

Newsweek

On Campus

April 1988

FRATERNITIES UNDER FIRE



Funeral for Rutgers Pledge



Protesting Racism at Wisconsin

Big-Time Women's Basketball • An Ethical Career
Rubén Blades: Building Bridges

When My Turn Strikes a Special Chord

My Turn, the column written by a student, is one of our most popular features, but every so often a My Turn strikes a very special chord. Four years ago a UCLA student wrote that his mother had treated him as "the man of the house" when his parents divorced; instead of being flattered, he felt that she had "stolen my childhood." The essay attracted dozens of letters—

some sympathetic, some angry. A similar response came to our My Turn of December, in which Mark W. Keller of Pacific Lutheran University expressed his personal dilemma: he wanted to study engineering and he wanted to study the humanities, and he found that they exist in almost completely separate academic worlds. Keller's essay brought an outpouring of letters from students who

have plainly thought a great deal about their education. So many letters, in fact, that we could not do justice to them in this issue; we will print a sampling in our May issue.

We are pleased that many of you are sending us My Turn essays. Obviously we can use only a few, but every one receives a careful reading. We think this month's essay is another striking contribution.



Page 8

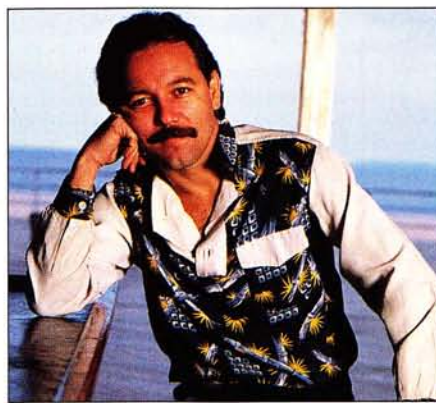


Page 26

Page 36



Page 38



Page 44

College Life

- Fraternities under fire:** As incidents of rape, racism and hooliganism increase, universities crack down on Greeks **Page 8**
- Honorary societies play an elite version of I've-got-a-secret **Page 14**
- Sports:** Women's basketball is a major-league attraction **Page 18**
- New leftist papers challenge the conservative press **Page 22**

Education

- Classy teachers are heroes to their students **Page 26**
- A U.S.-Soviet exchange **Page 32**

Careers

- A black American female flourishes in the small, male-dominated world of conducting **Page 38**
- Professional ethicists are in demand to wrestle with moral questions **Page 40**
- Studying ethics **Page 41**
- Resumes:** Tips from mentors; two guides for the Big Interview; a professional mathematician **Page 43**

Arts & Entertainment

- Music:** Rubén Blades's first English album builds musical bridges; new albums by Ziggy Marley and the Smithereens **Page 44**
- Television:** Actress Mary Steenburgen creates real people **Page 46**
- Movies:** Many schools don't want to be in pictures **Page 47**
- Books:** John Updike dips into Hawthorne again; Stephen Hawking explains the universe; two first novels with "the buzz" **Page 48**

