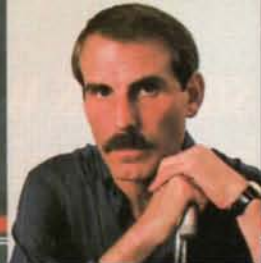


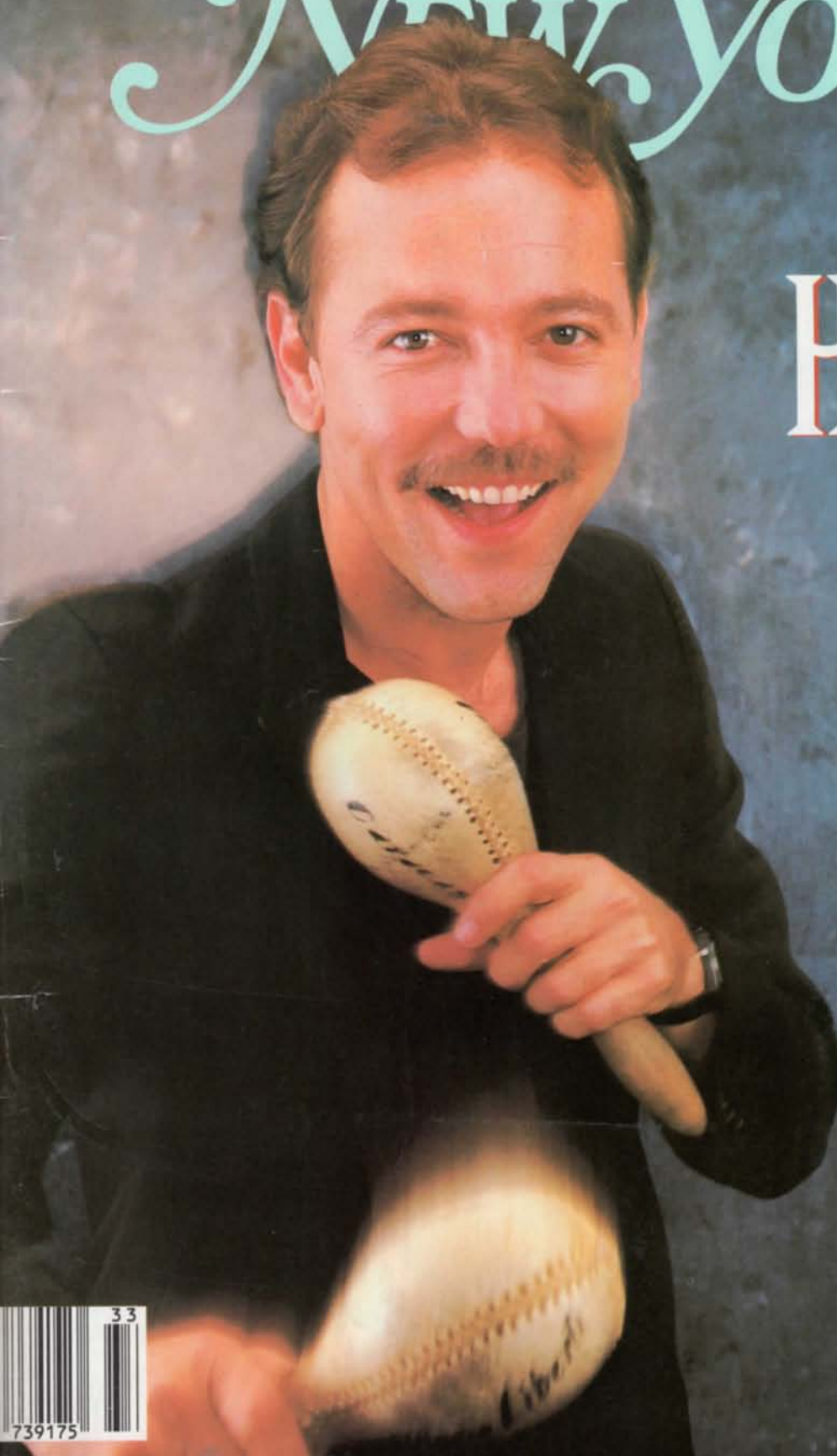
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AIDS: One Man's Story

By Patricia Morrisroe



NEW YORK



Hey, It's Rubén Blades

A Latin Star
Makes His Move

By Pete Hamill



CONTENTS

28 AIDS: One Man's Story

BY PATRICIA MORRISROE



Victor Bender is 39; his doctor tells him that he has perhaps eighteen months to live. Bender has Kaposi's sarcoma, a form of cancer associated with AIDS, the disease that has already killed more than 6,000 Americans. In June, he had to quit his job as a tour guide on the Circle Line because he felt too weak to continue. Now weekly chemotherapy leaves him dizzy, and he has constant stomach pains. "Some days are better than others," he says, "but most are pretty lousy."

36 The Canastel's Capers

BY DAVID BLUM

When Marc Packer and Shelly Abramowitz were working on Canastel's, they looked for all the world like partners. Once the restaurant opened, things changed. Now Abramowitz has filed a lawsuit accusing Packer of forcing him out of Canastel's and of "pulling out" large amounts of cash from the till. Packer denies the charges and says that Abramowitz is trying to take a piece of his successful restaurant.

