

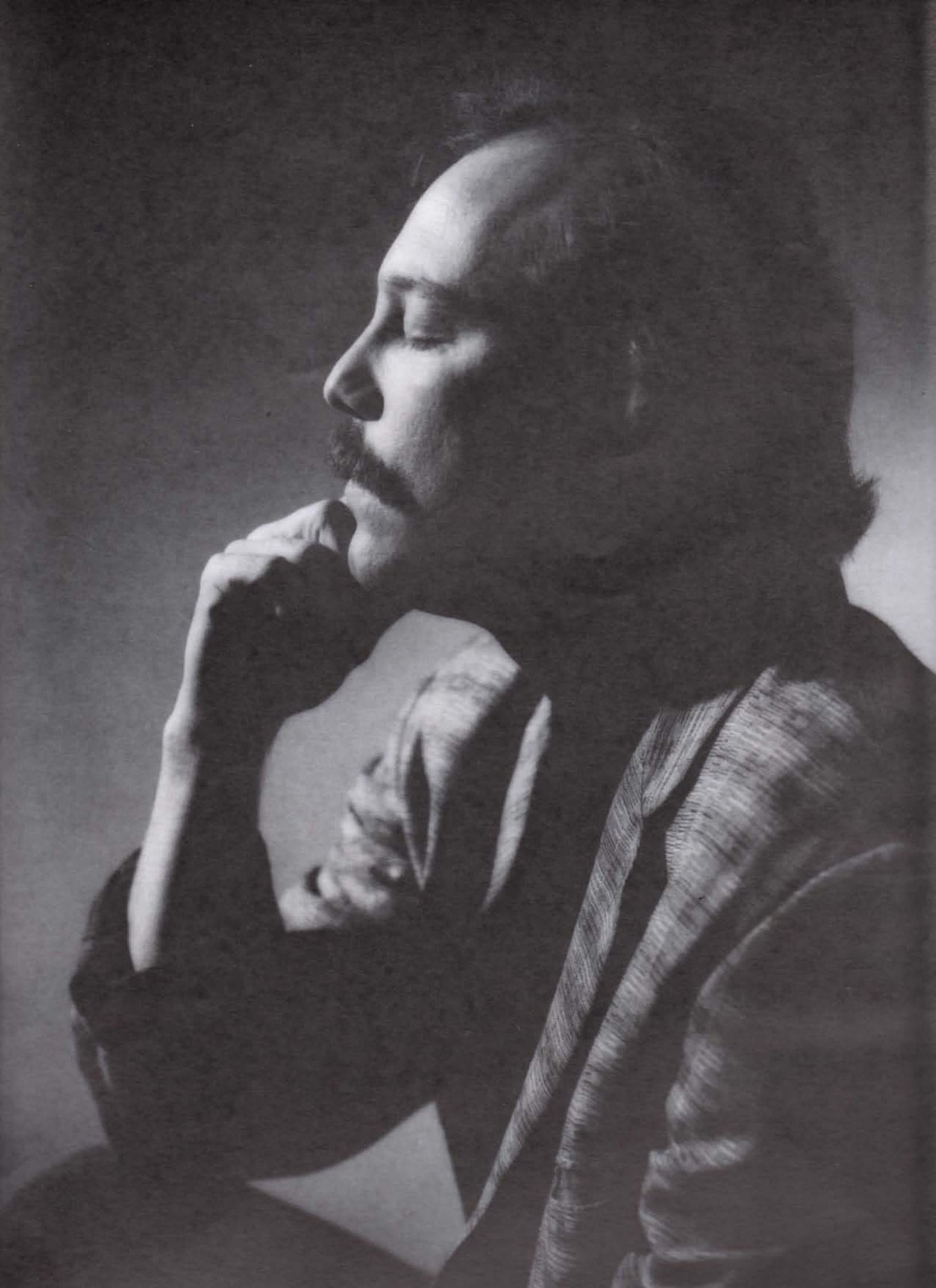
RUBEN BLADES · PENELOPE SPHEERIS · TONY

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STYLE





PANAMANIAN PANDEMONIUM

Rubén Blades—musician, actor and activist—uses his prestige to fight oppression throughout the Americas.