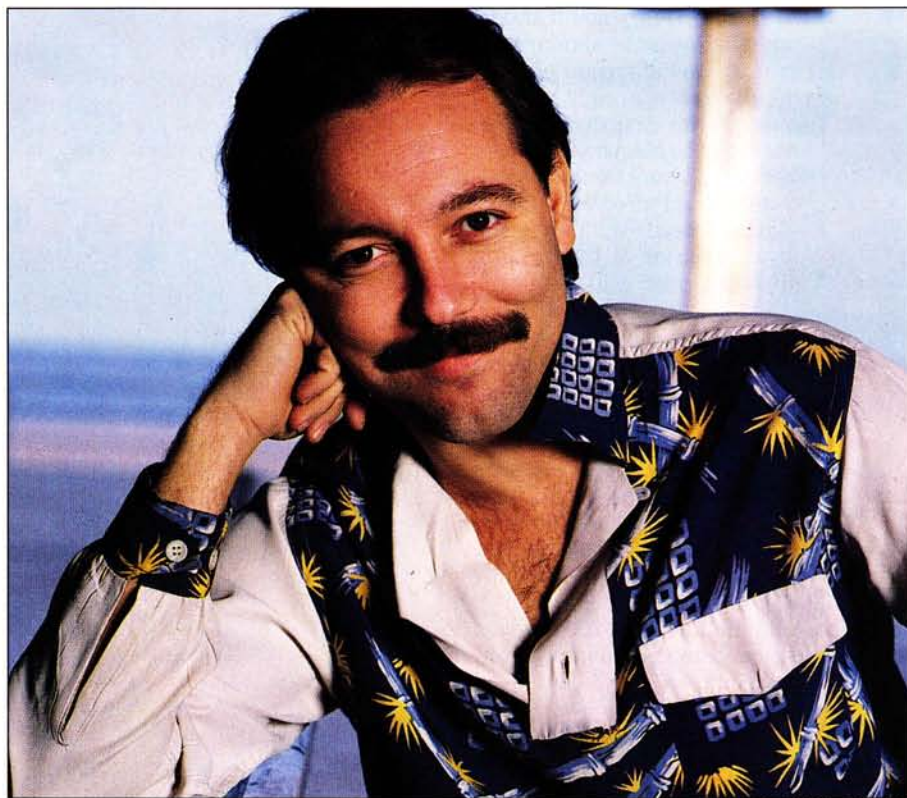
Departments

- Multiple Choice:** A Stanford dorm on shaky ground; a painted fence at Carnegie Mellon; Minnesota's computer counseling; Georgetown law students perform out of court; a New Hampshire dean discovers student life; an abortion poll **Page 35**
- My Turn** **Page 52**
- The Mail** **Page 4**

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MUSIC



BARBRA WALZ—OUTLINE

'If you can express yourself in other languages, why not do it?' Singer-actor Blades

Ruben Blades: Building Bridges

A new world record from an international pop star

There is a fear that haunts Ruben Blades, and it is the fear of never being able to go back where you come from. Musician, actor, writer, Harvard-trained lawyer, maybe the future president of his native Panama, Blades is a man for whom intellection is life itself, and he can't seem to leave this idea alone. So when he cowrote and starred in a movie several years ago, it turned out to be "Crossover Dreams"—the story of a salsa singer who is nearly destroyed by his pursuit of mainstream success. And when he releases "Nothing But the Truth" (*Elektra*) this month, the first song on Side 1 will be "The Hit (El Contrato)"—a *barrio noir* fable about street criminal Sweet Tyrone, murdered in a bar for betraying his friends. *Don't double-cross the ones you love . . . the ones you need*, Blades sings in English. Way

off in the background, barely audible, a voice sings a ghostly Spanish counterpoint.

It's an eerie moment, and charged with meaning. "Nothing But the Truth" is the first English-language record for Blades, 39, an international star in Latin music, and at this key moment in his career he seems particularly vulnerable to charges of a sellout. He's prepared for that. "There's always some suspicion that a move like this implies an abandonment of the Latin roots," he says. "Just like when I went to Harvard, a lot of people thought I'd never again record in Spanish and that I'd end up working on Wall Street or doing God knows what. But if you can express yourself in other languages, why not do it? You don't have to run away from your base." Put another way: Blades's career has been about building bridges, not burning them.

"Nothing But the Truth" is a strong musical bridge. It should connect him to his biggest audience yet.

Blades was already a well-established salsa star when he left the Latin label Fania to sign with Elektra in 1984. In 1984 and 1985 he released two albums, "Buscando América" and "Escenas." A Spanish-speaking musician on a big Anglo label, he was an apparent anomaly: just what kind of music was this? Salsa? Pop? Rock? Island music? Was it political? Was it romantic? The answer was, yes. The melodies blended salsa, rock and roll, doo-wop, West Indian music—all the styles Blades had heard growing up in Panama and later living in the States; the lyrics were tough, politically pointed, richly detailed. It wasn't any kind of music except, well, his own—intelligent pop with an Afro-Cuban accent and a global perspective. "The pleasure that I feel any time I step on a stereotype," Blades says, "is like the pleasure of kicking in a goal, or hitting a home run, or watching a kid smile. I feel so good about that."

Use your brain: Now, in English, there's "Nothing But the Truth," a magnificent record. (Recording in Spanish, Blades was always careful to include English translations. "Nothing But the Truth" carries a Spanish lyric sheet—"to keep that communication open," Blades says.) Anglo ears that may have been unused to Spanish lyrics can hear more easily now that Blades is a superb singer—direct, unaffected, with a rhythmic lilt that harks back to the calypso he heard as a kid. "I Can't Say" and "Chameleons" are cool and jazzy, although in the latter case the tight harmonies and smooth instrumentation belie the anger of the lyrics—about "so-called leaders who are chameleons," Blades says, "who don't have a point of view or a personality." *What color are you wearing today?* the chorus taunts and then throws down a challenge to the listener: *Use your brain or someone will use it for you . . .* The sly a cappella "Ollie's Doo Wop" paints Oliver North as a street-corner smoothie whispering geopolitical jive in the president's ear.

The record's most moving song is "The Letter," written as a letter to a friend who is dying of AIDS: *I heard the word on the street, from people we never liked. They told me that you were sick, and they think you're going to die.* The song's great emotional clout lies in its refusal to pander. It is infinitely compassionate and perfectly clear-eyed. In an extraordinarily moving couplet, the narrator even bawls out his dying friend: *Wished you would have told me, instead of finding out from strangers; I never was ashamed to be your pal.* It's a powerfully understated argument for love in the face of fear. "We cannot become AIDS's living victims," Blades says. "That's what happens when you accuse

people of destroying themselves—you deny them the compassion that comes out of tragedy.”

