

Teen Pregnancy: The "Love" Epidemic

# LATIN N.Y.

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AN INTERVIEW  
REVEALING

## RUBEN BLADES' NEW MESSAGE

Expressed in "MAESTRA VIDA,"  
two powerful albums depicting the  
life, death and political struggles  
in the barrios of the world

Reggae Rastafarian  
Bob Marley  
A Latin club  
for the '80s

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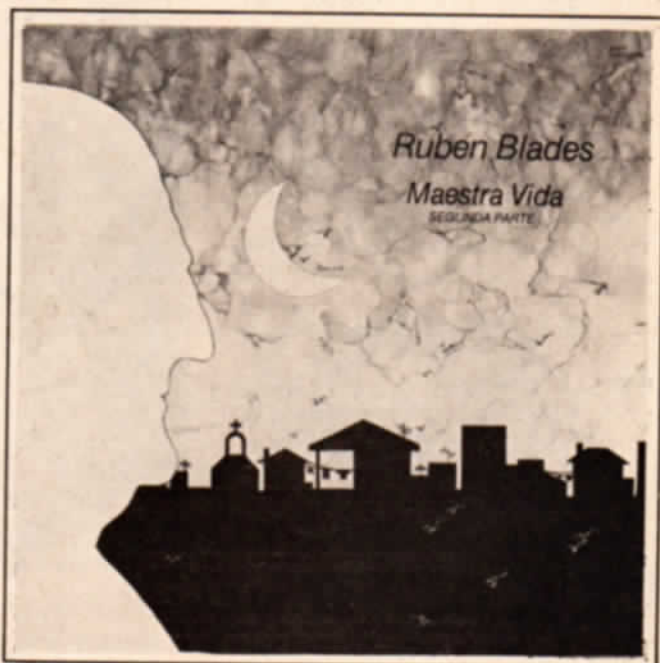
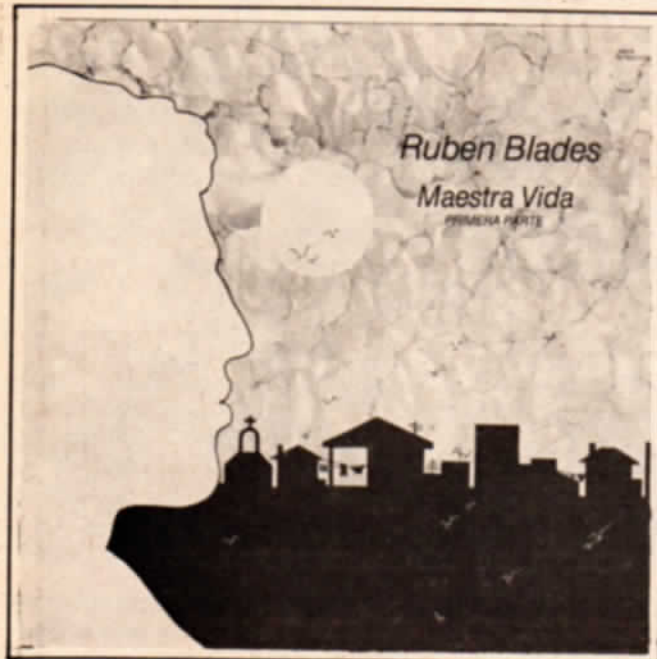
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*Maestra Vida... get in touch with our past, our present, our future — and above all, with our reality.*



This is one of the rare occasions in which Latin Picks is entirely devoted to one product, and a more appropriate one it couldn't be. Not because it is the creation of Ruben Blades, the one Latin artist whose incisive lyrical approach transformed his audience from nonchalant listeners into attentive participants, but because it would be a gross unfairness, (both to the creator and his public), that a work of this magnitude would fly sky-high over many heads who merely focus on the how-to-dance-to-it-level, instead of the how-to-listen-to-it. As Blades so well put it; "*La musica es solo un pretexto*," to display a drama which spans three generations, three central characters (Carmelo, Manuela and their son, Ramiro) and a hundred times more realities of the Latin America we are all part of, and which we so conveniently tend to neglect because of the all-consuming preoccupation with being *Americanos*.

