

MUSICIAN

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ZZ TOP

**HOW THREE
BAD BOYS
BECAME THE
KINGPINS
OF CACTUS
CRUNCH**

**BY
TIMOTHY
WHITE**

**KATE BUSH GETS
HER HEAD SHRUNK
YNGWIE MALMSTEEN
MARSHALL CRENSHAW**

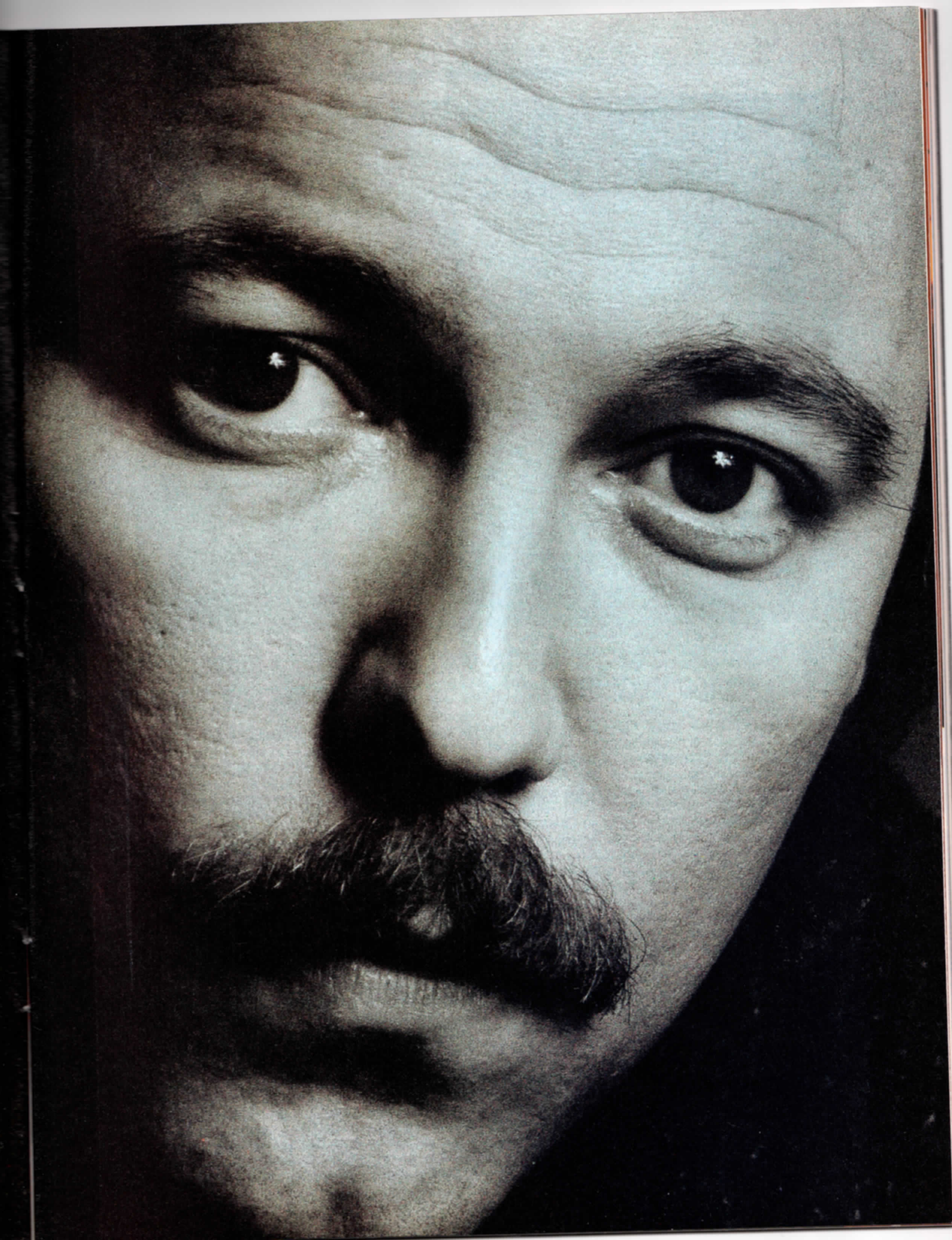


Rubén Blades wants to be the first Latin-American artist to exert a vital influence on mainstream pop music. Also, he would like to become the president of his native Panama. Neither ambition seems beyond his grasp. Since arriving in the United States ten years ago to play with salsa stars Ray Barretto and Willie Colon, Blades has carved an indelible niche in Latin music; his *Siembre* LP with Colon outsold every other title in the famed Fania catalog (which includes top names like Tito Puente and Johnny Ventura, among others), while "Pedro Navaja," an imaginative barrio reworking of "Mack The Knife," has become the greatest salsa hit of all time.

Blades' musical talents are complemented by a sturdy political idealism rare for any musician, a vision exemplified by songs like those found on his two recent Elektra LPs (*Buscando America* and *Escenas*), his efforts to improve the working conditions of his fellow Latin musicians, and most recently by his star turn in the critically acclaimed film *Crossover Dreams*. On screen Rubén portrays a musician who receives a sobering comeuppance when he sells out his music and his friends while chasing the chimera of commercial success. The real Rubén figures he can chart such success on his own terms, and his recent triumph at Carnegie Hall, which drew sizable proportions of both English and Spanish speaking fans, supporters from Bronx barrios along with more well-heeled followers like Lou Reed and Robert DeNiro, would seem to support that notion. He is convinced that the power of his music, his message (and perhaps, his spirit) will topple the barriers of language and rhythm which have so far ghettoized Latin music. To fulfill his own ambitions, which include a return to Panama and an active engagement in

By Enrique Fernandez

Photographs by Teri Bloom



political life, he knows that it must.

"In Latin American we still evaluate our local production in terms of its international accomplishments," he explains. "If I don't go back to Panama with an aura of power and fame earned here, no one would pay me any mind. They would say, 'Yes, the guy's good, but he can't compete with those people.' You have to make good here before you can go back there and be heard."

