

RUBEN BLADES • SEQUENCING SECRETS

THE MAGAZINE FOR PERFORMERS AND PRODUCERS

# MUSIC & SOUND OUTPUT

MAY 1988

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## TALKING HEADS



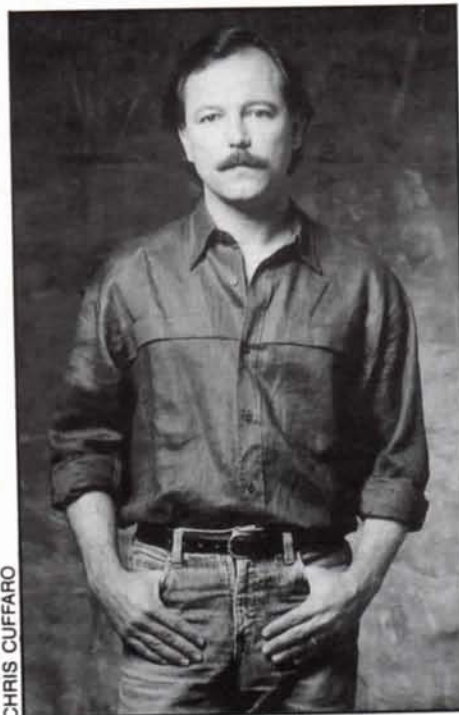


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VOL. 8, NO. 6

MAY 1988



CHRIS CUFFARO

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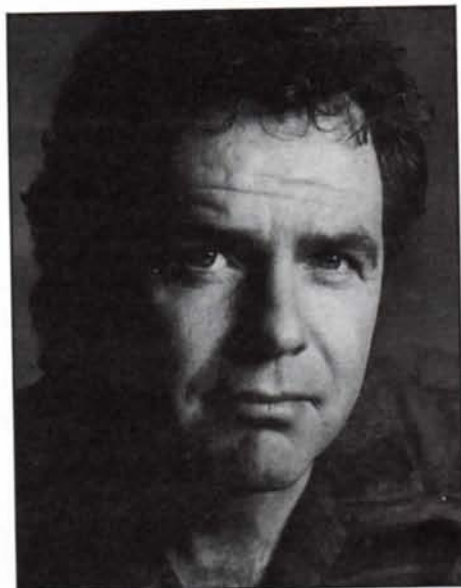
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# Partner In Crime

On his first English-language record, *Nothing But the Truth*, salsaero Ruben Blades collaborates with rockers Elvis Costello and Lou Reed.

"It's incredible that in a city like New York, with so many artists from so many different backgrounds, there isn't more collaboration. It's totally insane."

Musical codebuster Ruben Blades, lamenting the formats and restrictions in pop music that hinder free-flowing artistic interfaces between genres, decided to deal with that situation. The result is *Nothing But the Truth*, the famous Panamanian *salsero's* first English-language record. By grafting incendiary lyrics to a crafty rock sound, Blades has created a spirited, intriguing work organized around the themes of love and violence, with both subtle and strident political overtones. In the spirit of international collaboration he refers to above, it includes songs co-written with such well-known *rockeros* as Lou Reed and Elvis Costello, along with a new Sting composition.