*Every time we place our faith in
other hands
We take a chance by giving up control
And second guessing, feeling starts
to fade away
And hope's on hold*

—Rubén Blades/Lou Reed,
“Hopes on Hold”

BY GERRIE LIM

Rubén Blades, Panamanian musician and aspiring politician lately turned Hollywood actor, pulls from a pack the latest in a series of Merit Ultra Lights and ignites it with the still-burning stub of his last, nearly finished cigarette. His preferred attire—blue jeans, canvas shoes, and an untucked cotton shirt hung casually on his six-foot frame—reflects an open nature: He'll answer any question with unbridled enthusiasm. Although, after 15 years in the United States, Blades—along with Elvis Costello, Lou Reed and Sting. It's also his first foray into rock 'n' roll. This fall will bring yet another album, this time in Spanish, and once again salsa, called *Antecedente*. “If people are going to listen to what I have to say,” he declares, “they're going to have to make adjustments. I don't want the problems that some other artists have had where they become very successful doing a certain type of music and then, when they've grown and they try to move in other directions, they have a huge problem with their audience. I'm an explorer musically. I don't want to feel confined.” Or, as his close friend Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian novelist and Nobel laureate, once said: “There are two ways of writing. You can write for an audience by giving them what they want, or you can write for yourself and let them come up to your level. The second way is best.”

It's also a surefire way to attract controversy. Blades's hairpin career turns have often left friends and followers perplexed, and his pointed and often expressly political compositions have had whole governments up in arms. Born in Panama City of mixed extraction (his paternal grandfather was an Englishman—hence his last name—who married a Colombian, and his mother is Cuban), he graduated in law from the University of Panama and became a bank attorney before moving to New York in 1974. There, he worked for \$74 a week in the mailroom of Fania Records, salsa's premier label, while gigging and recording with the Fania All-Stars and several other

ished cigarette. His preferred attire—blue jeans, canvas shoes, and an untucked cotton shirt hung casually on his six-foot frame—reflects an open nature: He'll answer any question with unbridled enthusiasm. Although, after 15 years in the United States, Blades, 39, is no longer *un turista*, he remains somewhat *de afuera*, an outsider. But that's beginning to change.

He's regarded as one of the finest, and certainly the most generally visible, proponents of salsa, the Afro-Caribbean dance music created largely in New York City by immigrant Hispanics. Blades established himself as a singer in Manhattan, but left two years ago to live in Los Angeles to pursue a career in film. He's currently being seen alongside Sonia Braga, Julie Carmen and Christopher Walken in *The Milagro Beanfield War*, based on the 1974 John Nichols novel and directed by Robert Redford. "I was very happy to play a role where I wasn't a musician or a dope dealer," says Blades, who in the film portrays Bernabe Montoya, an honest sheriff caught in a land feud between farmers and developers in New Mexico.

But he hasn't left music. He recently released *Nothing but the Truth* (Elektra), his first English-language LP, featuring songs cowritten

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"My whole band was pissed at me," he remembers, "and my manager was saying, 'Time magazine is calling *Buscando America* the best album of the year, and you're going to *school*?!' Nobody understood. Some people thought I was going to become a Wall Street banker." It recalled the time "when I was an attorney in Panama and then quit to play salsa with some Puerto Rican band in New York. Everybody thought I was nuts. Someone said, 'This is not exactly a good career move, Ruben'—I could've been the chief of the legal department in the bank.

"But I needed to test myself," he explains. "When I went to Harvard, the teachers didn't give a shit what I did for a living. 'Oh, you're a musician? Well, you're just a *number* here, buddy.' And that, I thought, was healthy. I wanted to put some distance between myself and all this adulation I was getting, to show that I don't live and die by that.

"Plus," he laughs, "it made my mother a bit more convinced that I'm not a hoodlum." In Robert Mugge's evocative 1985 documentary *The Return of Rubén Blades*, Blades's mother, satisfied at last, is seen basking in the Ivy League splendor of his graduation ceremony. The bright pomp and circumstance give way to more somber tones as the film moves to the streets of Panama City,

where Blades tells writer Pete Hamill of his political ambitions. He wants to run for office there some day and, until recently, wrote political essays for the newspaper *La Estrella de Panama*. Now, with President Eric Delvalle in exile, and the regime of military despot General Manuel Noriega tottering dangerously out of control, an inflamed Blades wants to return home, despite his wife's concern for his safety.