42 Hey, It's Rubén Blades

BY PETE HAMILL

Rubén Blades is a Panamanian singer and songwriter on the verge of "crossing over." Blades does not write "mira-mira-let's-dance-baby" music; his songs are about serious subjects. He lives between worlds: He's inspired by the modern Latin writers and by Camus; he received raves for his first film role but considers his biggest coup of the past year to be his Harvard Law School master's degree. Though he wants mainstream success, Blades, 37, refuses to adopt the clichés that have been forced on many Latin performers. "I'd rather kill myself," he says.



50 Adult Education: Using Your Head

BY MICHAEL W. ROBBINS



Would you like to know how to design a magazine, write a play, or bake croissants and brioches? Have you always wanted to study industrial archaeology, the world of organized crime, or the American wilderness? You can tackle any—or all—of these subjects this fall at one of New York's schools of continuing education. A guide to higher knowledge.

DEPARTMENTS

18

THE BOTTOM LINE

By Dan Dorfman

Though the bears still outnumber the bulls, some precious-metals experts think gold is coming back in fashion.



74

74

CITYSCAPE

By Carter Wiseman

Michael Graves's proposed addition to the Whitney Museum has the architecture world in a stir. Most of the criticism is focused on the impact of the new building on Marcel Breuer's original. The larger issue is the quality of the whole.

79

WINE

By Alexis Bespaloff

There's no time like the present for enjoying a fresh, lively white wine. A selection of crisp and appealing 1984s—Chardonnays, Sauvignon Blancs, Chenin Blancs, and some miscellaneous suggestions.

81

MOVIES

By David Denby

Miranda Richardson and Rupert Everett face the music—a mournful blues—in director Mike Newell's *Dance With a Stranger*, which tells the story of Ruth Ellis, the last woman hanged in England.



79

MISCELLANY

| | |
|--|-----|
| Between the Lines | 7 |
| Letters | 8 |
| Intelligencer, by Jeanie Kasindorf | 15 |
| Fast Track | 22 |
| Ruth Recommends, by Ruth Gilbert | 27 |
| Best Bets, by Corky Pollan | 73 |
| Sales & Bargains, by Leonore Fleischer | 83 |
| Cue Listings | 84 |
| New York Classified | 123 |
| Strictly Personals | 128 |
| Town & Country Properties | 132 |
| Crossword Puzzles | 134 |
| Cover: Photograph by Gilles Larrain. Inset by Frank Fournier/Contact Press Images. Grooming by Kent Rulon. | |

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HEY, IT'S

RUBÉN BLADES

A LATIN STAR MAKES HIS MOVE • BY PETE HAMILL

THE VILLAGE GATE ON A MONDAY night in summer, 2,000 miles from the Panama Canal. There's a huge, murmurous crowd inhaling the nicotine fog; heavy traffic at the long bar; chairs crunched together at packed tables; the dance floor shrinking as the tables lengthen to accommodate the new arrivals. Art D'Lugoff, the bearded proprietor, is beaming.

"It's a beautifully mixed crowd," he says, and he's right. For at least one night in this Bleecker Street cellar, the elusive "Rainbow Coalition" seems to have materialized: whites, blacks, Latins, Asians, young men and old, in ice-cream suits or designer jeans or punky pegged pants, college girls, older women, veterans of the original Palladium (the midtown palace of Latin music in the 1950s), women with baroque piles of hand-tended hair or brusque downtown chops, tight glittery sheaths or summer cutoffs, stiletto heels or tennis shoes. On this night, the South Bronx is mixing amiably with the West Side, East Orange with Brooklyn, and even Japan is pressed up against Kew Gardens.

They're waiting for the slim 37-year-old Panamanian in the black T-shirt and trousers, who is moving through the chaotic democracy onstage, that familiar wilderness of instruments, wires, speak-

ers belonging to musicians about to begin an evening's gig. The man has thinning brown hair, intelligent hazel eyes, a smile that alternates between boyishness and irony. He is the star of the show, part of the Gate's "Salsa Meets Jazz" series, but he seems unaware of the huge crowd that is waiting impatiently for him to perform. He's right there, getting ready in front of them, without tricks or artifice, setting up for an evening's work as casually as a performer playing the arch at Washington Square.

"Hey, that's him, man," the guy next to me says to his friend. "Right up there. That's Rubén, man."

Rubén Blades.

"Oh, yeah. Oh, wow."

The band is ready at last, the instruments tuned, the microphones tested. Rubén Blades says hello in English and Spanish, turns, counts off, and unleashes the band, which is called Seis del Solar ("Six From the Tenement"). The group roars into a driving instrumental called "Pana Fuerte." There are cheers, yells from the crowd, a sense of consolidation as stragglers hurry back from the bar and the rest rooms and Rubén moves before the band in a contained, relaxed way, stabbing at the air with maracas, smiling his appreciation at the musicians. "*¡Vaya!*" someone shouts, and from a table a few yards away comes an approximate Eng-

lish translation: "Go get 'em, Ruben!"