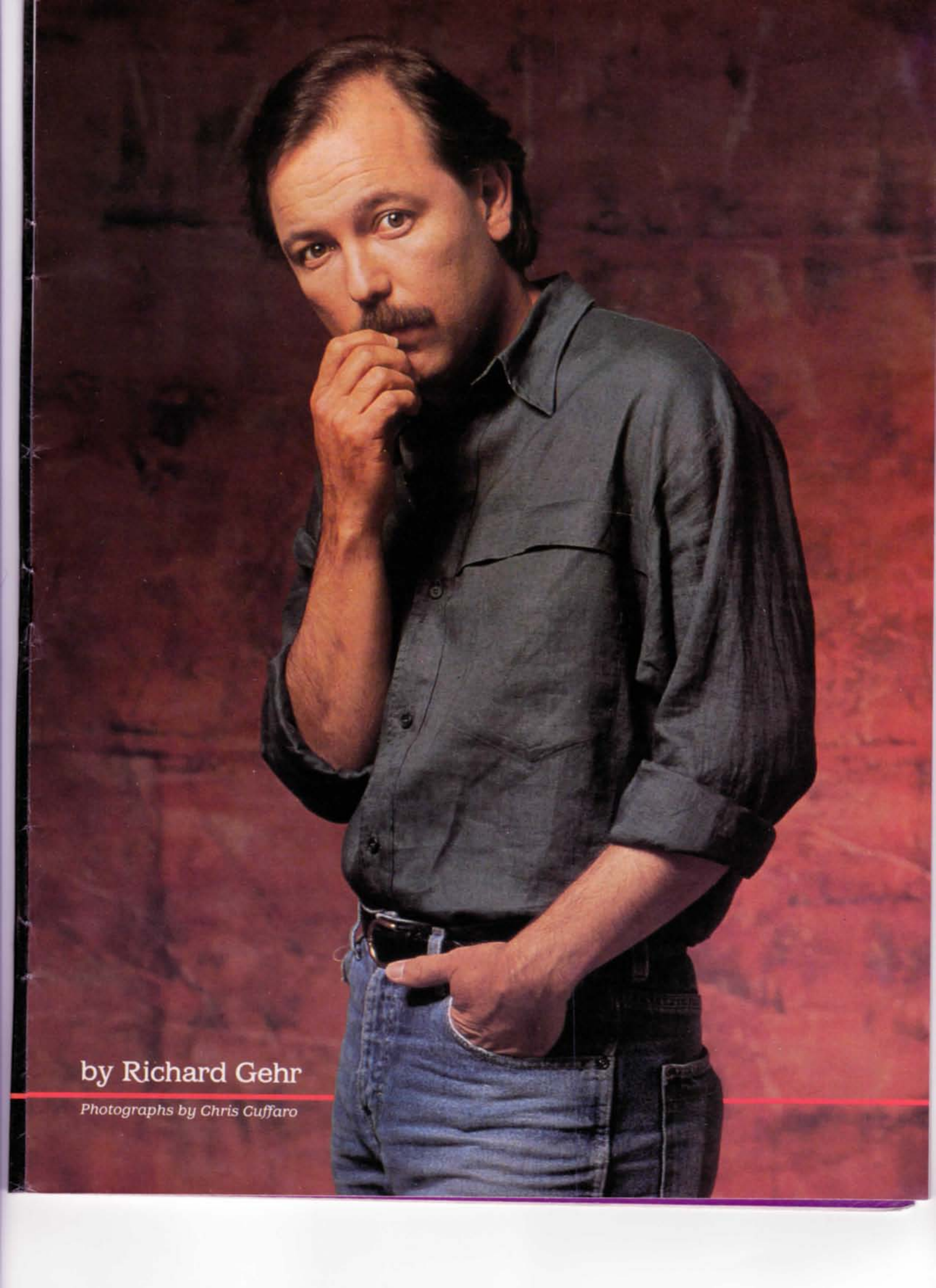
"I wanted to establish a precedent of collaboration between artists from different backgrounds. If I'd put my mind and effort behind it, I could probably have written the whole

record. But I find nothing more rewarding than the exchange of ideas."

Blades is indeed one of the great communicators of pop music, as one gathers from both his seductively relaxed stage presence and the obvious pleasure he takes in promoting himself and his music. His forums of self-expression have expanded to include film acting (*Crossover Dreams* and *The Milagro Beanfield War*), journalism (his column in the newspaper *La Estrella de Panama*) and literature (he is currently writing both a novel and a screenplay). Finally, his legal background—he was a lawyer in Panama and holds a master's degree from Harvard Law School—is reflected in the title of his new record.

It's a short leap from law to government, the most influential forum of all, and his political aspirations—he has expressed a desire to perhaps one day run for president in Panama—have frequently provided writers with a convenient hook. In fact, one of





by Richard Gehr

*Photographs by Chris Cuffaro*



Blades' most appealing qualities is his *engagement*, which transcends the social flirtations of Springsteen, Little Steven, Sting and their ilk. There's an immediacy and danger to contemporary Central American politics that seeps into the citizenry's bloodstream.

Approximately half of *Nothing But the Truth* is blatantly political, from the a cappella "Ollie's Doo-Wop" and dire "In Salvador" to the anthemic prognostication of the U2-ish "The Calm Before the Storm." Other songs take a more tender turn. There's "The Letter," a ballad sung to a friend dying of AIDS, "Hopes on Hold," and the beautiful "Shamed Into Love." Blades explains how the themes are connected.

