away from the notion that such music was only for dancing. I felt it could be used to create an urban folklore.



The first salsa singer to write his own material—and the first to put politics into the lyrics—Rubén Blades has given this traditional Afro-Caribbean music a vital, urban voice that has made his *Siembra* the all-time best-selling salsa album

You have said you wanted to be able to express rage and violence.

Well, our generation was raised on violence. We felt the anger that every youth feels. Some decide they want to join gangs; others choose antisocial behavior. We reacted very much like I feel kids from the South Bronx react today through breakdancing. I believe breakdancing is an alternative to violence. The kids that used to run in gangs, bashing in heads, now find through the physicality of breakdancing a release of tensions, a way of venting their anger in a constructive way. So the dynamics of *salsa* allowed us to bring out that rage and that violence we felt in a world that saw the Panama situation in '64, the Dominican situation in '65, the Czechoslovakian situation in '68, plus the Vietnam war and the U.S. civil rights movement. The world all of a sudden had grown more complex, and we needed a means to release tensions and deal with the new responsibility that was being given to us.

The concept of justice seems very important to you.

It's based on the respect that we should have for life in general—and for other people's rights. I was raised to feel that way. My grandmother was a very liberal woman in a society ruled by men. Emma not only survived that, she survived without bitterness.

I became, in a way, her project. It was not just the notion of right and wrong. It was the recognition that you seek for your own benefit but consider the needs of the other person. Emma was obsessed with justice, perhaps because she had gone through the fire of two divorces and raising a family at a time when divorce was the greatest stigma a woman in that society could face. A sense of justice also came from our working-class neighborhood, where nobody cared what your last name was or what work your father did. It was: can you run, how smart are you, how good are you fighting, how good are you sharing? In that environment, I found that my sense of fair play, my patience, my respect for the other person's rights guided me.

When did your songs begin emphasizing justice?

From the beginning. Because this whole business of *salsa* music was too exclusive. The lyrics were repetitive, often not grammatically correct, did not address Latin Americans in general or the life in the cities where most of them live. They repeated the old Cuban format of the 1940's. I believe there is a need to dance, a need to escape reality. But I also think there is an urgency to present life as it is, a need to link through music Latin American countries, which are polarized today by excessive nationalistic and political ideas. Through music, we can create our own form of social communication.

The driving force of your songs appears to be the message, but you also need to blend the melody to the message. How do you determine your priorities?

Ninety percent of the time my songs begin with the lyrics. I write an idea and leave it alone, sometimes for months. Then I go back to it, and if it rings true, if it still touches me, I work on the lyrics more and the melody comes. Because what I am doing is creating not songs but a popular literature that is sung. But as I have become more secure in my work, I have become more comfortable with melodic structure. And my next work is going to be even more melodic, although the lyrics will keep the same edge.

The song "Buscando America" (Searching for Amer-

ica) seems to have a stronger melody than your other works.

It's interesting that you would choose that. It is one of my very few songs in which the melody and words came simultaneously. I was so touched by the concept that I was practically singing the melody as I was writing the lyrics.

What were you trying to say with that song?

The horrible thing about war, about unjust situations, is that when two people want the same thing, they totally disregard each other's point of view. They try to destroy each other. Yet everyone wants to live, and they want to live in peace and freedom. Now, when Columbus left Spain on a commercial venture to find a short route to the Indies, the people who went with him—as much as history emphasizes their desire for wealth—I don't believe that the mere idea of economic wealth would make these people get into boats and face an unknown world that many said was flat, a world in which boats would fall over the edge. I think they were really trying to find a life that would be better. In that sense of finding a better place, we're all today looking for America. We found it geographically speaking, but emotionally we are still searching.

You also seem to be saying that America has lost itself.

We have made it lose itself every time we deny someone else the right to what they deserve. I have been a mediator many times in my life. I worked with prisoners in Panama when I did my thesis. I worked with people who, according to society, were beyond redemption, people I wouldn't turn my back on. But I always dealt with them as human beings, not condescendingly. And I got a response from these people in kind. So I believe that we can make this world work. But I also believe we're in dangerous waters. We have a wonderful continent. America is the most dynamic, most diverse and beautiful continent in the world today, and yet the state that America is in is just awful. We have lost our sense of justice, of wanting to do things for each other.

You hold onto this sense of justice when others who achieve worldly success would have given in. How have you withstood the temptation?

What has helped is that when I went into this work, I was totally sure I was going to succeed. It never crossed my mind that the *pueblo* would not support me. Because I always felt I was part of the *pueblo*. How I feel, I thought, is how *we* feel. I never thought of me, me, probably as a result of my street upbringing.