Then, when the get-'em-settled-down piece ends, Blades puts aside the maracas and without explanation or setup begins to sing:

"Regresa un hombre en silencio."

The crowd roars with the first line, for this is "Pablo Pueblo," from his 1977 album with Willie Colón, *Metiendo Mano*, and was one of his first big Latin hits. The Latin fans sing along with him:

"De su trabajo, consado."

And—what's this?—some of the Anglos are also mouthing the Spanish words:

"Su paso no lleva prisa, / Su sombra nunca lo alcanza. . . ."

This is not a song with a few catchy Spanish hooks, no mere *toma-chocolate-paga-lo-que-debes* 1950s Latin tune to be picked up in part by a few hip New York Anglos; it's a story song, with a lot of words, no easy hooks, part of a salsa genre that Blades invented virtually by himself. In English, the lyrics say, "A man returns in silence / tired from his work / his step is unhurried / his shadow never gains on him . . ." Not a song easily memorized. Yet here they were at the Gate, on this tune and others, across a long set, embracing, singing, cheering the work of the singer-songwriter from Panama, Rubén Blades.

In translation, of course, the Blades



PHOTOGRAPH BY GILLES LARRAIN

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THE NONCONFORMIST: *Blades won't challenge Julio Iglesias for title of cartoon Latin lover; he won't wear exotic tropical costumes nor will he fall into Ricky Ricardo's comic fractured English.*



COMPOSING AT HOME: "When I first got here, I had to argue the case for Latin America."

lyrics do not appear to challenge Wallace Stevens or Pablo Neruda. But working on the stage at the Gate, Blades is not presenting himself as a poet; he's a writer of songs, and the lyrics are as critically joined to the music as they are in the work of Bob Dylan, Randy Newman, or Irving Berlin. But they do share with poetry a personal vision; Blades does not write jingles for teenagers, or moony ballads of self-pity and abandonment; his songs are about people, one at a time, and their universal problems; they're about exile, too, and brutality and the loss of political innocence; they're about the struggle to be decent. They're serious songs but not solemn; the music is often joyous, as if promising paradise, and works in ironic counterpoint to the trenchant, clear-eyed lyrics. They're very much like the man who writes them.

"*Estoy buscando a América.*" he sings, "*y temo no encontrarle*" ("I'm searching for America, and I fear I won't find it"). "*Sus huellas se han perdido entre la oscuridad*" ("Its traces have become lost amongst the darkness"). The song is beautiful in Spanish, its harshness softened by vowels, the message clarified by the attitude of the singer. Rubén Blades

sings to the audience, and for the audience. "I try to express what they feel but can't express," he told me once. And the respect for the audience is evident in the attitude; Blades is on the verge of "crossing over" from the world of Latin music to the mainstream world of North American music. But he refuses to adopt the clichés that the entertainment industry here has always demanded of Latin performers. He will not challenge Julio Iglesias for the title of cartoon Latin lover; he won't wear exotic tropical costumes, nor will he fall into Ricky Ricardo fractured English, becoming a male equivalent of Carmen Miranda.

"I could never do that stuff," Blades says. "I'd rather kill myself first."

He has been making this grand refusal (or affirmation) for eleven years now, turning out twenty albums, alone and with others, paying his dues on the *cuchifrito* circuit, refining and expanding his vision of music, touring alone and with the Fania All Stars through Europe and South America. All the while, he has been steadily pressing against the walls of the musical and artistic ghetto in which so many Latin artists live. Now he seems about to break down those walls

for good. For himself and for others. "Nobody can do anything alone," he says. "Nobody."

LAST YEAR, RUBÉN BLADES came the first Latin artist signed by the mainstream Elektra/Asylum. His first album for it, *Buscando América*, received enthusiastic reviews, sold well, and was chosen by *Rolling Stone* magazine as one of the ten best recordings of the year. His second Elektra album, *Esceñas* (Scenes), will be in the record stores this fall. He will perform at Carnegie Hall October 26. In June, he recorded one of his songs, "Silesia," with Linda Ronstadt (in Spanish). She flew to New York the following month to sing with him on the stage at the Lone Star (the duet will be on his new album). Right around that time, *Village Voice* ran his trenchant essays on Panamanian politics.

And on August 23, a movie *Crossover Dreams* will open at the CIBC Studio theater; the movie is in English and stars Rubén Blades. When it is shown at the New Directors/New Films Festival at the Museum of Modern

last March, Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* described Blades as "a fine new film personality, a musical performer who's also a screen natural, the kind of actor whose presence and intelligence register without apparent effort."

Blades seems vaguely amused by all the recent attention. Most performers would kill for that kind of review, and it did bring Blades to the attention of Hollywood casting directors. But clearly, he believes that his most important accomplishment in the past year was earning his master's degree in law from Harvard. His thesis was on the historical differences between the concepts of law and justice, and he graduated on June 6, complete with cap and gown.