The opening scene is set in a bar — la barra de la esquina, the place where the poor go to drown in alcohol their impotency in dealing with the system. The initial music is one of beautiful sadness, much like a Lecuona zarzuela, in which the rich tonality raises an atmosphere of grandeur over a bed of irrevocable fatal-

ism. Lito Quiñones, Quique's son, introduces Rafael Da Silva to his father. Rafael, grandson of Carmelo and Manuela, is celebrating his forthcoming marriage and entices *sabelotodo* Quique to relate stories about his grandparents: Manuela Perez, queen bee of the neighborhood, the object of the most selective *piropos* from all the barrio men, and Carmelo Da Silva, the *guapo* among *guapos*. The songs and narration which are executed by Cesar Miguel Rondón (principal narration) and Ruben Blades as Quique Quiñones, are done in a series of flashbacks.

The song "Manuela" is like the woman it characterizes: expressively bouncy, *alegre, con salsa* — Invoking thoughts of a narrow waist and mighty *caderas* which, alternately fanning the air at both sides, pied-pipers the lusty *hombres* after her, while coroeing *Ay, que no diera por el amor de Manuela*. The sounds of "Carmelo" also paint the prototypical picture of the *jodador* and his surroundings: a *guaguancó* (rhythm of the barrios) floating over the gathered voices of street corner characters. Whistles of admiration, complimenting rhymes, the clinking of bottles of *cuajquier solar*. The lyrics, announcing Carmelo's amorous intentions for Manuela, fall within the

macho framework — daring, defiant, challenging. (*Me quito el nombre / si no soy su primer hombre*). "*Como tu*" shows the mellow side of the tough ones, the one side they never admit having, only exposed in those intimate moments when no one is around. Its *son-montuno* style conducive to couples dancing — slowly rhythmical, is perfect for *el rapeo*. "*Yo soy una mujer*" is simply beautiful: Carmelo and Manuela declare their promise of eternal love with la señora Anoland Diaz (de Blades), in the role of Manuela, performing a magnificent duet with her son Ruben Blades.

*El viejo Lito* then tells young Da Silva about everyone's shortlived expectations for the couple's happiness due to Carmelo's reputation as a *malon*, but that they threw a party for them anyway. "*La Fiesta*" celebrates the union of the lovers. Its slow beginning and subsequent development of the music into something danceable reflects the song's similarity with a house party: slow to start, further evolution toward *burullo* and *algarabia* and the ending fight, probably caused by a *disputa por mujeres*. "*El Nacimiento de Ramiro*", like the joy of the moment implies, comes through with intense musical happiness, yet always laced with sad overtones. (*usen el*

*baño si quieren / pero con mucho cuidado' / si no hay papel no se quejen / desde ayer esta tapao')* The lyrics also carry an implicit message. Carmelo's bubbling fatherly joy is expressed in a series of emotions ranging from tenderness to the newborn, to his preoccupation with the stoic mother who has just given birth to his prince, with all his hopes that this son will become a great baseball player, a scientist or even a doctor — anything except a "faggot" or a thief, the two things which the *machos* like Carmelo have no forgiveness for. Unmentioned throughout the whole song is motherly love. While we eventually notice that, after his initial burst of affection, Carmelo's worries turn toward making ends meet ("Dejenme Reir Para no llorar), motherly love, though initially subdued, remains constant.

"Dejenme Reir (Para no llorar)" is preceded by a conversation between Rafael Da Silva and Quique, with the young one complaining to *el viejo* about the bad economic situation. *El viejo* tells him that times have always been bad because *el pobre siempre esta fregao'*. This number discusses the plight of the Carmelo who, after the birth of his son, complains about lack of work in the *sastreria* — since that is now considered a luxury and not a necessity — and about the politicians who show up every four years promising *villas y castillas*, blaming inflation for their poverty, and how the situation doesn't change for the deprived after the elections anyway. It further mentions how the armed forces always want to fix everything with a *golpe de estado*, and they aren't any different anyway; and how the poor have to laugh to maintain their sanity. The music is extremely unusual in this song: It moves from *bomba plena*, speeds up to an almost *merengue* (with Ruben singing very much "a la Wilfrido Vargas") while finally falling to *lelolai*. The *coro* once again plays an important role for when the politicians' situation is discussed with the *estribillo el voto buscando*, the *coro* answers *y robando . . . . y engañando*.

