

# PICKS

IF THESE ARTISTS WERE HORSES, THEY'D FINISH FIRST

## RUBEN BLADES

SPEAKING A NEW POP LANGUAGE

**SITTING IN THE** sparsely furnished living room of his recently acquired home in Hancock Park, one of Los Angeles' most elegant residential neighborhoods, Ruben Blades talks eloquently about the inherent

risks in the making of *Mundo* (Sony Discos/Columbia), an album that finds the former *salsero* creating a bewitching fusion of Latin, African and Celtic musical styles, the ultimate aural homage to mankind's cultural oneness.

"From the beginning, I was very aware of the risks involved in this kind of project," says Blades in Spanish heavily inflected with his thick Panamanian accent. "This could easily have become an experiment that was totally insincere. People could have said [and here

Blades the Actor takes on a hilariously whiny tone], 'Here's this guy trying to show us that we can all live together like *hermanitos y hermanitas* [brothers and sisters].' Nobody would appreciate something like that. Not the instruments from foreign lands that were used on the album, not the musicians who performed them, nobody. They'd say that I'm hypocrite and a [expletive] liar."

Blades' commitment

to his own honesty of expression isn't new. In the late '70s, he was the first artist to combine the effortless danceability of New York's hardcore salsa scene with a sociopolitical message that exalted accountability and justice as required virtues for a better tomorrow. Aided by producer and trombonist Willie Colón, he recorded such seminal albums as 1978's *Siembra*, which, propelled by the anthemic single "Pedro Navaja," stood until recently as the best-selling album in the history of salsa.

Since then, Blades has continued his never-ending quest for the future of Latin music. During the '80s he recorded a string of progressive salsa albums with *Seis del Solar*, a sextet of virtuoso session players. He also studied law, developed a successful career as a Hollywood actor and even returned to his native Panama for a brief stint as presidential candidate.

Through it all, music continued to be his biggest passion. In the late '90s, tired of the schematic formulas of tropical music, he began searching for a new language, one closer to the kind of subtle, world beat-friendly pop favored by such artists as Peter Gabriel and Sting. Although critically praised, albums such as 1996's *La Rosa de los Vientos* and 1999's *Tiempos* failed to generate strong sales. Truth

be told, they sounded unusually tame compared to the relentless swing of his salsa material.

Now, Blades' perseverance has finally paid off. On *Mundo*, he has struck a perfect balance between the spice of his classic stuff and the more meditative nature of his recent output.

"The first thing I said to my current band [Costa Rica's New Age ensemble *Editus*] when we started working on this project was that it needed to be a visceral experience," recalls Blades. "So we actually spent a couple of years listening to music. While on tour in Europe or Latin America, we'd go raid the local record stores and hold listening sessions at the hotel. Everyone was invited to bring whatever he wanted us to hear. It was like being a bunch of 15-year-olds working on a school project."

This process of extensive research is reflected on *Mundo* and its flawless blend of disparate styles. By mixing Afro-Cuban conga patterns with violins and bagpipes, and covering tunes by jazz guitarist Pat Metheny ("The First Circle"), *tropicalia* master Gilberto Gil ("Consideración"), plus traditional songs from Ireland ("Danny Boy") and Mali ("Jiri Son Bali"), the singer has single-handedly demolished

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Ruben Blades has yet to fulfill his dream to appear on an episode of *Cribs*.

"We actually spent a couple of years listening to music."

every conceivable multi-culti cliché lovingly fostered by greedy record companies during the last 10 years. Instead, he has created the basic syntax of a new pop language, one that harks back to ancient cultures and their similarities.

It is not a coincidence that *Mundo* feels heavy the first time you listen to it. It actually is a heavy album. Like the pilot episode of a television series laden with its own mythology, private and complex, *Mundo* sets the ground rules for the musical statement that Blades is likely to articulate in the following years.

For now, Blades' old fans will be happy to know that he is also planning the recording of a new salsa album with his brother Roberto, a singer/songwriter who has made his own fortune in the biz through a prolific collaboration with Emilio Estefan. Also in the planning stages: an album of tangos and the launch of his own Web site ([www.rubenblades.com](http://www.rubenblades.com)), which he hopes to use as a platform to make quality music from all over the planet available to its visitors.

The singer is also dreaming up a world tour

that would see him performing together with the many artists who participated on the album: besides Editus, there's Argentina's De Boca en Boca, Brazil's Boca Livre and Irishman Eric Rigler, leader of California-based world fusion group Bad Haggis. It would be a celebration of the concepts of universal unity that are articulated in *Mundo*.

"For the longest time, I had harbored the desire to combine [Cuba's venerable rumba group] Los Muñequitos de Matanzas with [traditional Irish group] the Chieftains," he reflects happily. "We finally made it happen."

—ERNESTO LECHNER