

AUG.-SEPT. GUIDE TO SALSA FESTIVALS, CONCERTS & DANCES

# LATIN N.Y.

NO.  
7-84  
\$1.50

Fania All Stars Return  
Celia Cruz Debuts on ABC  
Ruben's Blades LP Controversy  
Growing up Gay & Latin



**SIZZLING  
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JULY 2, 1984

# TIME

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STOP  
**IMMIGRATION**  
Can It Be Controlled?

TIME magazine devoted a full page to Ruben Blades

“How you can win the presidential election”  
“Guerra de los Gueguinos”

## Music The Keen Edge of Rubén Blades

He is a lawyer, essayist and... oh, yes—a terrific musician

**Q**uick. Catch him now, before he gets elected.  
He is 35, one of the biggest stars in Latin American music, a composer who can combine bold lyrics, intricate melody and a fine flair of the best song-writing writers. Bruce Springsteen, Pat Tillis, and Jackman Brown come first to mind, and if that is heavy, heavy comparing, then all right, just keep the pedaling to a minimum and make a little room.

But even way up there as the top where the air is thin, Ruben Blades would wear a ray, highlighting stars. He is a lawyer, an essayist, a politician, a musician, a performer, a composer, a writer, a singer, a dancer, a man of many talents. He has been a lawyer for a bank in Panama, a man working for a Latin music company in New York City, and one of the main performers with Tropical World Culture, of Panama City. He is also the author of a book on the history of the short story in Panama. He has written a long-distance collaboration with Gabriel Garcia Marquez on a cycle of songs based on some of the best short stories from the Caribbean. He has also written a book on the history of the Caribbean. He has also written a book on the history of the Caribbean.

probably a problem first step in a very ex-  
tensive career, but anyone who has been  
started in Blades' song has songs on his  
album that would have no doubt that  
he knows plenty already.

As he says of Garcia Márquez, Blades  
has "one foot in the music and the other  
on the earth. We are both citizens of an  
emotional continent." Blades sings feel-  
ing characters in poems as political  
performances, musical drama and song.



The singer-composer swinging hard on the street corner

Blades' music is a blend of the best of the Caribbean and the best of the Latin American. He has a unique style that is both traditional and modern. He has a deep understanding of the music and a strong sense of rhythm. He has a powerful voice that can carry over a large crowd. He has a unique style that is both traditional and modern. He has a deep understanding of the music and a strong sense of rhythm. He has a powerful voice that can carry over a large crowd.

nothing in society. "I couldn't just take  
away the Afro-Cuban. Cuban." Blades  
has been the only link to the people. I  
believe that the music and the lyrics  
Blades has taken contemporary  
American Latin music and not only made  
it more accessible to  
the American public, but it has also  
made it more accessible to the  
Latin American public.

Blades was raised to be a writer and  
started before law school classes began.  
He was in English, and for the occasion he  
will switch his first name to Pascual  
Blades in homage to his grandfather and  
great-grandfather. He is a composer and  
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His mother, a piano player and song-  
writer, and his father, a politician, were  
both active in the music industry. He  
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“Quick. Catch him now, before he gets elected!”  
So starts Time magazine's  
intense article on our most  
intense salsaero...but does he  
really want to be president?

The controversy surrounding Ruben Blades and his new album can make him our biggest star yet...



**BUSCANDO AMERICA** — genius at its best, or presumptuous garbage? The vote is still not in.

by Adela Lopez

**T**he stylish intelligentsia of Latin America, that socially conscious group of university-educated favorite sons, has finally opened a branch office in New York — and Rubén Blades, star of the *Village Voice*, the *Daily News*, and *Time Magazine*, is its first president. The password for entry into this elite group of learned Latino gentry is meaningful, as in "meaningful" lyrics, relationships, causes, protests, debates and the like. Ho-hum.

There was a time when the new president related directly to "la esquina," a Rubenism for the man-in-the-street. But the release of Blades' latest LP, *Buscando América* has marked the end of this era. "La esquina" can no longer keep up.