La Segunda Parte of *Maestra Vida* opens once again with the bar scene of the three characters of Lito, Quique and Rafael accompanied by another beautiful piece of music. "Manuela, después" and "Carmelo, después" are gut-tearing songs: the first presents the lamentations of the older Manuela, the former queen bee, now hunched, with all her beauty gone, painfully aware that the end is near. The second has former tough man Carmelo in his rocking chair, lost in a sea of dreams and sadness. Sad because his son has shunned him;

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# MUSICA

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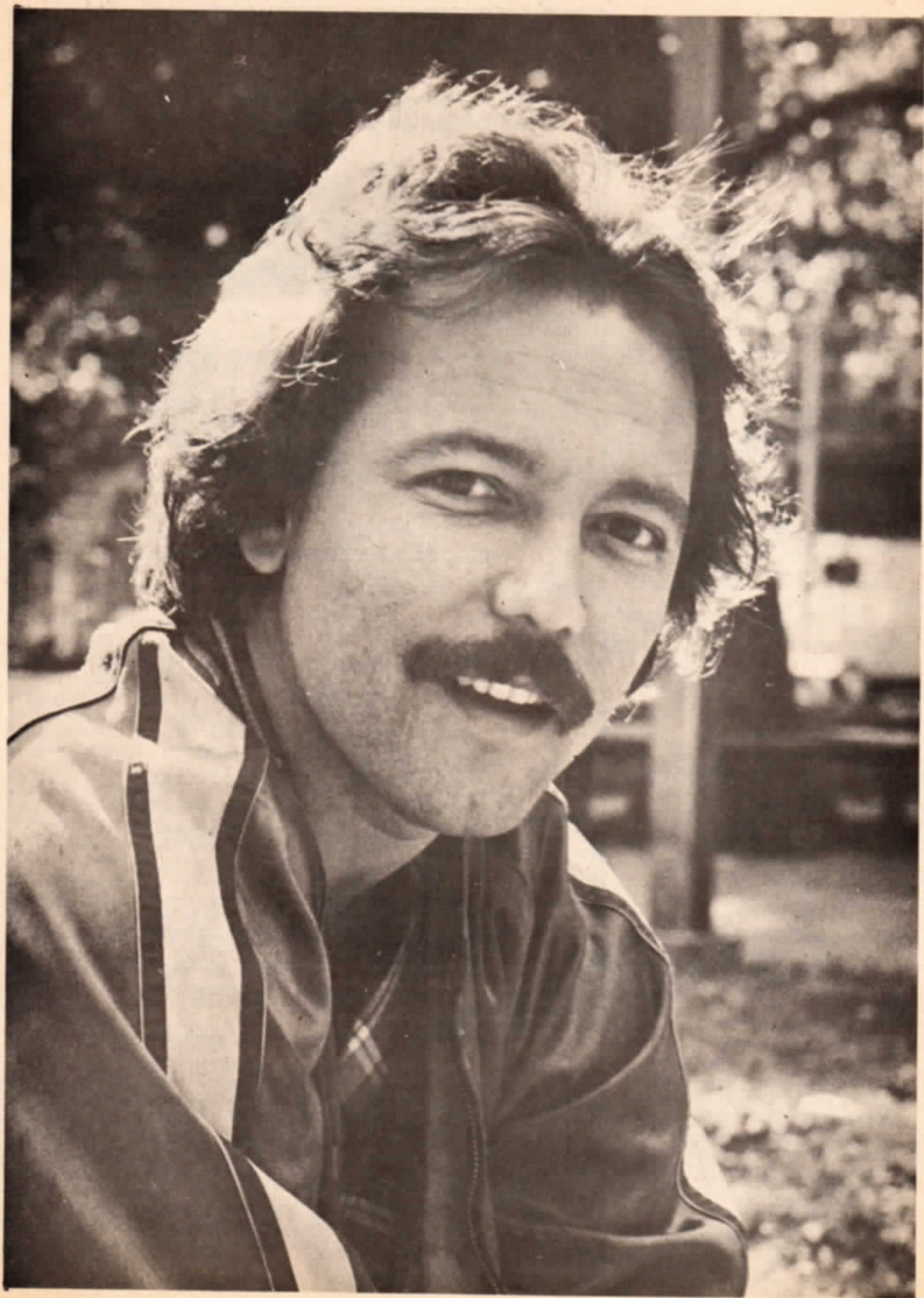
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# Ruben Blades singer, poet, philosopher

By Izzy Sanabria / photos by Anne Saxon

If we were to cite the major influences in Latin music over the last few years, one would have to say Willie Colon and Ruben Blades, individually and collectively. In 1978, they collaborated on *Siembra*, an album that was not only a popular success but which was proclaimed by the critics to herald the renaissance of Salsa.