Rubén Blades is thirty-seven years old. His heritage is multicultural (blacks, whites, Americans, West Indians, Cubans, Colombians). His parents, themselves once musicians, initially discouraged his desire to become a singer and composer of popular music, so Rubén effected a typically ambitious compromise: He earned a law degree at home, then moved to New York to ply his musical talents (he's since received his master's in international law from Harvard). Through the 70s he made his his reputation turning out hits for Fania, the Motown of salsa, but inevitably locked horns with the company when he attempted to fight what he regarded as corporate exploitation of the city's Latin musicians. Two years ago he left that label, incurring a lengthy litigation in the process.

More happily, his visibility in *Crossover Dreams* alerted Elektra to the possibilities of a musical crossover as well. Blades' 1984 debut, *Buscando America*, offered unabashedly politicized vignettes of modern Latin American life—the morning routine of a state police officer, the assassination of a progressive priest, the plight of the "disappeared." *Escenas* takes a more personal tack, but its narratives are no less forceful, while its musical innovations are, if anything, more radical. Instead of salsa's normal brass configuration, for example, *Escenas* features synthesizers, a startling departure from salsa's conservative musical traditions. And Blades' beat, while still grounded in that tradition, ignores salsa's strict rhythmic codes. "Silencios," a slow duet with Linda Ronstadt, takes the form of a pop ballad instead of a bolero. "Muevete," the album's hottest dance track, typifies Blades' merging of musical and political concerns—not because the tune comes from socialist Cuba, but because the *songo* beat is the progressive sound of the Spanish Caribbean, salsa's musical "left."

That shouldn't surprise either, for Blades is one pop artist who always knows not only what he's doing, but why. Imbued with a strong sense of purpose and social responsibility, he's more than willing to articulate it, which helps explain the attentions he's suddenly receiving from the U.S. establishment press (*Newsweek*, the *New York Times*). Of course, his timing is impeccable: Here is a Central American who is becoming a pop star just as his part of the world seems targeted for a U.S. invasion, and a composer whose music is reaching all corners of the Spanish speaking community even though it originates, not in Latin America, but in the U.S. Finally, the man himself intrigues—good-looking, charismatic, quick-witted, cultured and, as the following interview suggests, aggressive, self-confident, and driven to excel.