© 1984 Gary Gershoff

ing. Another thing is that I never accepted the entourage idea. I still open my own doors, go get my own water. I never fell into that because I never had that kind of insecurity. Still another thing on my side is that I never got involved in drugs. If I had been into drugs, I would never have been able to face the consequences of my work or the expectations of other people. Now, not doing drugs is amazing in this environment, and I don't say this out of superiority. But it gave me the opportunity to see clearly what was happening, and when I was vulnerable and got hurt, I could see the wound heal. And that made me still stronger. Of course, people are now asking why I am going back to school just when I can make so much money. Well, I need to get in touch with myself. I need the break. I'm not afraid that if I leave the music world everybody will forget me, that somebody else will get my public. I don't worry about that. I know that my work is honest and has quality.

What are the new directions you are planning?

My next big project is the García Márquez work, using seven of his early short stories. I am doing it because I want to end the stereotype that intellectuals and popular artists cannot work together. I approached Gabriel because we have a background that is very similar. His grandmother was Colombian, and mine was also. He comes from the coast, and I do as well. He also maintains a strong popular root. He loves the music from Colombia that stresses

Blades has plans for several more albums, including one in English, but he is studying for a master's degree in law at Harvard this year with an eye toward entering the Panamanian political arena

social issues. And I do believe that if Gabo hadn't become a writer of fiction and journalism, he would have been a musician. He told a friend, "Through Rubén's songs, I'm going to be the singer I never was." When I told him of my project, he understood immediately what I wanted to do and why I wanted to do it, although he still doesn't know *how* I'm going to do it. Before that an album will maintain the Afro-Cuban rhythms as it integrates folkloric Indian rhythms, in order to bring more of Latin America into this popular music. So when the García Márquez album comes in two years, it is going to be the best all-around musical production I have ever done.

What about reports you are going to do an album in English and call yourself Panama Blades?

Yes, I'm going to satisfy my youthful desire to do an album in English. But I have two problems. One is that I do not want to leave my base, a mistake that has been committed by many Latin artists. They burn their bridges, go to the other side, are not accepted and are forced to return. But the need to do social commentary about Latin American cities doesn't change with the language. In fact, these cities feel a lot of foreign influences. And social abuse is a universal problem, anyway. The other problem is to sing in English without it having a ring of commercialism, of selling out. So I asked myself why a Latin American would sing in English. Well, I decided it was my West Indian heritage. There is a large West Indian community in Panama, people who came during the construction of the railroad and the canal. My grandfather was one of them—that's where the name Blades comes from—and when I was young I used to hear them sing calypsos. And there it was, the connection I was looking for. So I'm going to do a mixture of calypso and Afro-Cuban music. I'll sing in English and call myself Panama Blades to separate my two images.

And what will the future bring after Harvard?

I will go back to touring. I am not thinking about going to Panama yet. Eventually I will, but when I go there I will not be performing as much. I don't think I'll ever stop writing. I may continue recording. But I won't be performing when I'm older,

because I would like to have a family, and I don't believe I can have a family unless I settle down. Also, I know that if I get a chance to enter public life, I cannot be involved in professional touring.

Does this mean that 30 years from now you will be retiring from public life, or from musical life?

Public life—I will definitely be involved in some capacity. And not by choice but by necessity. Because, you see, I'm part of a generation that has learned that private complaining will never solve anything. I think I can make a difference among a youth that has grown cynical about the political process in much of Latin America. So if I decide to enter public life, still relatively young, untouched by corruption or a party of any persuasion, and if you take into consideration that 75 percent of the population of Panama is less than 35 years old, and 50 percent is under 21, I think I have a hell of a chance. But I am not a fool. I do not assume I can arrive in Panama one day and be elected to anything on the basis of my popularity as a musician. I must spend four or five years, at least, creating an infrastructure that will allow me to understand and prepare plans for each of Panama's areas of need—health, housing, education. How am I going to create this infrastructure? By finding the best talent available in Panama, people who have not wanted to integrate themselves into any particular movement. Of course, before doing this I must be convinced that the Panamanian people have acquired a political maturity, a sense of responsibility, and would support my ideas. I do not have the least desire to be left alone holding a bomb. But I'll perceive this after we start two or three social experiments in the city. I want to try some of the things I did with the prisoners many years ago, which is to create a program in which the community helps itself. We will select an area that is considered impossible to correct and have its own people change it—with the help of the private sector and the infrastructure being created right now among students, young professionals and others. We will create a kind of think tank and make projections about the economy, about unemployment, about what we need to do. We will have something for the people to base their expectations on.

All this is admirable but also idealistic, and idealists create enemies.

We will encourage communication, not dissension and separation. I'm sure it's not going to happen without a fight, and I'm not going to give up my New York apartment. There will be a lot of problems, a lot of problems. But what is my alternative? To pretend that the potential is not there? I really think that I can make a difference. I really do. 