Besides its music, *Siembra's* lyrics by Ruben Blades brought a new and exciting dimension to Salsa. Ruben utilized the music as a vehicle to express a philosophy — singing words of wisdom to a vast public that rarely listens to lectures or bothers to read about the relevant issues that concern our daily lives. Thus Ruben was able to reach a people who have always relied on oral communication and Salsa conveyed his message.

Ruben Blades is a singer, musician and composer who in a few short years has established himself as Salsa's singing poet. What Bob Dylan represented to America's dissenting youth during the sixties, Ruben Blades has the potential to become to an even larger audience of Hispanics the world over.

Ruben's lyrics address themselves to social situations and issues reflected in the lifestyles of the barrios and its inhabitants — the underdogs of the Hispanic world. Several years have passed since the release of *Siembra*, and now Blades is releasing two albums simultaneously — a long-awaited work which has taken Ruben to yet another plateau in his musical journey. Entitled *Maestra Vida* — Life, the Teacher — the albums are a study of life and death spanning three generations. These albums are a collection of songs and narration which tell the story of a family living in any barrio of the Latin world. The story revolves around the life of the character Carmelo DaSilva, his wife Manuela, and his son Ramiro, and is told in flashbacks to Rafael, Ramiro's son.

There had been a cloak of secrecy

over this work. Now, with the albums released, I was anxious to hear what Ruben had to say about the "opus" and what obvious and hidden messages he had written into it. Our conversation took us from *Siembra* to *Maestra Vida* to local and international politics, and the part all of us are playing in this day-to-day drama.

**Izzy Sanabria:** How does this LP differ from *Siembra*, in terms of expressing a philosophy and underlying theme?

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*"There had been a cloak of secrecy over MAESTRA VIDA, but now, with the albums released, I was anxious to hear from Ruben what obvious and hidden message he had written into the work."*

— IZZY SANABRIA

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**Ruben Blades:** With *Siembra*, I tried to create an awareness that we all should have in order to see and do something about the things that are hurting us. Three songs in that album conveyed a sort of message.

The underlying theme of *Maestra Vida* is life and death, with an emphasis on one of our great fears — aging — the fact that we are all going to grow old. This is a society that does not forgive old age. Growing old should be considered a victory over death. We all want to live. No one wants to die. But we have no respect for those who succeed in that struggle of not dying — of wanting to live.

**Izzy:** America has been described as a disposable society which tends to throw away old things, including our old people.

**Ruben:** In Latin America it isn't as bad, but we are beginning to lose the respect we once had.

**Izzy:** True. Traditionally, it was thought that old people possessed wisdom, and therefore, their presence was valued by the young. Unfortunately, today everything is so youth-oriented that the young have lost respect for their elders.

**Ruben:** There is a song in the album sung by Manuela when she was a beautiful young woman, and it's sung by my mother.

**Izzy:** Your mother? No kidding.

**Ruben:** I used her as an example of life's ironies. My mother was a very good singer and piano player, but she never recorded — never made it. She used to tell me that I would never make it. But now that I've had some success, I wanted to record her. A fifty-three year-old woman that sounds like she's twenty. Otherwise, I wouldn't have used her. It emphasizes the fact that age isn't that important sometimes. It's what you do that is important.

**Izzy:** Look at Celia Cruz.

**Ruben:** Exactly. What I'm trying to stress is the incredible void in the possibilities of life from one generation to the next.