Blades admits that music like this creates a marketing problem—“It isn’t your traditional format-oriented album,” he says—but he has hopes that it will gain mass acceptance. “The promise that it holds is, it could be a breakthrough—not just for a Latin artist doing his first English record, but for English-speaking musicians as well. Why does every song have to sound the same? Why not take a chance?”

Making this an even bigger month for Blades is the release of his fourth movie, “The Milagro Beanfield War,” directed by Robert Redford. It’s a comedy about the clash between developers and the residents of a New Mexico mountain town. Two years ago, after “Crossover Dreams,” he moved from New York to Los Angeles to study the movie business up close: “I wanted to see for myself what kind of mentality there is here and why



Studying the business up close: In ‘Milagro Beanfield War’

there isn’t more Latin participation in film production.” The connection with Redford has already paid off. Next year, Blades hopes, he’ll be bringing a group of Panamanians to study film at Redford’s Sundance Institute in Utah.

In the meantime there’s work to be done,

bridges to build and to maintain. Right now Blades is preparing for the late-spring release of “Antecedentes,” a Spanish-language record on Elektra, and considering movie parts. And late this year he’ll move back to New York and soon will begin planning for his eventual return to Panama—where, rumors persist, he’ll run for office someday. But not until he’s well prepared. “There’s a lot I have to understand,” he says. “I have to identify the problems. For that I need to gather a group of people who are equally motivated, and who aren’t subject to the existing political structure. Once we’ve analyzed the problems we can present a plan.”

Never mind that Blades already talks like a politician when he talks politics. More important is this: in Panama Rubén Blades will come full circle and keep the promise of his life and work, which is that going forward doesn’t have to mean you can never go back.

BILL BAROL

Reggae, Heartache: Two LP’s

If you’re a reggae musician and your last name is Marley, fans of the island music will give you a listen—even if your first name is Ziggy. But anyone expecting this son of the legendary Bob Marley to remain comfortably within the traditions of his father’s music had better get out of the way. With his dazzling third album, **Conscious Party** (*Virgin*), Ziggy Marley has cut a path for reggae to follow into the next decade.

Certainly, Ziggy has a musical, as well as physical, resemblance to his late father. There is the same political fervor, as in “We Propose,” when Ziggy and his band, the Melody Makers (with Marley’s two sisters and younger brother), exhort “warmongers, politicians, racists, capitalists” to “learn, learn, learn!” And there are the undertones of Rastafarianism, the Jamaican religious sect. One of Rasta’s more powerful themes,

the call of “back to Africa,” drives “Dreams of Home,” with its traditional rhythms and majestic choir.

Ziggy’s music, however, has a cleaner, more “pop” sound than his father’s. The effervescent “Tomorrow People” is irresistible. This is not the butter-smooth, recycled reggae of bands like UB40; songs like “Tumblin’ Down,” defiant and confident, and the steamy “New Love” maintain a raw edge. Through the hop of the



‘Conscious Party’: Ziggy

rhythm, through the refined tunes, burns the unmistakable fire of his father. For reggae, rent by Bob Marley’s 1981 death and the murder of Peter Tosh last year, Ziggy’s powerful work couldn’t have come at a better time.

TODD BARRETT

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If the great pop songwriters of the ‘60s knew how to do one thing, it was *ache*. John Lennon and Paul McCartney’s “Ticket to Ride,” Brian Wilson’s “Don’t Worry Baby,” Jerry Butler and Curtis Mayfield’s “He Will Break Your Heart”—there’s more honest, hope-to-die heartbreak in those three-minute sides than in all of this week’s Top 40. That’s why the Smithereens, a quartet from northern New Jersey, are such a revelation and their second major-label release, **Green Thoughts** (*Capitol/Enigma*), is such a pleasure. Pat DiNizio, the group’s songwriter and singer, can ache with the best of them.

It’s clear on a first listening

how deeply DiNizio has absorbed the work of the ‘60s pop craftsmen, who prized lovely melodies and meticulous lyrics over visceral power. Less skillful musicians have been ruined by this reverence for the past. The Smithereens get away clean. The band plays with a tough, propulsive attack that’s utterly contemporary. Producer Don Dixon has shaped an aural landscape that shimmers with dark tensions. And while DiNizio obviously believes that love is a hurtin’ thing, his songs have none of the old masters’ naiveté. “Only a Memory” makes a jilted lover’s nostalgia sound downright ominous, like a brush fire about to spread out of control and burn down the whole town. “Drown in My Own Tears” makes you believe that this guy means to do just that. “Green Thoughts” may be the most perfect record ever made for people who are brokenhearted and pissed off about it.

B. B.