

In the news: Loretta Lynn, Rod Stewart

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Bill Murray

INSIDE COMEDY

Eddie Murphy

Heard the one about the stars, the big bucks and the hot new talent?

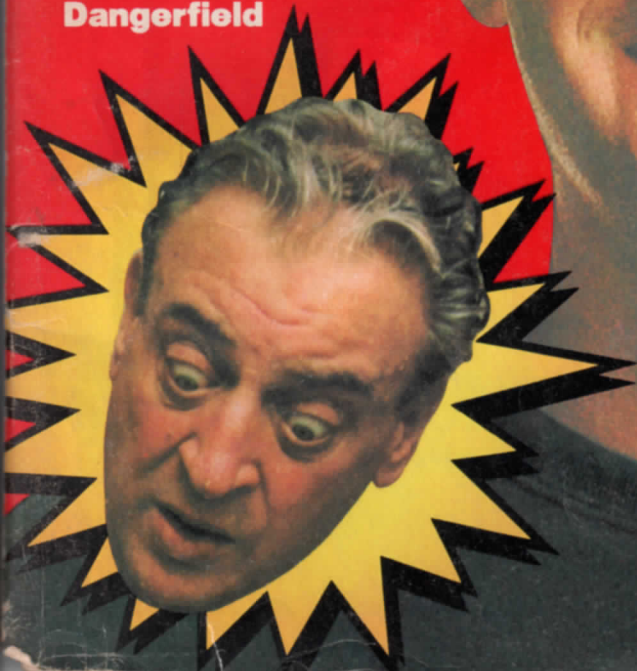


Rodney Dangerfield

Joan Rivers



David Letterman



A NOVELIST'S EYE, A HUMANIST'S HEART AND A HOT BAND MAKE RUBÉN BLADES SALSA'S NUMERO UNO

Song

The gunman entered the church and opened fire without a word, killing the priest giving communion and the 10-year-old altar boy assisting him. The priest, who felt stifled by his previous job inside the Vatican, had been speaking out against the violence plaguing his volatile part of Latin America. The altar boy cared little for politics. He had been given his post in the hope that he would stop skipping school. He lived for soccer and dreamed only of meeting Pelé.

Though the incident is imagined, the story of *Father Antonio and the Altar Boy*, Andrés rings with a front-page veracity. Singer-songwriter Rubén Blades is a Latin cross between Bruce Springsteen and Randy Newman. On his critically acclaimed Elektra album *Buscando America* (Searching for America), Blades combines the political realism of songs like *Father Antonio* with narratives of insight and subtle humor. In one, a husband hides behind the front door with a baseball bat to ambush the philanderer who has propositioned his wife. As the would-be adulterer opens the door, Blades sings, in Spanish, "The bottom of the ninth inning begins."

"In Latin America we do not have a strong movie industry, and a lot of people don't have the habit of reading," Blades says. "So I am reverting to the original popular way of communicating, which is song. I tell stories I see are not being presented. I feel if it's interesting to me as a human being, it will be interesting to other human beings."

Quite a number of them, in fact. For years Blades, 36, has been famed and even idolized wherever Spanish is spoken. But when he hit New York in 1974 from his native Panama, industry pros told him his songs were "too long, with too many lyrics." Seeing young Latins turned off by salsa's macho posturing and its dinosauric brass arrangements, he persevered. Now the Anglos are lending an ear. Says progressive rock-

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"When I moved away from macho lyrics, I attracted a whole new element," says Blades (letting loose in his apartment).



er Joe Jackson, who invited Blades to open for him earlier this summer, "When you get to know what a particular kind of music is all about, you realize that once in a while someone comes along who is not just working within the confines of the style but is branching out and doing something of universal interest. That's Rubén."

Rubén's sandwich operates on many levels at once. He is starring as a Latin singer in an independent film



"I admire Rubén's originality and integrity," says Joe Jackson, who met with Blades at Madison Square Garden.

called *Crossover Dreams*, being shot in New York. From his coop on the West Side of Manhattan he writes columns on politics and art for a newspaper in Panama, where he is a nonpracticing member of the bar. In the fall he will pursue a master's degree in law at Harvard. "I know I'm not going to be jumping around onstage when I am 50 years old," he says. "It seems to me I will end up in Panama involved in politics or public life. I need to reestablish my credentials as a professional."

Meanwhile, he is composing a song cycle based on four short stories by Gabriel García Márquez, 56, with whom he confers periodically by long distance. In 1979 mutual friends arranged a lunch meeting with the future Nobel prizewinner in Bogota, Colombia. But Blades and his band missed the appointment when the electricity failed in the jail where the group was to give a morning concert. The prisoners' disappointment was so great the musicians decided to wait for the juice to return. Since then several other meetings between the artists have been derailed by similar flukes.

What people don't realize, Blades says, is what a realist García Márquez is. "The Caribbean for me is an emotional continent," he explains. "Things that only happen in dreams for other people happen to us in daily life. Nothing is impossible." As an example, Blades cites his own family.

His father, of West Indian descent, was a bongo player who was so good

at basketball he was recruited to play on the national secret police team, and became a detective. With father and mother (a Cuban singer and pianist) always working, Blades and his four siblings were largely raised by his extraordinary paternal grandmother, Emma Bósques Laurenza. A Rosicrucian, vegetarian, yogi, painter, poet and feminist, Emma "instilled in me the desire for justice and truth."

With the Canal Zone in his backyard, Blades grew up on American music and movies. Mimicking Bill Haley and Frankie Lymon, he sang in English before he sang in Spanish. He switched in 1964, when the U.S. Army killed 21 Panamanians and wounded hundreds in quelling riots that erupted after American students refused to fly the Panamanian flag opposite Old Glory at Balboa High School. "They turned friends into enemies," Blades says in sadness and frustration. "Even today, that's the pity of U.S. policy in Latin America."

Blades has refused to pigeonhole his political philosophy, at some cost. His 1980 song *Tiburón* (Shark) equated that sleepless animal with interventionism. It was aimed at both superpowers, but *Tiburón* got him labeled a Communist in Miami and banned from the leading Latin station. Even at home in Manhattan, his yardstick is human. Strolling his recently gentrified neighborhood, Blades takes pleasure in the new boutiques and trendy restaurants but notes, "They've driven out Mom-and-Pop stores, people that made their whole lives here. Some will say, 'That's the way it goes,' but still, they were people, not just businesses."

Apart from continuing to provide English translations of his Spanish-language LPs, Blades says he will do nothing to "dilute" his salsa. Instead, he will create a new, English-speaking character, Panama Blades, who will also record for Elektra but admit no more kinship with Rubén Blades than Andy Kaufman did with Tony Clifton. Rather than Afro-Cuban salsa, Panama's music will spring from the calypso fount that Blades' grandfather brought from Saint Lucia. "It's in me, it's in my genes," Blades promises. Panama's debut may be delayed while another character, Barrister Blades, brushes up at Harvard. Rubén, Rubén, we'll be waitin'. **ERIC LEVIN**



Living on opposite sides of Central Park, Blades and girlfriend Lori Carson, a songwriter, sometimes meet in the middle.