"I must have seen fifteen scripts in the last six months," he said one night. "In half, they want me to play a Colombian coke dealer. In the other half, they want me to play a Cuban coke dealer. Doesn't anybody want me to play a lawyer?"

Blades can laugh at the persistence of Latin stereotypes (the drug dealer is the latest variation), but he can be genuinely angry at them, too, particularly when Latin artists collaborate in their perpetuation.

WHEN I FIRST CAME to New York," he says one afternoon in his Columbus Avenue apartment, after returning from a two-week tour of Germany, "I found that the musicians here did not fully understand the impact they were having on Latin American life—that this music was not just producing fans, it was filling a *social need*. The radio and the songs were becoming companions of so many people. And sporadically, when a song would come on and *speak*, and talk about something more than *mira-mira-let's-dance-baby-let's-dance*, it struck a chord, a very sensitive spot in the audience. I found a total lack of understanding here—even among Latin musicians—of what Latin America was all about. So when I got here, I had to argue the case for Latin America."

Blades made the argument for a change in subject matter as a means of changing the stereotypes. He thought translations of the songs into English were important and later insisted that they be included in his albums. "But in order to do translations that meant something, you had to have songs that said more than 'Let's dance, let's boogie.'"

He remembers telling Latin-record-company executives and other musicians, "Why are you continuing to address exclusively the life of the neighborhood, when you're all members of a city? Why don't you address the city as a

whole? There's nothing wrong with addressing the barrio; I always do; I'm a product of the barrio. But it's tough enough physically to live in a ghetto; must we live in a ghetto in our minds as well?" Blades says that he decided to start writing his own lyrics in 1969 (when he first came to New York and stayed for a few months).

What happened?
 "Nobody would record me," he says, and laughs. "They'd look at my lyrics and say, 'Too long.' Or 'People don't want to hear that.' Or 'Why are you talking about this Pablo Pueblo guy? A guy who's coming home and he's tired and he's angry at his state. Why write about that? People don't want to hear that. . . .' And I kept saying, 'You're wrong. On several counts.' I told them we were simply re-creating the facts of life, fortifying the need to produce an urban folklore that sustains itself because of the identification between the protagonists and the exponents of this music. What we were really doing was making certain that the music maintained its popular

cations, including political implications. How can you write and *not* touch these issues? Those issues can determine the life of the Latin American people. So one thing I was trying to do was present the Latin American side of things to Latin Americans, and *then* to Anglos."

He takes a drag on a cigarette, glances out at Columbus Avenue, sees a friend in a window across the street, waves, asks about the man's new baby. Then he sighs, takes a deeper drag.

"The biggest trouble was trying to get the Latin record companies to address the need to communicate with the Anglo audience without reinforcing past stereotypes. Which meant, for example, for a big salsa group to make it through, to be understood, you didn't have to dress them up in ruffles, like Xavier Cugat's band in 1951, and send them over to the Johnny Carson show to play 'Bésame Mucho.' The companies thought that's what you had to do. So it took me fifteen years of banging and banging and banging to get the point across, and to *finally* get the point across, I had to leave



MAINSTREAM MUSIC: Recording "Silencios" with Linda Ronstadt.

roots, not simply by the application of certain rhythm patterns but by the enrichment of the subject matter."

In addition to the problems Blades had explaining his lyrics in the early seventies, there were also political problems.

"You have to remember, I was writing at the time when there were about seventeen Latin American dictatorships. So some of these executives would look at the lyrics and start saying, 'This guy is obviously a leftist. Why is he writing about these things? Why isn't he writing about dance and music, which is what music is all about?' You can imagine the reaction when you start writing about sweat and toil, about life in all its impli-

the company [Fania Records] where I worked for nine years and hook up with a North American company, Elektra/Asylum."

IN CERTAIN WAYS, BLADES IS A PRODUCT of the so-called boom in Latin American literature; his generation of educated Latinos reads the works of Borges, Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo, and especially Gabriel García Márquez, and certainly Blades's magic-realist narrative songs have more in common with those writers than with the tradition of Desi Arnaz and Charo. He is, in fact, quite friendly with García Márquez, who is from the Caribbean side of

CATHOLIC TASTES: *He admires Latin writers, but Blades's bookshelves also contain Hemingway, Hunter Thompson, Oscar Lewis. When asked what writer influenced him the most, he said, "Camus."*



GOING HOLLYWOOD: *Blades and Shawn Elliott in Crossover Dreams.*

Colombia. For a year, Blades has been working on a suite of songs based on eight of the Nobel Prize-winner's early short stories, and the Blades album *Maestra Vida* was obviously inspired by the man Latins call Gabo.

"You have only to say Gabo and people know who you're talking about," Blades says. "Imagine the tremendous transition that went on from the intellectual who's disconnected from the people, and writes his things—which are elective, really; some people may read them, some not—to a guy who becomes a world celebrity because of his writings! A guy whose works reflect the best and the worst, who depicts all of Latin American society, and at the same time has not lost his popular connections!"