MUSICIAN: *The Latin record industry has grown a lot, particularly with the entrance of major companies into the Latin market. However, the kind of music they make is not your music, it's not Caribbean music, it's not roots music. It's much more orchestrated, romantic music, ballads, the Julio Iglesias sound. Where do you fit in in all this?*

BLADES: Well, what I'm indicating through my work for Elektra is that there's a wider range of tastes in Latin America and a greater possibility of expressing Latin cultural reality than what the format of these romantic ballads allows. One reason why these companies have backed this kind of music is that it presents no problems. Basically, it's music that doesn't sweat, that has no smell. Well, perhaps it has an aroma.

MUSICIAN: *Julio Iglesias has come out with a fragrance.*

BLADES: It's called "Hey" [*the name of an Iglesias hit song*].

MUSICIAN: *That's also the name of his dog.*

BLADES: Well, maybe that's how it smells. Julio Iglesias sells a lot of records as a balladeer and the companies say "This is what the people want to hear." In this party only people with coat and tie are allowed. What they're trying to do is pretend that Latin America is just that, a grouping of rooms where the residents wear coat and tie, talk about winters and autumns, and drink beverages internationally recognized for their sophistication. In my opinion, it's nothing but a reflection of certain social classes that are finally disappearing, the ones who've been in command politically and economically, and who have caused the disaster we are living today in Latin America. That image is obsolete and indefensible. Perhaps there was a time when they could not be opposed for practical reasons, because we were resigned to it: The lord up on the hill and we down here eating *caca* but happy because our life is the right one and will take us to heaven. But that's over. Those who pretend to find a musical reflection of those old realities are in complete ignorance of the history of Latin America, and most importantly, are ignoring the future of Latin America, which is going to be the rise of an integrated Latin American society.

MUSICIAN: *The music fan who doesn't know Latin music may hear a lot of rhythm and something very hot but has no idea how this music is structured and how it evolved. How would you explain it?*

BLADES: Basically it's a music of African origins, complemented by the Spanish experience—which isn't hard to understand since Spain already had a lot of African influence, from the days of the Moors. A *guaganco*, [a traditional Afro-Cuban dance beat] for example, has on the one hand the African drum and on the other the voices of Andalusia in southern Spain, gypsy voices: *Aeeé, eeé, eeé*. Cuba is where these influences came together, that's why we call the music "Afro-Cuban." There's a tremendous variety of rhythms, but basically within a structure of three and two beats, the *clave*, a way of encompassing African accents within a rational, European beat.

Later on, this music was called "salsa" because it was impossible for many people to know the enormous variety of rhythms. I've never liked the term salsa. It merely points to the festive nature of this music without taking in consideration the lyric content. But as society becomes more complex, as the *barrio* becomes part of what's happening nationally and internationally, the music begins to assume another shape, influenced by jazz or music from south of the Caribbean. The structure and the presentation of this music changes. And the lyrics are not just about the ghetto, but about the city and the world. The day is coming when this music will have a more contemporary designation, leaving the "Afrocuban" adjective to identify the point of departure.

MUSICIAN: *In Panama salsa has been "popular" music, in the Latin American use of the term: people's music, of the working class, the peasants, the poor. And salsa caught on more than Panamanian music.*

BLADES: Originally, yes. Since Cuba was one of the first Latin American countries to make its own records, Cuban music began to arrive in a big way in the 30s and 40s. The people didn't have enough money to buy records, but they did listen to the radio. Figures like Beny Moré, Celia Cruz, La Sonora Matancera, Casino de la Playa, were all identified and accepted. And local bands began to follow these models. Afrocuban music took over. The *tamborito* and the *cumbia*, the cultural heritage we had inherited from Colombia [Panama was once part of Colombia] was only heard during national holidays. It was said that Panamanian music was for hicks. Afrocuban music was foreign and thus it had a certain air



“When I came to New York, full of hope, I realized my songs meant nothing here. In Puerto Rico they did, but not here. And I found that the musicians were being kept ignorant of the impact they were having outside New York. We’re a minority, but we have a *majority* outside. That’s where the schizophrenia begins.”

of sophistication, while our national music was for peasants and for moments of patriotic effervescence.