"This album is deceptively tight in thought, although it seems totally different from song to song. It really runs around the concept of violence and its consequences. The reasons for that violence is this tension: it's very hard for us to admit love. Love is considered a weakness—and we wonder why we have violence."

Blades also would like to think of himself as a player in the international pop sweepstakes. For now, however, he assesses his status as second-class, acknowledging listeners' musical prejudices (racial and otherwise) without explicitly invoking them. With *Nothing But the Truth*, he says, "I wanted to compete in and contribute to the U.S. and European music scene—as an equal. I wanted to present something that would be judged on its own terms, not as a Latin trying to do rock."

Although Blades grew up listening to the good-time tropical rhythms of the Afro-Cuban sound, he and his friends were regularly exposed to rock as well. "There are a lot of rock musicians I admired as I grew up in Panama, which is something a lot of people here in the States don't understand. Like Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers—I wish Frankie Lyman were alive today so I could play with him. I'd like to do a cut with Chuck Berry too because I had the same thrill watching him play guitar and do those steps as you had here: I saw him on film, in *Rock, Rock, Rock*. I saw *Rock Around the Clock* with Bill Haley and all those guys; Simon and Garfunkel were very successful in Panama; the Beatles, of course; and the Platters. We went through everything. Sam Cooke."

By now Blades' background should be familiar to most cognizant fans, since he's become perhaps the most interviewed and profiled artist of the past several years since signing to Elektra/Asylum in 1984. His subsequent Spanish-language records for the label—*Buscando America* (*Searching for America*), *Escenas* (*Scenes*), *Agua de Luna* (*Moon Water*) and the upcoming *Antecedentes* (*Antecedents*)—were greeted enthusiastically by critics and hip listeners but didn't receive the crossover success he hoped for.

But Blades' *Crossover Dreams*, per the 1985 film of the same name in which he starred, are antithetical to those of most Latino artists. "I didn't want to do the commercial duet record [a la Willie and Julio] and video, the calculated effort to feed a radio format. I didn't want to come out with the ruffles and a dog, that stereotyped look that's already so dated to begin with."

Rather than compromise his aesthetic in order to weasel himself onto U.S. and European pop charts, Blades prefers the term "convergence," a meeting halfway between Latin and Anglo musics. This was the point of his contract with Elektra/Asylum—that is, his two contracts.

"I signed two contracts, one in Spanish and one in English. They said, 'Come on and do an English record.' But at that time I didn't feel it was the correct thing for me to do. I wanted to establish my base first with Seis del Solar (Six From the Tenement, his band) in Spanish and polish my craft, my writing in English. So it was a process for me of thinking, writing, dealing with it emotionally and executing it at a later date.

"Although I'm somebody who's impulsive, I am not a fool. The responsibility of this move, in personal and political terms, was one I had to weigh. This is not a mad rush for the dollar and I wasn't going to put something out that would in any way compromise my integrity."

*Nothing But the Truth* demands to be heard on its own terms, both musically and lyrically. The songs range in style from reggae to doo-wop, from ballads to hard rock. The recording of the stylistically diverse record therefore required extensive cooperation from singer, musicians, producers and record company.

"It was hard for me to deal with rock's rigid structures, and I presented the producers [Carlos Rios and Tommy LiPuma, although Blades and Reed produced two tracks] with an interesting problem in that I was doing 11 very different songs with 11 different subject matters—11 different formats, if you want to call it that. Their problem was to present these diverse songs and ideas in a way that could help them be understood by an audience geared to hearing things in a specific way."

Blades hopes the mainstream English-speaking rock audience will stretch its ears to appreciate the range of influences and sounds it contains. "Salsa audiences—my public—have been trained by me from the beginning to enjoy the unexpected," he claims. But the only major difference Blades perceives between something like his streetwise salsa masterpiece "Pedro Navaja" and "The Hit" (from *Nothing But the Truth*) is in the beat, the "recognition factor" that qualifies the song as belonging to a certain genre, in this case rock.

"That's the part I found myself constantly fighting with the producers about. I would have put a lot more conga up throughout the whole song, along with timbales and this and that. But what happens is they begin to fight with the beat and you have a problem. The producers were trying to save me from myself. Their problem was to get the product played, to make it accessible."

While Blades credits Elektra with giving him absolute leeway with the record, he willingly admits that commercial considerations were never far away. "This album is a tough one to market. The position was, okay, this isn't a format album but we're going to make sure the elements in each song that make it easier to understand are out there—let the listener pick the ones he or she likes."