Blades obviously admires the modern Latin writers and has been inspired by their ambition to create world literature. But he is not parochial in his literary tastes; his bookshelves also contain Kafka, Hemingway, Ortega y Gasset, Italo Calvino, Poe, Boccaccio, Anaïs Nin, Oscar Lewis, Jayne Anne Phillips, Alejo Carpentier, Hunter Thompson. And there is a shelf with books by Groucho Marx, P. G. Wodehouse, Woody Allen, and S. J. Perelman. But when you ask him which writer influenced him most when he was young, he just shakes his head. "Camus."

He gets up again, and finds his well-marked copy of the Vintage paperback edition of *The Rebel*.

"Listen to this," he says, and begins to read from Camus. "Rebellion wants all

or nothing.' He's talking about Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. And goes on, "'All the knowledge in the world is not worth a child's tears. . . ." He says that if truth does exist, it can only be unacceptable. Why? Because it is unjust.' And then, next page, listen to this: 'There is no possible salvation for the man who feels real compassion. Ivan will continue to put God in the wrong by doubly rejecting faith as he would reject injustice and privilege.' That part of the book destroyed me. I got to that point and closed the book and I didn't read anything else for four years! I mean it. Four years! That's how much this man got to me."

Hearing this, I wished that Camus, who spent his 1946 trip to New York wandering with A. J. Liebling to places like Sammy's Bowery Follies, had lived long enough to see El Corso, the Latin dance hall on East 86th Street, or the Village Gate on a Monday night. Or better yet, for the philosopher of the absurd, Panama.

RUBÉN BLADES WAS BORN IN Panama City on July 16, 1948. His grandfather had come to Panama from St. Lucia, a British colony in the West Indies, which accounts for the name Blades. An accountant, he married Rubén's grandmother Emma, had several children, including Rubén senior, and then, "after certain problems involving women," disappeared. Grandmother Emma held the family together.

"Emma was some woman," Blades says. "She had a character and a half. She had gone to high school, which was the highest education available in Panama at the time. She practiced yoga, she was a Rosicrucian, she was into spiritualism, she levitated, she was a vegetarian when nobody had even thought about it. And she sent the girls to school, not the men. She never had enough money, was barely making ends meet, but she felt it was a man's world, so she thought the women needed the education. The men she educated at home."

Rubén's father became a cop, was a star at basketball, played bongos; Rubén was the second of five children. His mother, Anoland, played piano, worked as a radio actress on *novelas* (soap operas), but it's clear that Emma was the strongest influence on Rubén's life. To begin with, she introduced the boy to the art form that most influenced him when he was young—not music, but the movies.

"The reason was very simple," he says. "Panama is very hot. We lived in a tiny room—my mother and father, Emma, my brother, and me. There were no fans on the ceiling; they used *abanicos*, little hand fans, or a newspaper. It was hot as hell. So my grandmother would take me every day to the movie theater in the barrio, the Teatro Edison. It had the coldest refrigeration system I have ever been into—in Panama, in New York, in Europe, anywhere on earth! That place was *cold*, man. You had to bring a jacket; there were penguins in the aisles! So we used to go every afternoon, pay 15 cents, and watch movies all day. And they always used to show us, for reasons unknown to me, newsreels from Europe! You'd have the music in the back: 'And the chancellor of Germany, Herr So-and-so, has just . . .' You know, in this theater filled with Panamanians trying to escape the heat!"

AS BLADES GREW OLDER, HIS family moved around from Plaza Herrera to Santa Ana and finally to Calle Segunda in the Barrio Carrasquilla, where they lived for seventeen years. The Teatro Edison was superseded by the Teatro Roosevelt (where bingo was called wahoo), and music began to enter his life in a more conscious way.

"We were a radio family," he says. "In those days, you had a lot of time on your hands, so we would sit down wherever

we could sit down in the house and listen to the radio. We would listen to guys like Beny Moré, of course, or the Orquesta Casino de la Playa. But in Panama they would also play Mel Tormé, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Glenn Miller, and Harry James. Duke Ellington too. The disc jockeys—it was anarchic, they just played what they wanted to hear, so you'd get everything, from the Blue Tango to Prez Prado . . ."

And then, in 1956, everything suddenly changed.

"Rock and roll," Blades says. "Rock and roll was a real turning point for all the young guys down there. Let me explain: When I was like six, Beny Moré came to Panama. Everybody went to see him when he played in Barraza, which was a kind of landfill in the Barrio Chorrillo. We never saw so many horns, and everybody in the band had a white suit on; they looked sharp as hell. It was really something to see this band, these Latin musicians, proud as hell, having a great time in their great-looking suits, and their energy, and everybody—black, white, mulatto—dancing. I remember my father lifted me up, and I touched Beny Moré's hand. But still, I was looking at people who were like my father. They were older people. It didn't matter that Beny Moré was like 26 at the time. I looked at him and saw my father."

Rock and roll was different. They began to hear it on the Spanish-language radio stations—in English, of course.