In defense of Mr. Blades, it must be stated that *Buscando* is not a sell-out, not a cop-out, and definitely not a compromise product engineered for the mainstream palate. It is merely a totally baffling piece of music which neatly and successfully

divides Rubén's Latin fans into two distinct camps — those who feel the album raises Rubén into the realm of genius, and those who, for lack of better phrasing, feel the LP is a piece of garbage.

At this point, I think it particularly relevant to state that *LDNY's* usually fearless stable of critics and writers refused to touch *Buscando*. Tony Sabournin, one-time *LDNY* LP critic and currently doing PR for RCA Records, feels the album is a masterpiece, "by far the best product Rubén has ever produced." But he declined to write the review.

Ivette Piñeiro, current reviewer, also declined. But her motives were different. She claimed immunity on the grounds of gross boredom. "The album put me to sleep. I know I won't be impartial."

So what do we have here? A Latin LP that's so extraordinary it deserves full page coverage in *Time Magazine*, or a piece of presumptuous mish-mash that fooled the gringos but not the natives?

Fortunately, a detailed review of the album is unnecessary. The important issue is not so much the content (trust me, *Maestra Vida* and *Siembra* were superior product), but the waves it's making in the American media. Suffice to say that *Buscando América* flirts with a different breed of music lover. That becomes evident when one examines the arrangements (no brass section), the bilingual lyrics, and the overall Latin American (as opposed to Newyorican) flavor. Which is not to say that Rubén is deliberately making a break with the barrio. On the contrary, it appears he's trying to court both worlds and, interestingly enough, he may just succeed.

At least Blades has proven that American media attention is not necessarily the kiss of death for Latin artists intent on maintaining their sizeable Spanish followings. It's the *esquina* that's vacillating. The man-in-the-street who has a hard time liking something he can-



## **RBRB**

Since no one was brave enough to review *Buscando América*, editor Adela López was pressed into service. After twelve feeble attempts, she came up with this excuse disguised as a parody.

"Llego a mi casa. Cansada y sudando. Abro la puerta. Miro a mis manos y miento mil veces la madre del super por no haberme dicho que acaba de pintar las paredes. Saco el nuevo disco de Rubén Blades de mi cartera. Lo pongo encima de la mesa y salgo rumbo a la cocina. Prendo la luz. Salen dos cucarachas del lado de la nevera. Siempre salen de ese lado de la nevera. Cada una tiene su jodido lado de la nevera. Busco una lata de Raid y las mato. Me lavo las manos y las seco con una toalla que dice Hilton Hotel. Nunca he ido a Disneylandia. Me falta dinero. Me faltan ganas. Voy pa'la sala. Ahí está el nuevo estereo que me compró mi mamá. Pongo el disco de Rubén. Mucho ruido. Poca salsa. Pero Rubén es muy amigo mio. Escucho. Me cuesta trabajo. Qué tan amigo es Rubén? Me duele la cabeza. Me duelen los pies. Tengo hambre. Estoy de mal humor. Quisiera escuchar más, pero no puedo. Me vence el sueño, varon..." ■

not, or rather chooses not to relate to. *Las esquinas de Nueva York* are far more removed from the Latin American reality. Conversely, the *esquinas* of Latin America may be too caught up in that very reality to want to hear about it in song. It's just so much easier to zip open a can of beer and tune out with El Gran Combo.

In the meantime, Rubén marches on to the greener pastures of the American intelligentsia. A wise move. In those waters, a sell-out is unlikely. (He's being compared to Bob Dylan, not Charo.) As a side benefit, he may get the chance to kick the door open just wide enough to allow his Latin fans to live the dream with him. *Que viva el presidente!*

Latin N.Y. invites readers to send in their comments on Rubén's latest LP, *Buscando América*, available through Elektra Records. Next month, we'll publish the most interesting. ■

**S**OMETIME IN THE mid-1990s, when he's about 45 years old, Ruben Blades hopes to run for president of Panama. He might do it sooner if he didn't have other things to do first, like consolidating his position as one of the world's most popular salsa singers and getting a degree from the Harvard Law School.