***“I wanted to present something that would be judged on its own terms, not as a Latin trying to do rock.”***





Rios is a well-known session guitarist who arranged most of the cuts on *Nothing But the Truth* and played on several tracks. This is his first production job. According to Blades, the record required an extensive amount of recording time in several studios. Although most tracks were recorded at Bill Schnee Recording Studios in North Hollywood, time was also spent in New York's Power Station, Sorcerer Sound, RPM Studios and Secret Sound, and in Los Angeles' Ocean Way Studios.

"We recorded, re-recorded and re-recorded. We didn't just waltz in. Because albums today are almost all format format, we first had to make our own mistakes and spend money to discover what we needed. Not all the musicians who played are on the record."

The musicians who are on the record include a varied group of studio experts, chosen largely because of their ability to work with the producers. "I thought it would be easier for the producers, in terms of the problem I was presenting them with, to work with musicians they knew and with whom they felt they could communicate without offending. You have to understand, it was a very difficult project for the producers, for myself and for the musicians."

Most songs passed through several phases before achieving their final sound. "The Miranda Syndrome," for example, ended up as the record's rootsiest cut although it didn't begin that way. And either through convergence or compromise, communication is Blades' prime directive.

"'The Miranda Syndrome' originally didn't sound at all like it sounds now. I had harmony parts going wild in there and I kinda liked it. But I felt this distracted you from the lyrics, making it much more fun than I intended it."

After dropping lines to a number of musicians he thought he might enjoy working with, Blades chose

Costello, Reed, Sting and Bob Dylan as "people who had a sense of humor, the character to express a point of view, and who were not afraid of being judged in noncommercial terms."

"I didn't get out *Billboard* and check to see who's number one," he explains, "and I didn't call Zamfir, the 'master of the pan flute who's sold more than 40 million records worldwide,' or put Slim Whitman in the chorus. The bottom line is that I wanted to make an honest album."



Blades began a song with Dylan he hopes to complete soon. And he was unable to get together in person with Sting, although the busy blond superstar contributed "I Can't Say" to the record, a song Blades saw no reason to alter even though Sting gave him carte blanche to do so. Blades worked directly with Reed and Costello, however, and noticed glaring contrasts in their songwriting methodologies.

"Lou, like myself, is slow. I don't know about Lou, but when we'd finish our session, I'd be emotionally exhausted." On the other hand, "Elvis seems so clear about what he wants that he'd just sit down and write. After he produced a page, it would be very hard to find what was wrong with it. Maybe he's developed his craft to the

point where it seems effortless, but he used to stun me with this. The only risk in working like that is you might be more cerebral than emotional, but I believe Elvis does feel what he writes."

*Nothing But the Truth* concludes with "Shamed Into Love," a poignant ballad whose title derived from one of the extended conversations Blades engaged in with his collaborators. After one of these, "Elvis came around the next day and told me, 'You said something interesting yesterday.' I said, 'What was that?' 'Shamed into



love,' he says. 'You don't realize the things you say.' And I said, 'I guess I don't.' "

The other song Blades co-wrote with Costello, "The Miranda Syndrome" is a witty yet scathing indictment of national stereotypes created by men in "an office without windows." Blades added music and the chorus, "Carmen Miranda, won't you come home," to Costello's lyrics. Costello's words cover the intrinsic evils of stereotyping, Blades' struggle to achieve international musical credibility and even larger ramifications, as Blades explains.

"When stereotypes are created to distract and entertain people, the stereotypes also victimize those entertained by them. The 'joke' referred to in the song is that the victims don't know that; mankind becomes its own victim. Don't expect me, as a person from a different background, to service your notion of a stereotype, because they're making a fool out of you too; they begin with a stereotype and suck you into it.

"The people in the room without windows have no idea, no interest in truth. They create and manipulate it for their own benefit in every aspect; we just used Hollywood as a metaphor for illusion. Politicians are magicians too: they're doing tricks with the future of this country at the expense of the future, like pulling a dead rabbit out of a hat, and people are applauding. The people don't understand that they're applauding their own demise, buying time with entertainment."