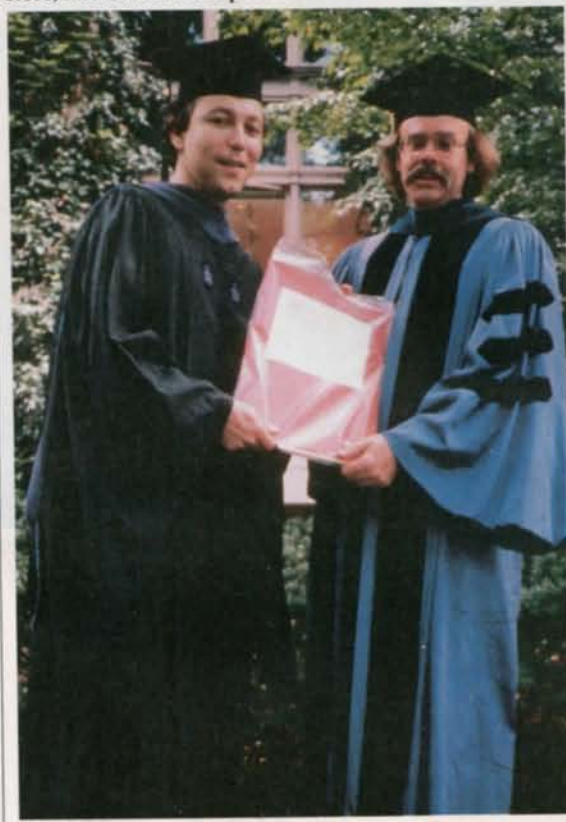
"We didn't understand the words, but there was some kind of *thing* in there. Something we could intuitively associate—I guess—with what we were: kids. Regardless of where they're from, kids are kids. Then we saw a movie called *Rock Around the Clock* and right after that, another one called *Rock, Rock, Rock*, and we went, like, *what????!!* We saw kids singing like adults, and we said, 'Wait a minute, we can do this, too.' Frankie Lymon was fourteen years old; you looked at him and you knew it was a kid, not an old man. And also, rock and roll came with a dance. The boleros and all that stuff, that was an older kind of dance, very formal, a grown-up type of dance. But rock and roll was just running around and going under someone's legs and doing whatever you felt like doing and having a nice time. The older people had their dance, now we had ours."

Blades and his friends began to sing doo-wop together, searching out buildings in Panama City that had echoes under the stairs, school bathrooms, anyplace that might help them sound like the new songs they were hearing on the radio. Then a momentous event occurred: Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers came to Panama.

"They were received like *kings*," Blades remembers. "Huge limos picked

them up at the airport. The police were out front, with their sirens blaring. Everybody went to see them as if they were the president of the world! Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers! Three Puerto Ricans and two kids from Harlem! No president that I can remember *ever* had that kind of reception."

BY 1963, RUBÉN'S OLDER brother, Luis, was in a rock-and-roll band called the Saints, which started playing around the barrios; one night, they were in competition with another band, called the Monsters, and Rubén was pressed into service



THE GRADUATE: With a Harvard Law dean.

as a vocalist. It was his first public appearance.

"My mother never wanted me to go in the band, because they got paid for the gigs maybe three, four dollars, which was a fortune in those days," Blades remembers. "She was always afraid of what I might do if I had money. I had read so many books by that age that I wanted to live like in Robert Louis Stevenson's novels, just take off to an enchanted land, go meet David Balfour and go to Treasure Island." He smiles at the memory. "Money meant mobility."

Rubén would sing "Strangers in the Night" in addition to true rock tunes. And he was impressed strongly by the Beatles in 1963, when their first tunes were released in Panama. "I kept trying to explain this to North Americans. They

think about Panama as some foreign place where people don't know what's going on. But we were just as much part of the rock-and-roll movement as the young people here. And that was true everywhere."

But then occurred one of those footnotes to United States history that are gigantic events in the histories of other nations. On January 9, 1964, major rioting erupted in the Canal Zone, leaving 21 Panamanians dead and almost 500 wounded. This was in a dispute over the flying of the Panamanian flag at the Balboa high school (the law said that both flags should be flown, but the Canal Zone Americans refused to fly the Panamanian

flag). There was shock and revulsion among many Panamanians, including fifteen-year-old Rubén Blades. He stopped singing in English ("It was like something snapped in me," he explained a few years ago), and he turned with almost nationalistic fervor to Latin music. To Joe Cuba. Ismael Rivera. Cortijo y Su Combo. Mon Rivera.

"I couldn't believe what had happened," Blades says now. "The reason was that until then the North Americans were always the good guys. We knew that from the movies, didn't we? They were the guys we'd seen kicking the Nazis, beating the bad guys. And all of a sudden, you had them on the other side, and they were shooting at you! It was a big disappointment. And a lot of us started asking hard questions, not taking everything so literally anymore. I began to read a lot more history, politics. I once wrote that the best North Americans were all in Latin America, people like myself who went

to the movies. And later, there was a tremendous loss of innocence."