Blades is to salsa today what Bob Dylan was to folk music in the '60s, or Willie Nelson to country music in the '70s. He may not always sell the most records, and he may trigger debates about commercialism and authenticity, but no one denies that his work lies very near the heart of a major musical form.

At a time when Julio Iglesias and Menudo are making Hispanic music popular and even a bit trendy, Blades does it harder and better; instead of homogenized pop, he retains the jazz textures and Latin rhythms of the music's Afro-Cuban roots, and reinforces them with lyrics which move past the genre's traditional "let's party" approach into social protest and poetry.

Blades' string of gold and platinum albums, some recorded with Willie Colon, goes back to 1977, and he's now planning perhaps his most ambitious project: an album based on eight short stories of Gabriel Garcia Marquez ("One Hundred Years of Solitude").

All this has happened, of course, largely within the Hispanic market, and although it's estimated there will be 40 million Hispanics in the U.S. by 1990, anyone who wants to be very big in the world's biggest market must cross over ethnic and industry lines. That, therefore, is Blades' next step, and no one's betting he won't do it.

Enrique Fernandez, Latin music editor of Billboard, sums up Blades this way: "Like Dylan, Lennon and McCartney, who composed literary pop music that reached a large mass of newly educated people, Blades has fans among university students

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OF PANAMA.**

**BY DAVID HERSHKOVITS**

and the educated who listen because it satisfies their literary side. His appeal is broader than among those who normally would follow salsa. He's good looking, a talented songwriter, and well-educated, a very rare combination in the branch of pop music.

Blades is modest in the bigger language market, and he calls himself any than I Am call-chit tell So St. wi ic ir n t

guage in which he sings has socio-political implications.

Growing up in Panama in the '50s and early '60s, he recalls, he sang the songs of Buddy Holly and the Beatles. "I wasn't a TV kid. Everything we had was the movies and the radio. I saw all the Jane Powell and Busby Berkeley musicals. We were watching an America we took literally to exist as such. A place where everything was always right. Everything was in Technicolor. Everybody had a car. Everything always had a happy ending.

"Everybody grew up wanting to be a North American."

Until 1964, that is, when 21 students were killed and nearly 500 wounded by U.S. Marines in the Canal Zone.

"That stopped us in our tracks," says Blades. "I started really examining for the first time and I discovered a lot of stuff. The period coincided with the Civil Rights movement here and I saw pictures of dogs biting blacks because they were walking in a town. We never knew these things. We didn't see them in the movies. After '64, when we got our ass kicked, we had to be more informed."

objection, he says, is to misguided foreign policy). He speaks English fluently; he has lived in New York for the last 10 years. "It would be foolish to cut myself off to culture," he says, and adds that even when he moves back to Panama, "I'll never leave New York totally. New York is like my girl."

If Blades' emotions seem conflicting, he's got the background for it. His grandfather was a Louisiana boy who went to Cuba with Teddy Roosevelt during the Spanish-American War, met a Cuban woman and stayed. One of their 22 children, Blades' mother, went to Panama as a teenager, met a man and stayed.

It's Blades' paternal grandmother, however, who made the strongest impression on him—and who, in fact, seems to have shaped much of his life.

"She was a very interesting, very special woman. She was obsessed with culture. She taught me how to read (using Illustrated Comics) when I was 4 or 5. She was a vegetarian in days when people weren't even dreaming about nutritious values of food. She was into Eastern philosophy and yoga.

"She married twice, divorced twice. She sent her daughters to school, didn't send her men because she didn't have enough money and figured that women needed education more than men. She was a poet. She wrote poetry. She wrote...



**Media  
Mania**

The Daily News printed this feature article on Ruben in its Sunday Magazine, July 22, 1984.

*Salsa in New York are just supposed to share beyond...*