"I can't write for the paper anymore, and I'm not permitted to hold public rallies," he says, "so I'm going to make a videotape and try getting it on television. But I'm going to make it in Panama, not in the United States. I'm not going to be protected by the distance."

There was a time when we had an idea whose time hadn't come.

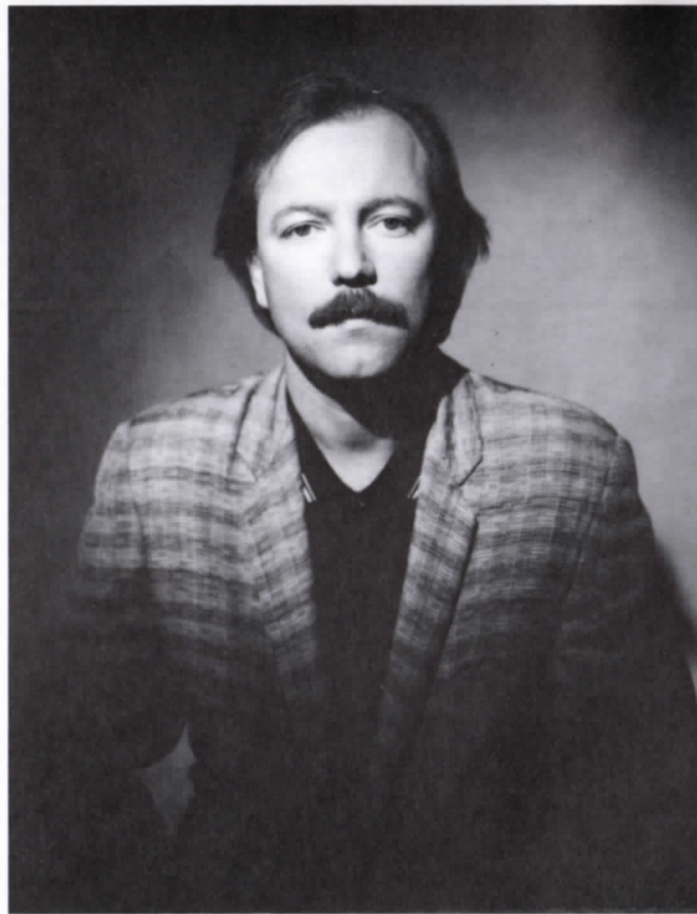
They kept changing its name, so we could pretend it was not really gone.

We heard our screams turn into song and back into screams again.

And here we are, here we are, in the calm before the storm.

—Lou Reed/Rubén Blades,
"The Calm Before the Storm"

"When I wrote 'Calm Before the Storm,'" he reflects, "I was thinking about all of us who, at one point or another, miss the fact that you cannot ask for love when you cannot give it, that we remember our rights but not our duties, that we're all in one way or another responsible for



These are the times when mediocrity shines

And faith lives undercover

A world where chameleons control and rule lives

And hope keeps changing colors...

Rubén Blades/Carlos Rios,

with Robert Redford, in whom he found a kindred spirit. "He's concerned about the environment and all that, as everyone knows, but I'll tell you something else about Robert," Blades confides. "He does a lot of things for people that do not become public. He has a heart that does not sleep."

Now ensconced in a West L.A. apartment, Blades is considering future film roles and writing songs for his next album, due in 1989. Los Angeles perplexes him ("I don't get a sense of community here, and I find that very troubling") and frustrates him ("I don't drive"), but he's at least where he wants to be now: closer to the film business. "Someday," he declares, "I will write and direct my own films. You can bet on that."

And if his countrymen should want him on a ballot? Draft him for, say, president? Where would that leave these other pursuits? "No, no, no," he avers. "I don't think it's ever going to happen like that. But the point is—and I say this without arrogance—I'm not more important than my country. To hell with the movie career and to hell with the recording. It wouldn't even be a matter of concern."