And in Panama what was always present was American music. Afro-Cuban music presented an alternative, not only to celebrate but to create a popular voice through music.

MUSICIAN: *What did Panamanians listen to when you were coming up?*

BLADES: The whole American big band sound, and singers like Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Perry Como, Mel Torme. Plus Beny Moré, La Sonora Matancera, Daniel Santos, Billo's Caracas Boys. When rock 'n' roll came in it had a tremendous impact on young people. I started out with rock, singing and trying to play the guitar. The movies *Rock Rock Rock* and *Rock Around The Clock* were decisive. It was the first time we saw kids like us making music, singing and having fun.

MUSICIAN: *When you switched to salsa and moved to New York, what did you find?*

BLADES: In Panama we were very impressed by the degree of sophistication of New York salsa: the tremendous variety of arrangers and musicians. We believed that here in New York there was a cultural movement, a grand design, not only to use music as entertainment, but as a means of estab-

lishing a cultural identity within a country that wasn't ours. Which led us to believe, erroneously, that there was total compatibility between American Latins and Latin Americans.

When I came here I realized this was not the case at all—that to many, music was exclusively a business, that record companies only thought of making money, that there was very little information here about Latin America. And it was no coincidence that the song lyrics did not have a Latin American tone. The connection with Latin America was exclusively through the music's Afro-Cuban origins.

Paradoxically, since one expected New York to be in the vanguard, there had been a group in Puerto Rico to point the way: Rafael Cortijo with Ismael Rivera. Cortijo, may he rest in peace, was a man in love with his country, with its traditions, its culture. Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena* [two traditional Puerto Rican dance forms] came into Panama like a hurricane. The songs didn't have that folkloric tone of the old Afro-Cuban lyrics. All of a sudden, there are other beats, other intentions. Mon Rivera starts singing about how the strike is coming, that there's no work at the shop. He starts presenting social conflicts and transforming the music into a medium not just for dance, but also for reflection. He would

create these little chronicles about Puerto Rican characters that could be easily recognized in Panama. And his songs offered solutions, positions. Like he would criticize the non-sense of not using our own language and would urge us to avoid substituting one culture for another.

MUSICIAN: *When did you first come to the U.S.?*

BLADES: In 1970. In Panama the movement of Cortijo and Mon Rivera had lost momentum and there were other elements in the scene: Eddie Palmieri, Willie Colon, Joe Cuba—whose singer, Cheo Feliciano, along with Ismael Rivera, had the greatest influence on me. And Ricardo Rey, a classical pianist who took traditional music and changed its tone, utilizing jazz harmonies.

MUSICIAN: *On your last LP, Escenas, there are some departures from your previous work—more synthesizer, for instance, and no vibraphone. Why?*

BLADES: Two reasons. One, we can travel a lot better. The vibraphone is extremely difficult to transport; it's very big and very fragile. The other is that the vibes made us sound like a second Joe Cuba sextet so we had to find something with a different sound.

Basically, we wanted to find a way out of the Afro-Cuban brass configuration—the American big band format that has so influenced salsa. Why not present the sound of today? We no longer dress the same, nor think the same, nor act the same as forty years ago. We want to present our culture and our music using a contemporary language.

MUSICIAN: *Since you separated from Willie Colon, you've chosen a small group. That has practical reasons; it's easier to travel with them than with a big band. But why these specific musicians? None of them is a big salsa name, like the Fania All-Stars.*

BLADES: One: musical talent. Second: their attitude. They're guys who want to work, who want to exercise their art under different conditions than the usual ones, and this makes them accept my way of being. Third: They don't have the problems that usually wear out the superstars, problems with drugs or with being irresponsible in their work. Their character is in many ways like mine. They are also extremely versatile.