**Izzy:** You mean the generation gap?

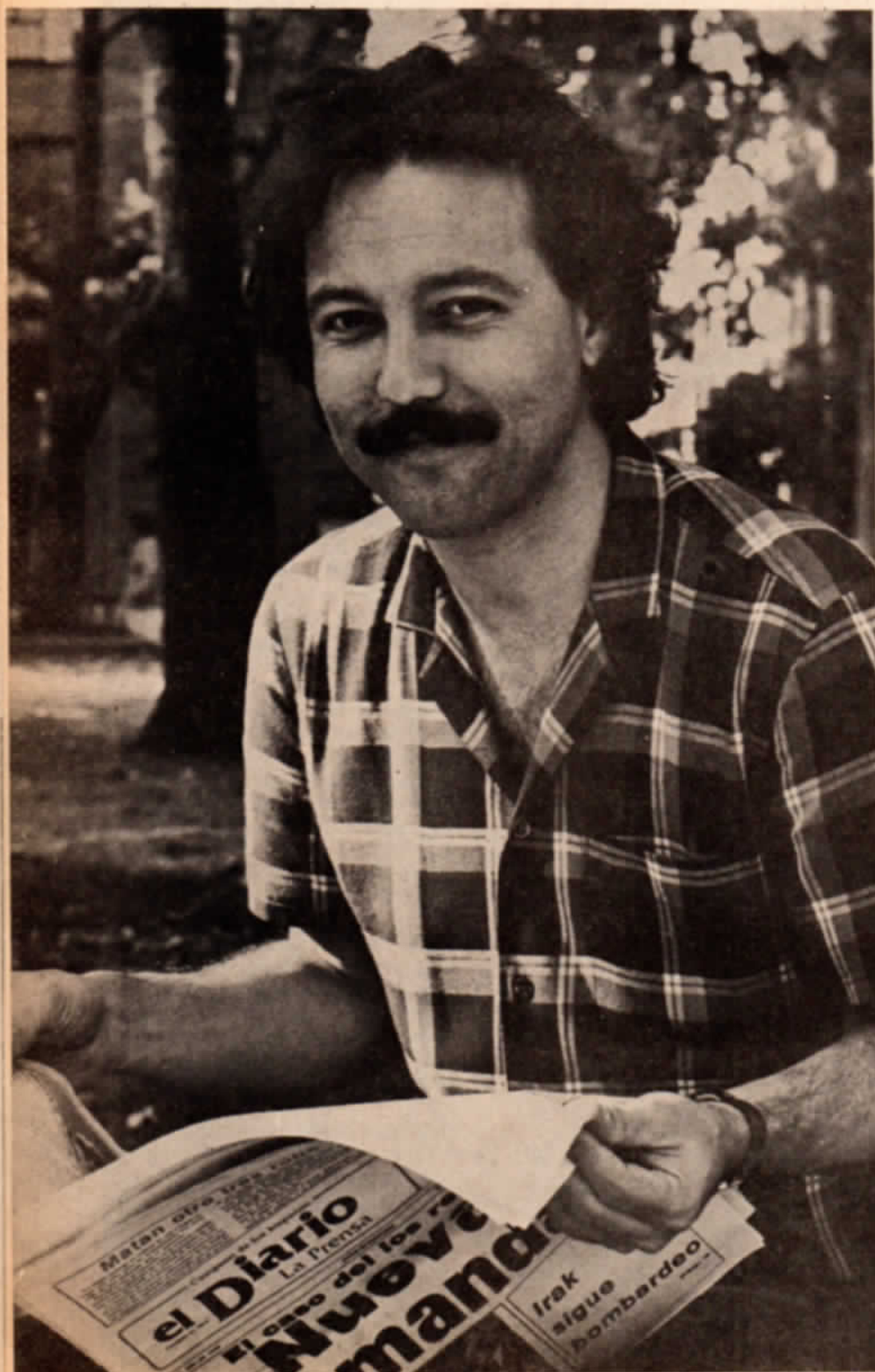
**Ruben:** Not just the gap, because the old people in this story are more willing to get closer to the young experience than the young are. But the young don't know what they are doing.

**Izzy:** As the poet Longfellow said, "Youth is wasted on the young!"

**Ruben:** Right, like Ramiro, Carmelo's son thinks the answer to happiness is to live in a shack which he built in a squatters' area called Porvenir (yet-to-come). He never returns to the barrio called Salsipuedes (leave-if-you-can). The youth refuses to acknowledge the neighborhood and all the sacrifices his folks made to make it possible for him to go on.

It is only after Ramiro's father (Carmelo) dies, that he senses the void and realizes that he is next to go. And that's the crux of the whole thing. As long as we have a mother and a father, we are still

"The underlying theme of MAESTRA VIDA is life and death, with an emphasis on one of our greatest fears — aging."



somebody's kids. But when they no longer exist, then you are the next in line. You become to somebody else what they were to you — or you become your own mother and father.

In Ramiro's case, even though he feels sadness over his father's death, he is more concerned with his own mortality, and it scares the shit out of him. From there he goes to the alley of the poor where he sings the title song, "Maestra Vida," singing to life and the neighborhood — the same place where his father had sung about his son's birth forty-eight years before. He sings about the paradox of life — he has seen so much and learned so much and yet, has learned nothing. A dissatisfied man, he leaves the neighborhood in search of an elusive security, the shack he built, only to die with his wife three short years later when he's shot down by the army.