I asked Blades to tell me what music has excited him

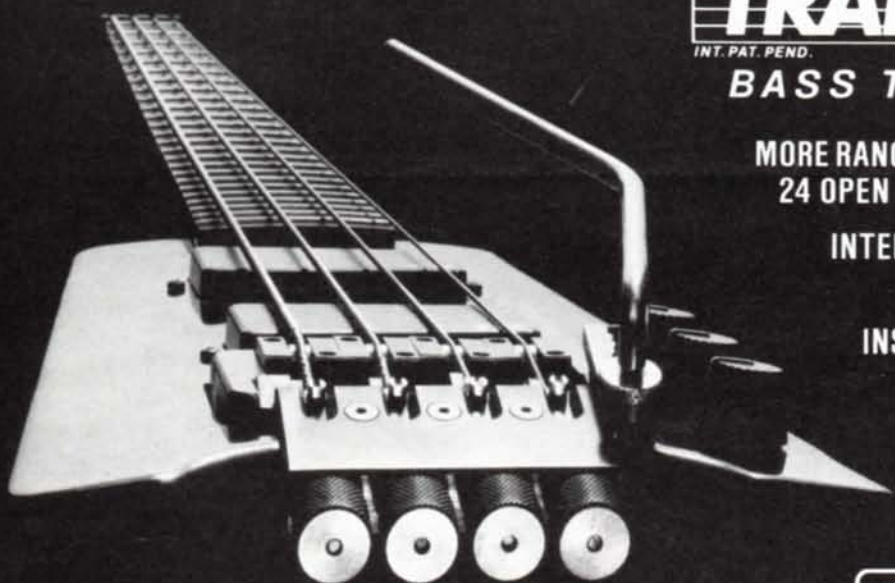
most lately. He immediately began to rhapsodize over the Santo Domingo group Cuatrocientos (400). "They do wonderful harmonies with merengue songs, oh God. Imagine a real hip Dominican equivalent of the Manhattan Transfer." He also enthused over T Bone Burnett's new record and Midnight Oil, with whom he may soon work.

As our time together drew to a close, I solicited his opinion on current political events in Panama. His good mood visibly shifted downward. (For further information, consult today's paper for the latest adventures of military strongman General Manuel Antonio Noriega versus democracy.) I can tell he is weighing his words even more carefully than before, and Blades never speaks without first considering the ramifications of his answer. In this case, however, he's well aware that his responses could have a direct effect on his future, both politically and personally.

"I think this is the most confusing situation I've ever seen happening in Panama. You have different aspects of the problem to deal with. On the one hand, you have the issue of corruption. On the other hand, you have the issue of U.S. foreign policy. On the other hand, you have the issue of Central America. On the other hand, you have the issue of the opposition parties in Panama. On the other hand, you have the issue of the people of Panama. And on the other hand, you have the whole issue of Panama as a country."

That's a lot of hands, but it's Blades' way of making  
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to his voice."

Recording Travis' voice, Lehning uses a C24 AKG tube stereo mic. "He sings through that virtually flat. I use very little EQ or limiting, but where there is any, it's a Pultec equalizer and it's an LA2 limiter, which is all tube stuff. I just like tubes. For me, they seem more honest-sounding." On a tracking date, Lehning begins with a rhythm section of piano, bass, drums, two acoustic guitars, an electric guitar player and a steel. "Generally," he says, "that gives us a good foundation and a couple of lead instruments to give us some color. From there I try not to do any overdubbing until I've gotten what I think is the vocal."

During the tracking date, Lehning doesn't concentrate on singing. He can redo, change or refine it later, working just with Travis. "I think it's more important to focus on laying the bed that he's going to sleep in, so to speak, than it is to make sure we're getting the vocal. Randy works a lot, and some days his voice is in great shape, and some days it's not. The vocal needs major attention, and during a tracking date, when you've got all these other elements going on, it's hard to pay attention to him and make sure every other nuance is in place."

Lehning and Travis are beginning to consider using larger rhythm sections, bringing in dobro and fiddle, for example. "You can have a little more interaction between all those things. The fiddle player can affect the drummer, instead of a situation where you've cut a record and the fiddle player comes in later and it's the drummer affecting the fiddle player." Lehning cites an instance in which an unusually small number of rhythm players—two acoustic guitar players—actually yielded a negative complexity and the idea was quickly abandoned. "It became obvious," he says, "that even though there were only two players on this tracking date, they were playing things that were so intricate that they affected all the overdubs. So we're going to recut the song, and now I have a good idea how we're going to approach the tune."