It's a band that can go in very many different directions. And it saves me a lot of the headaches of a big band. You know, you become the psychiatrist, father, mother, social director, friend, enemy, tyrant, everything. And it allows us to travel to places where it would be economically unfeasible to take a big band.

MUSICIAN: *You've made the film Crossover Dreams, and there's been a lot of talk about you crossing over. That usually means a Latin or black who wants to cross to the mainstream American market, which may not necessarily be bigger, but provides more money and prestige.*

BLADES: There's definitely an economic situation. The markets within which the U.S. Latin artist subsists are very limited because we're a minority that has not yet been taken seriously; the Latin musician wants to leave this economic ghetto and look for the broad market.

But what's even more of a determinant is the search for a cultural blessing, which is something that exists whenever one group has been subjugated to another. One looks for a recognition of one's worth by a boss figure—in this case the Anglo public. We look for an approval that we are like you, that we can do it like you do.

Right now I'm doing everything I can to be understood by people who have traditionally ignored Latin America. And as a musician who's eventually going to return to Panama, I know the power of the media: I too need that cultural blessing. But I'm not going to dye my hair blond nor stop speaking Spanish nor stop writing and performing in Spanish because now everything has to be in English.

MUSICIAN: *However, you've been criticized for living in the*

U.S. and not in Panama, for not living in a Latin neighborhood but on gentrified Columbus Avenue, in a comfortable apartment, living a comfortable life.

BLADES: Look, whoever thinks I moved here from Panama to improve economically is crazy. I was a lawyer in Panama. I would've been the youngest lawyer in Panama's foreign service when in '74 I was interviewed by the Panamanian ambassador for the job of legal counsel to the embassy. I turned it down while I was making \$73 a week working with Ray Barretto. I left Panama motivated by artistic, not economic reasons. I left because Panama did not have the recording technology, nor the international record distribution, nor all those musicians I admired and I was going to learn from.

As far as how I live, brother, I came out of a one-room apartment, my father out of one that was even smaller, and my mother from a household of twenty-two people—you can imagine what that was like. I come from a family of working people where one always tries to improve the lot of those who come after you and where there is one constant: honesty. I've never believed that one has to vulgarize oneself under subhuman conditions in order to have the right to express a popular feeling. That's a story the ruling classes made up in order to keep everyone else at that level. That is, be poor because the poor are happier than the rich. That's fiction. Money corrupts: False. Money unmask. Whoever is corrupt can be corrupt without any money. Power corrupts: False. It also unmask. It only gives whoever is evil the power to do evil at a larger level than when he didn't have a penny in his pocket.

Where does one live? One lives where one can have the greatest assurance of living in peace. I've been living in this neighborhood for eleven years and I've stayed because I like it. I know where I can buy plantains, I have credit at the La Caridad diner. But if I could afford to move upstate to a place with lots of land, a beautiful house, a pool, sure I'd go. *Everyone* wants to live better than they did before.

MUSICIAN: *But doesn't that mean that you're more and more among Americans and among the jet set. Aren't you isolated from your own people?*

BLADES: No. Becoming a lawyer in Panama put me in contact with people who were much better off than me. But what I learned then is that one can physically live in a ghetto but mentally one doesn't have to. And I've never lived in a mental ghetto; I've always read, I've always been convinced of what I can do, I can talk on a first-name basis with anyone. And something else I know, my background has allowed me to get here and the moment I abandon it I'd go down, not only artistically, but as a person.

MUSICIAN: *In Crossover Dreams your character Rudy is very naive, which is why he swallows the whole world of glamour and hype. Do you think that people who see Crossover Dreams and don't know you will think that this is the Ruben Blades story?*

BLADES: People will make the association. I have gone through the same situations. The difference between Rudy and me is that Rudy did not create enough alternatives for himself. I created them through study and thanks to a background that was much more protected. In my neighborhood people didn't drop dead from an overdose of heroin or get murdered in the streets with a gun.