Is he aware of the price he's already paid for his varied interests? "Oh God, yes. I'd like to spend more time with my mother and father. I'd like to spend more time on a street corner. I love playing dominoes. I miss playing sports. I miss my friends, and I miss my family tremendously.

"When I wrote 'Calm Before the Storm,' " he reflects, "I was thinking about all of us who, at one point or another, miss the fact that you cannot ask for love when you cannot give it, that we remember our rights but not our duties, that we're all in one way or another responsible for the deterioration of our lives. We seem to oscillate between our acceptance of violence, our acceptance of our need for love, and our denial or admission of love—and in that cycle, the ideas die.

"Everybody wants to do something with their lives. But then we see things like honor and integrity become fuzzy. Hope, all of a sudden, changes. It turns into a different thing; we give it a new name: A hope is a car, a home, a child, the lottery. In our gut there's a sense, but our actions do not make that gut feeling a reality."

To hear him talk thus is to recall the poetic terrain he shares with such Latin American writers as Jorge Amado, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, and, of course, Gabriel García Márquez, whose short stories inspired the songs on Blades's last album, *Agua de Luna (Moon Water)*. Blades's own magical brand of lyrical realism made him enormously popular, especially among the young, back in Panama, "a land where few role models exist." A

A world where chameleons control and rule lives And hope keeps changing colors...

Rubén Blades/Carlos Rios,
"Chameleons"

1984 poll for local heroes placed him third, after late president Terrijos Herrera and boxer Roberto Duran.

Latinos in North America have responded as well. *Siembra*, recorded in 1979 with celebrated South Bronx trombonist Willie Colon, became the best-selling salsa album in history (one million copies sold, in a market where 40,000 is a hit), while *Canciones del Solar de los Aburridos*, which teamed them again, was a 1983 Grammy Award nominee.

Over the course of 16 albums, Blades has expanded upon the traditional salsa of Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri by adding rock and jazz inflections to the vocal/percussion interplay and has distinguished it from the Puerto Rican style of Hector Lavoe and Yomo Toro by replacing the familiar horns with synthesizers. This adoption of *norteamericana* high-tech, however, is still less revolutionary than Blades's penchant for political lyrics that decry military

dictatorships and transnational imperialism in the same personal terms he uses to delineate the pathos of more intimate human relationships.

Still, he says, "the bottom line is not what you say but what you do." In the last few years, he's done quite a bit—from participating in the anti-apartheid *Sun City* LP and subsequent Amnesty International "Conspiracy of Hope Tour" alongside Peter Gabriel, Lou Reed and U2, to coaching Michael Jackson in singing Spanish. And *The Milagro Beanfield War*, is, in fact, his *fifth* film; he has already appeared in *The Last Fight*, *Crossover Dreams*, *Critical Condition* and *Fatal Beauty*.

"I know the power of film," he says. "It gives you tremendous visibility throughout Latin America and in this country as well. I grew up looking at movie stars." He recognizes that a good deal of the public interest he's now generating proceeds from his having just worked

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Is he aware of the price he's already paid for his varied interests? "Oh God, yes. I'd like to spend more time with my mother and father. I'd like to spend more time on a street corner. I love playing dominoes. I miss playing sports. I miss my friends, and I miss my family tremendously. That is the biggest hole in my life.

"A long time ago," he says, "my grandmother, who taught me how to read and was very influential to me, told me: 'It's tough to live in a ghetto physically, but you don't have to live in a ghetto mentally or spiritually.' That remark has made the whole difference in my life." Now, far from the barrio in which he was raised, that maxim still informs his every step, plumbs the depths of his dreams, lends sureness to his quest: *la lucha por la verdad*, the struggle for the truth. This path he will follow without hesitation wherever it leads.

Even if it takes him backwards. For he's about to spring another surprise: His forthcoming album will bring back the traditional salsa horns he seemed to have abandoned long ago. The album's title, *Antecedente*, is, you see, Spanish for *Antecedant*.

De afuera, eh? He crushes one last Merit and smiles. □

Gerrie Lim is a free-lance music writer based in Los Angeles.