Despite Lehning's engineering background, he's not obsessive about equipment. "I don't really like anything," he says, "I just tolerate some stuff." He's not crazy about SSL consoles ("I just don't think they sound good") or old Neves, which he describes as "always kind of tubby-sounding. The old Neve had a wonderfully smooth top end, but the bottom was poofy. The SSL has a nice tight bottom, but the top end sounds real raggedy to me. The Trident Series 80 is pretty good, pretty good midrange, and the bottom is relatively tight-sounding. This new Neve is in some ways neat:

it seems to have a relatively silky top, and a pretty tight snappy bottom." Lehning's attitude toward studios is equally easygoing. "We've cut at Milsap's, Audio Media, Treasure Isle, Nightingale. It doesn't really matter to me, as long as the piano's in tune and we've got some decent isolation." (Often, Lehning will record vocals and overdubs at Morningstar, his own studio in nearby Hendersonville.)

What does matter to Lehning is the creative possibilities recording studios pose. "I'm not so attached to a vision as much as I enjoy letting the process flow. Because the vision is something I can always hammer out. As a producer, I can always hear the record finished, and I can then take step-one-until-step-done to get it to that vision. I can do that—sometimes the artist and I do sit and say 'Yeah, this is the way it's going to be.' I feel like I have enough ability as a musician, as a musical person, to always get to that point. That's the safety net. What I really enjoy is letting go, so that it can become something other than what I envisioned, which might be much better. And it's almost always better than what I envisioned. It's that interaction with other people. These people are wonderful. It's that whole symbiotic interaction that's incredibly exciting. It requires patience. It probably requires some kind of a capacity to love."

Kyle Lehning is a true Nashville modern. "Randy's style of music is in many ways very closely related to jazz. Country swing records—they're made by great jazz players who decided to make the eighth notes straight up and down instead of swing." Lehning used to play in a rock & roll band—"My influences were the Beatles. I think when you listen to Travis, you can hear that in the approach to it. I can't be terribly specific about it, but I think that's just part of who I am." And he knows the country traditions Randy Travis records extend—"I have a tremendous amount of respect for the way records were made by Owen Bradley and Billy Sherrill and Chet Atkins... and Phil Spector. When I listen to a record Owen Bradley produced, I don't just hear Owen Bradley. I hear Duke Ellington. I can't toss that off lightly. We're talking respect for some intensely good musical people. I don't put myself in a category with Owen, or any of those guys. I think I probably fly a little more by the seat of my pants." ●

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## BLADES

(continued from page 26)

a strong yet diplomatic point. "I'll say for the record that I don't believe in military dictator-

ships. I think the military should go back to headquarters and leave the government to be run by civilians. I'm defending Panama because I believe the U.S. has a totally absurd foreign policy. It's put us [Panamanians] in a contradictory position, however, where if we defend the country we appear to be endorsing corruption. But while we're against corruption, we're not against Panama."

In politics as in music, Ruben Blades is definitely a populist. With his accommodating but essentially uncompromising attitude, it's difficult to imagine him failing at whatever he chooses to undertake unless, of course, those men "in an office without windows" get in the way. The odds always improve, however, if you have a few good collaborators on your side. ●

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## TALKING HEADS

(continued from page 48)

it seems that that's how record buyers behave as well, that if the person doesn't look like them, or if it's not an image that they can copy, they aren't going to get behind that music.

*So do you also rely on the media to get a feeling for your own image?*

**David:** I do read a lot of what's written, not everything but a lot of it, and I think in a way it's like playing to an audience. If they have some kind of integrity, they're putting into words the best they can how they perceive what you're doing. And to me, I think, well, I may have my own ideas about what we're doing, what we're trying to get across, but I should read this and see if that's coming across or whether it's making a completely different impression. And if it's making a different impression, we should modify it: we should change our hairdos, get some new clothes, or do whatever so that we communicate what it is we're going to communicate. But it's not like we have this mission, or job, or passion to do that, to bring other music to people. It's something that I think we feel ourselves, that this is something that we want to do.

I sometimes ask myself, "What is this for?" Sometimes I tell myself, all right, I've got to make music that surprises me and that I'm really happy with. And I think I'm not really that different from other people, so that given a chance, the music will be acceptable and accessible, even if it's completely different from other kinds of music that people are listening to. I think it will speak for the times. It will speak for people, probably more or less my age, but at least it will be doing that in a straightforward way. ●