It was a tough neighborhood; you could get beaten up or have someone break a stick or a bottle over your head. But some things were not done. You got in a fight with another guy and you would punch it out in the street. All by hand. That relative peace gave me a chance to think and correct my errors along the way. Although the problems with record companies, with promoters and managers, the problems of musicians who make no more than forty, thirty, twenty bucks per night, I went through all that.

MUSICIAN: Has that situation changed since you started out?

BLADES: I believe it's still going on. Probably because there are no associations, outside of Local 802, that protect the interests of Latin musicians in this city—even though I and other musicians tried to create one. There are many musicians here who are in the same situation as Rudy, or myself back in '74.

MUSICIAN: You've had a very problematic relationship with the Fania label. Through them you became an international figure. Yet you've been involved in litigation with them, even after leaving the company.

BLADES: The relationship between the Latin musician and the record company in this city is a feudal relationship, one in which there is a master and a serf, where the serf is allowed just enough of the crop to feed himself and his family so they can stay strong enough to keep serving the master. Once a promoter told me that without the record company I could not exist. And I told him that I can have a phone at home to handle my own calls, I can make my own contract, I can make my own work arrangements—but you can't sing. So please reevaluate the situation. That was basically the problem I had with Fania. If you asked for foreign royalties they told you they hadn't arrived, and it's not that they didn't arrive one year, they never arrived. They gave you the checks after a thousand threats. Musicians were not encouraged to get legal representation. And the people who ran the company lived extremely well. While we musicians have to put up a collection whenever one of us dies.

Within this framework, I never allowed them to treat me like a racehorse. And even though initially I had to sign a contract where the company took the lion's share, because it was a take-it-or-leave-it situation, I was very clear about what I was doing and who they were: simple administrators of a talent pool without which they could not live. When they sued me for money they said I owed them, they were trying to make me see the power of the company. It was settled out of court and I wound up recovering all my publishing rights, plus \$10,000 they owed me. It was the first time an artist from Fania recovered his music.

MUSICIAN: What's next?

BLADES: The first English-language numbers, for the Gamboa Road Gang project. The idea is to communicate and to play places where we never played before, in places where Latin bands never perform. Los Lobos have done it to a certain extent, but I don't see them having a Latin American projection. Now, Gamboa Road Gang will have nothing to do with my present band,

Los Seis del Solar. When I'm playing with Los Seis del Solar I won't sing in English. I'm not going to get people confused nor send an alarm that Ruben is going over to the other side: We're losing another one.

MUSICIAN: And the musicalization of Marquez's stories? You met with him recently. What will be his contribution?

BLADES: Well, his first contribution is to let me do this kind of work. Though from a strictly legal point of view I didn't need his permission; I'm not making a faithful adaptation of his stories into song. What I asked for was a kind of blessing. When I tried to talk to him about the stories he said no because then I would never finish them, he would give me suggestions and he knew, as a writer, that this would delay the project. What he did say is that now he was going to sing through me; he always wanted to sing. Right now I'm trying to convince him to appear on the cover with me. I don't know if this will be possible, because Gabriel is extremely cautious about people taking advantage of him. But it's important because it will indicate at an international level that there is a collaboration between two characters who are popular, each one in his field, and who form part of that same Latin American condition and the same popular background. We can end that notion that intellectuals and popular musicians are like oil and water.

MUSICIAN: In Escenas you have a song about cocaine, "La Caina." You have an anti-drug reputation in the Latin music world, where, just like in American music, there's a lot of drug consumption, perhaps because coke gives you an artificial, chemical machismo. Do you think people are going to hear your song and reconsider?

BLADES: The song is directed at those who haven't used it yet or who need another type of reinforcement to not get into it. The drug problem in Latin America is not the use, but the abuse. Everybody drinks coffee and that's a drug; it riles you up chemically. The problem is not drinking coffee, but drinking ten, twenty, thirty, cups of coffee and not being able to function.