BLADES WENT ON TO COLLEGE in Panama, playing with Latin bands when he had the time; in 1968, he sang on an album with a group called Bush and the Magnificos. A New York producer named Pancho Cristal heard the album and thought Blades would be an ideal replacement for Cheo Feliciano, who was leaving the Joe Cuba band. Blades was excited—Joe Cuba had an amazing band—but he decided to stay in school. Then, in 1969, students at the university had a confrontation with the Panamanian army, and the authorities closed the school for a year. Rubén was soon on his way to New York. He hooked

CULTURAL IDENTITY: *The great challenge for Blades remains the question of crossover. Can his powerful, complicated music move from the Latin ghetto into mainstream American culture?*



THE LATIN "BOOM": *Performing at a benefit for migrant workers in Winslow, New Jersey.*

up with Cristal, and made an album with Pete Rodriguez called *De Panama a Nueva York*. This was the first time Blades had written all the lyrics (with the exception of one tune), and he seemed about to start a major Latin-music career. But then the army relented in Panama, allowed the university to reopen, and Blades returned to school, where he got his degree. He didn't make another album until 1974.

"Those were difficult times," Blades now says. "Not just trying to get an original sense of music and its potential. But trying to deal with all the political overtones. I've never had any animosity toward the people of the United States. *Never!* But the way I was brought up, a sense of justice was very important. That's why I tell Latin Americans, Don't judge the people of the United States by the actions of the government of the United States. Because there are a lot of good people in the United States, lots of things that work."

What does he think are the best things about life in the United States?

"The opportunity you have here to build something with your own effort, with guarantees of respect for your integrity, for your freedom. You don't have

those things in Latin America all the time. People who want to make something of their lives don't go to Russia. I'm proof of it. I came here and did things I would never have been able to do in Panama—or elsewhere, for that matter. But you also have to take a very hard look at what's wrong. The inequities... there shouldn't be any poverty in this country, and everybody knows it. But no society's perfect. This society offers hope through its constitution, which is the best in the world, if it is implemented the way it's supposed to be."

Blades gets most heated about the current United States policies toward Latin America, particularly toward Nicaragua. "When you tell me you are prepared to invade Nicaragua but you won't touch South Africa, or that whatever Pinochet does in Chile is all right, you are justifying the worst kind of dictatorships. And what about China? I'm a Latin American, right? But I remember 35 years ago, the Korean War, how the Communist Chinese were portrayed in the movies. All of a sudden now, they're going to Disneyland and everything is cool. What makes a Chinese Communist so different from a Cuban Communist?"

There have been reports, here and in

Panama, that Blades hopes to go home eventually and run for president. He says all such talk is premature, but he does intend to return home and use whatever power he has acquired as a popular entertainer to push for social changes. "You don't have to be president to make some changes," he said. "Panama can use all the help it can get, including mine. But that won't be for a while yet."

FOR NOW, BLADES CONTINUES to work and live in New York, complaining like many New Yorkers about the enormous changes in the Columbus Avenue neighborhood where he has lived since he came here ("From *bodegas* to boutiques! And look, you see that penthouse? I could have rented that six years ago for \$500 a month"). He has a steady woman but no plans for marriage. He doesn't drink or use drugs, and is financially independent now ("You come from a poor family, you don't throw away money"). He doesn't know how to swim ("One of these days...") and can't drive a car ("Too poor in Panama to own one, and who needs a car in New York?"). He does a lot of walking, and while walking, he often thinks out

the columns he writes for the newspaper *La Estrella de Panamá*, or the words and music of his songs.

"I can't tell you how many songs I've written on the brown bags full of take-out food," he says. "One day, I was walking from 57th Street to here, and all of a sudden, I get this great melody in my head. I begin to sing it and put some words to it, but I don't walk around with a tape recorder on me, so I start to whistle, hurrying faster, whistling and whistling for seventeen blocks! People stopping, look at me, Who's this crazy man running and whistling?"