**Izzy:** Are both albums necessary to fully understand the story?

**Ruben:** I would like to stress that we are releasing two LPs simultaneously because, as I said at Studio 54, a double album might be too much money to lay out at one time for many people here and even more so in South America. So people can buy either album and still get the gist of the story. There are a lot of little jokes, ironies to listen for and make you think. Little scenarios, slices of life which can happen in any barrio in the world. The rest of the stories and situations in this mythical alley of the poor will be continued in albums to come. The next album that I'm preparing with Willie Colon, is called "Stories of the Island of Bored People."

**Izzy:** Sounds like a great trilogy. Did you make *Maestra Vida* independently of Willie?

**Ruben:** Yes and no. I wrote the music and lyrics. The arrangements were by Carlos Franzeti, Louie Cruz, Marty Sheller and Javier Vasquez. And I must really compliment them all because they did a wonderful job. Willie Colon produced both albums. He's a master. He gets into the

*"What I'm trying to show is how we lose our compassion and perspective on life. And how life wakes us up with its many surprises."*

booth, listens to everything that's happening and I feel completely confident in his judgement. He knows how to get the most out of the studio set up. I think he's the best.

**Izzy:** What are you concerned with most as an artist?

**Ruben:** To be clear. To not be presumptuous. I don't want people to be in awe of the artist, but more importantly to interpret clearly the images the artist is projecting.

**Izzy:** What is the underlying message you wish to give the world?

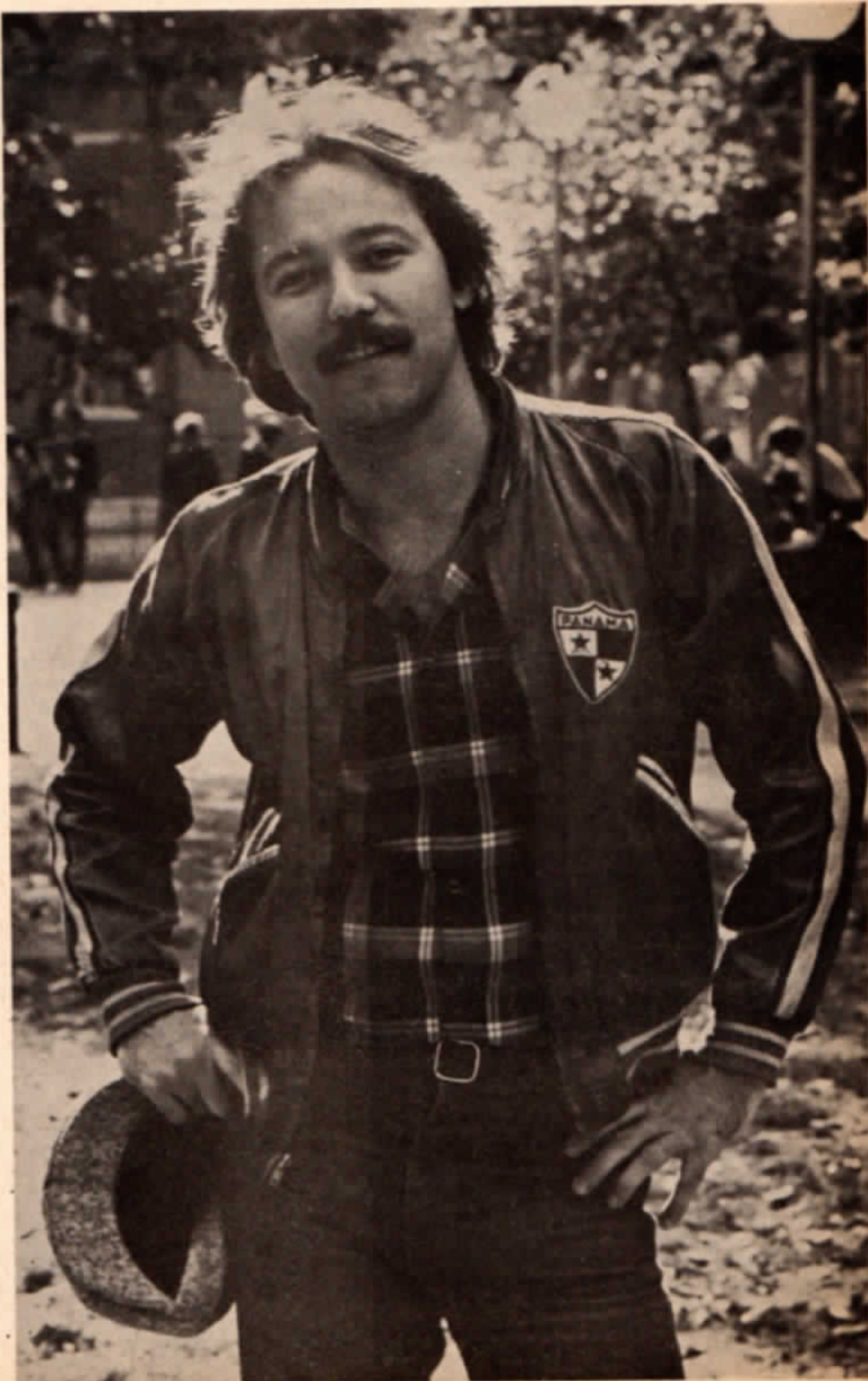
**Ruben:** That we should all be a little more humane. We have to be more aware and in contact with the things that are happening around us. We are headed towards a world of automated feelings. It bothers me how blasé we are about death. Violence is nothing. Just a normal part of life. I'm trying to shock people where they have never been shocked before. Maybe if I present these facts through music, which has always been used to dance away our troubles and feel better and forget. Maybe if I can touch you there, it will shock you more than everyday occurrences that you see in newspapers and on TV. What I'm trying to show is how we lose our compassion and our perspective on life. And how life wakes us up with its many surprises.