I think that those who party and snort around will keep on doing so. I don't think they're going to hear my song and say, "How badly I've been acting." Maybe some who do it by imitation will hear this and reconsider if they think that the artist needs to take drugs to be an artist. For the record, never in my life have I had a hit of cocaine. Not even to find out what it's like. I'm not interested in drugs, I don't take pills even if I'm in pain. I don't like them. Man, I'm so set on assuming control of my life, so totally obsessed with always being

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and emotional punch. When Erdelyi throws Paul Westerberg's righteous voice against a wall of guitars on such no-quarter rockers as "Hold My Life" and "Bastards Of Young," they fit together like the old friends they are.

But Erdelyi's production wouldn't matter if the band members hadn't matured. Westerberg has discovered subtlety, and the guitar lines he trades with Bob Stinson reinforce lyrics without overwhelming them. His voice has also developed: On "Swinging Party," he describes the bring-your-own-lampshade event in a tone more mournful than exuberant, while on "Waitress In The Sky," a skiffle rewrite of Johnny Rivers' "Mountain Of Love," he channels his sneer into a striking lament. *Tim* shouldn't be mistaken for *The Replacements Grow Up*, but they have tightened their sound without losing their DIY charm, making music that's more accessible without discarding their punky raunch. It also provides a compelling example that underground bands can broaden and tighten their sound without compromise.

— Jimmy Guterman



DIVINYLS

What A Life!
(Chrysalis)

Some groups you just naturally identify with a time of day. Abba are an eight in the morning band; Springsteen, he's a five p.m. man. Marvin Gaye was always a midnight man. But Divinyls, they're three in the morning.

Part of that mood is lyrical; singer Christina Amphlett places many of the ten songs on *What A Life!* in the long hours before daylight, when memories and hopes are the only alternative to pills and booze. It's also her growly voice, thicker than vegemite, which sounds as though she'd been woken from a deep sleep and forced to sing before she had a chance to brush. Then there's Mark McEntee's brutish guitar chords, the obvious result of an amplifier that's been left on for too many days. The bars of Australia are tough and loud, something like the set of *Mad*

Max, and bands as different as AC/DC and Midnight Oil have come out of that environment with an aggressive edge. On their second album, Divinyls prove they can temper that tempestuousness with a bit of radio gloss and make a grabby album that doesn't sacrifice any of their character.

Amphlett sets the stakes on the first song, "Pleasure And Pain"—(written by Holly Knight, the Aaron Spelling of pop music). If the song's structure and Mike Chapman's production seem customized to meet the Standards For Acceptable Hits, listen to how Amphlett brays "Please don't ask me how I been gettin' off" and tell me that's a sell-out. She's at her brassiest on "Casual Encounter," while "Motion" works as a snarling rip-off of the Stones' "Empty Heart"; on "Don't You Go Walking," McEntee flirts with an acoustic guitar on the bridge before accelerating past Rick Grossman's punkish bass and into a long demolition solo.

Producer Gary Langan, a Trevor Horn protégé, introduces a few weird twists on his tracks, notably "Dear Diary," the surreal dreamscape written by guitarist/keyboardist Bjorne Ohlin which closes the album. Langan constructs a perfect setting with a circus organ, acoustic bass and carnival barker; the song ends with an eerie chant about "struggle and strife," set to the melody of "Three Blind Mice" as McEntee simulates the farmer's wife's carving knife. As a grim hallucination, it's a flip side of the beautiful "Sleeping Beauty," where Amphlett suggests that salvation from physical abuse, rejection, separation and boredom can only come in a dream. Or, she should have mentioned, in a good rock 'n' roll album.

— Rob Tannenbaum

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on the alert. Besides, my obsessive character would have killed me if I had gotten into drugs. But my talent and spirit are going to take me to something more important than snorting coke in a john. I've found my own way of having fun, reading or playing dominoes, or having a drink on the corner, or hearing stories, or sitting on a park bench watching people go by and hearing them talk. So my direct message to Latin American youth is that whoever is going around snorting let them do so, they must have their reasons, but the idea is to articulate another kind of reason and another kind of attitude so we won't lose our force for renovation, which is our young people. And if a pop figure is worth anything, given the failure of our political institutions, it's to assume a responsible posture; a posture of salvation. ☐