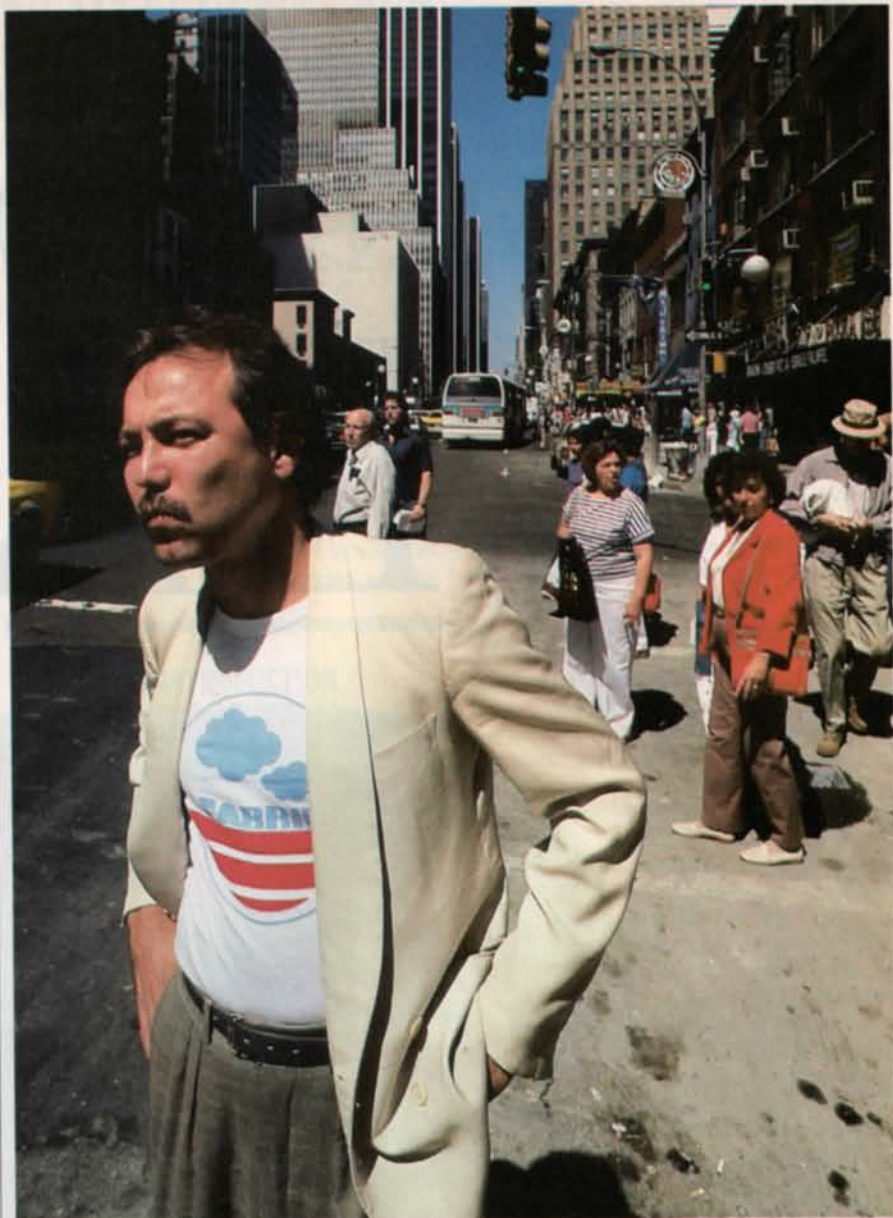
Sometimes the process takes longer. "I have a drawer with little bits of paper. Once in a while, I look at them, and if there's that burst of enthusiasm, I know it's time to do the song; it's like they hatch themselves. When I have enough good ones, I call the guys and say, 'Okay, write the charts, and let's go into the studio.' Then I'm always changing the lyrics, trying to be more precise. In that sense, I'm a pain in the ass. When I saw Gabo in Mexico and started telling him what I was doing with my interpretation of his short stories, he said, 'Don't tell me anything.' And I said, 'Why?' And he said, 'Because if you start telling me what you're doing, I'm going to start talking to you, and you're never going to finish.'"

THE GREAT CHALLENGE FOR Blades, and for many Latin artists, remains the question of crossover. Can this powerful, complicated music move from the physical, artistic, and economic ghetto into the mainstream culture of the United States? That question haunts *Crossover Dreams*, the movie Blades made with Cuban-American director León Ichaso and producer-writer Manuel Arce. The character Blades plays, a salsa musician named Rudy Veloz, cuts his connections with friends, lover, fellow musicians in the barrio when he signs with a mainstream record company; when the mainstream album fails, he is lost, unable to exist in the mainstream world, unable to return to the barrio. Blades doesn't think the choices in his own life are as drastic as the movie implies, and he certainly doesn't see the movie's message as Know your place and stay in it.

"Some guys are dying for a so-called crossover," Blades says, "because they've spent one night in Las Vegas and 49 in El Corso. They want Las Vegas because they're looking at everything in terms of dollars and cents. But why cross over to crap? Instead of crossover, I say we should think of convergence."

Blades feels that his music and that of other Latin artists will inevitably gain wider acceptance.

"But the most important thing for me,"



MAN ON THE STREET: "I'm making communication possible."

he says, "is this: If you're going to accept me, accept me from the perspective of my intelligence, of what I really have to offer, of what I really am. Don't do it from the perspective of what I'm wearing, or what's the color of my skin, or am I pretty or am I ugly. The guy who might save your life tomorrow might be the worst-dressed, ugliest person on earth."

One way Blades plans to deal with the problem of crossover is by actually splitting his public personality. He wants to create a character he calls Panama Blades to sing English, using the calypso and English-speaking tradition of Caribbean music as the base. The character will work with a band that Blades calls the Gamboa Road Gang, from a novel of that title by Panamanian author Joaquín Beleño. This English-speaking Blades won't really overlap with the Latin

American Blades; he sees them as different facets of the same personality.

"Gamboa, you see, was a penitentiary," he says. "They used to send Panamanians to that prison when they were caught in the Canal Zone. The road gang was what you can imagine. They worked on the roads, like a road gang here in the South, I guess."

He pauses, lights another cigarette, glances at the bookshelves.

"But in Latin America, roads are a form of communication. And these guys from Gamboa, they were building roads that they would never use themselves, because they were in jail. So that's where the name for the new band comes from, because that's what I'm doing, I hope; I'm making communication possible. That's what I'm about: making roads for other people to travel on."