**Izzy:** Getting back to *Siembra*. Don't you find it ironic that the most popular song was "Pedro Navaja," and that some people even say that it perpetuated the negative Latino image, which is contrary to what you as an artist are trying to accomplish?

**Ruben:** That's where people go wrong. It's not a matter of a negative image. It exists, unfortunately, so let's bring it out in the open. Let's work to correct it.

**Izzy:** I heard that in Puerto Rico they've premiered a play called *The True Story of Pedro Navaja*.

**Ruben:** Yes, I know, and I'm very curious to know how they envision him, because Pedro Navaja was a child at one time, and he also had his dreams and hopes like everyone else. But people don't care how he





*"It bothers me how blasé we are . . . Violence is nothing. Just a normal part of life. I'm trying to shock people where they've never been shocked before. . ."*

might have become evil. People laugh at the fact that this bad dude tried to do in this lady, and she gave him the surprise of his life. For once, the woman wasn't the fall guy. He had a knife, but she had a gun, so she shoots the bastard. And for the first time it is a woman who delivers the punch line: "No estas en na" (you're into nothing). There was an equality there of sorts. He's a hustler and she's a prostitute. The drunk represents life. The life that moves on. He picks up the knife, the gun and the money and the final irony of all the ironies: he thanks God for this miracle, laughing merrily and thinking of his next drink.

I hope people can get into and understand things in *Maestra Vida* like the song "Dejenme reir para no llorar," sung by Carmelo. It's the situation of the governments in South America. "Cada cuatro años se aparecen cargando niños por el barrio, prometiendo y saludando, el voto buscando," and the barrio answers, "Y robando" y engañando". Carmelo continues, "y acaban las elecciones y al mirar las selecciones, siempre ven las misma gente." And everyone shouts "ha-ha-ha." And the guy who voted with highest hopes, is still hanging in the meat rack. And the guy who voted indifferently thinks that by an act of God, all the damage will be fixed miraculously. And everyone shouts "AMEN."

Then there's a take off on Wilfrido Vargas — a Merengue which says that the new president and new cabinet make a thousand new declarations and promises, the press gives their own version that further confuses the people and the issues, which leads to chaos, bochinches and then you hear the sound of marching soldiers with the news: "Ladies and gentlemen we are going to fix the situation once and for all," which is the military coup. And after the army takes over, there's a huge fight for top position, and in the midst of all this confusion, Carmelo sings that no one is coming into his tailor shop because people are too busy trying to feed their bellies. They'd rather go poorly

dressed than hungry. And while he can understand what's happened, he still has to hold on, so he sings, laughing to avoid crying, "Dejeme reir para no llorar, dejame cantar para que la pena no duela tanto."

The first line that he delivers — the fault of this hell is the incapability of the government — is the cry of thousands and thousands of people throughout South America, regardless of the political system, under which they live. Wouldn't it be interesting to keep records which reflected the exact amount of change from one government to the next. Take for example the problems we confront with inflation. Do you think this situation is going to change in the next year or so just because we choose so and so? Everyone knows where the wrongs are, but nobody does anything.

**Izzy:** Why?

**Ruben:** I guess we're all sort of hypnotized. We just keep on being slaves of routine.

**Izzy:** It has always been my opinion that the common man knows what has to be done, but the politician does nothing because he's usually busy serving his own best interests.

**Ruben:** Of course. When you look at it, the bottom line is corruption. In "Siembra" I mentioned the Samoja regime in Nicaragua. That situation is the prototype of what corruption can do to a country. Those people owned everything, the airlines, supermarkets, radio, press, everything. And the country was completely backward.

**Izzy:** Do you consider yourself a visionary, philosopher, a politician or what?

**Ruben:** We are all politicians in South America. That's another thing, we are so afraid of the word politics yet we're all part of the political system, just by existing, whether we're in a republic, a democracy, or a socialist state. Every decision we make has a political connotation and everything we do has a social meaning because we are part of society. But people are afraid to use the word politics or social issue. Right away they say you are a communist or

something or other.

**Izzy:** You're right. You have been accused of being a socialist and even communist.

**Ruben:** I don't see why. I don't believe communism is a solution for anything. I always say, if it's so great how come they have to build a wall to keep people in?

**Izzy:** Wouldn't you say that poor people in South America and many in New York lean towards socialism?

**Ruben:** Many do, because when you are poor and disadvantaged, it's logical to think in terms of sharing, which makes sense. I think there should be a limit to wealth. You don't have to be filthy rich to the extent that you block other people's rights to eat and to be clothed and housed. It's obvious that anybody in the streets who doesn't have anything is probably going to listen to any doctrine that talks about sharing. I think it's a shame that in this country, if you don't have any money or Blue Cross/Blue Shield, you can't get proper medical attention. That's awful. In Panama, medicine is free. We pay social security and if you get sick you can go to the hospital and get the best medical attention available.

**Izzy:** I mentioned in an editorial that while illegal aliens come here to make a buck, Latinos who are American citizens tend to be too dependent on the government.

**Ruben:** Well, we have to do things that are conducive to making the government aware that we are willing to face our responsibilities and in turn demand for them to fulfill theirs.

**Izzy:** That's exactly what some of the Latino politicians said in our October issue in reference to exercising our political power. (Elections '80)

**Ruben:** What is killing us more than anything is the non-participation in the social issues of this city. It's not so much a dependence on government, because even the people on food coupons are not getting enough. There are people in this city eating dog food and the rents keep getting jacked up higher — and

*"We are all politicians. Every decision we make has a political connotation and social meaning because we are a part of society."*

there's no end in sight. Ever since that incident at Studio 54 when some people felt that I wasn't involved enough to speak as I did, I have been getting involved in the community.

The reason why I can't get any more deeply involved is that I am a legal alien, which means I pay city, state and federal taxes but I cannot vote. And I can't go out and register people to vote, when I myself can't vote. That's up to the Puerto Ricans to do because they are the natural citizens in this city with the right to vote.

**Izzy:** What kind of community affairs have you been involved in?

**Ruben:** Recently there was a TV telethon to raise money para los niños lisiados de Puerto Rico, and the irony was that the only groups I saw performing were Dominican. I saw not one of the Puerto Rican bands from this city.

**Izzy:** Why was that?

**Ruben:** I don't know. It was in the afternoon. The price at the Beacon theatre was only one dollar, and there were maybe a hundred people there, in a theatre that holds over two thousand. People just don't lend their support.

**Izzy:** Maybe it was the fault of the committee not informing anyone in the business?

**Ruben:** It wasn't necessary. You know how I got involved? I read about it in *El Diario*. I picked up the phone and called them. I said, 'I'm Ruben Blades' and the guy said, 'Who?' He didn't even know who I was. I had to explain, 'I sing with Willie Colon and I wrote Pedro Navaja, etc.' "Oh yeah, si, como esta hijo."

**Izzy:** That's also part of the problem. The fact that they didn't even know who you are. They're not aware of Salsa, which has had a tremendous impact throughout the world, especially here in New York and throughout South America. How can a publication that calls itself a newspaper ignore that kind of news?

**Ruben:** But what else is there? I buy *El Diario* everyday. Forget about the

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