

JULY 1982

THE SECOND ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

JULY 1984

RockBill



Difford & Tillbrook Remodel

Rubén Blades' America

Princely Ambitions

GENERAL PUBLIC



and antlers above the rest.
CANADA'S OLDEST INDEPENDENT FAMILY BREWERY.

Inside RockBill

July 1984

\$1.25

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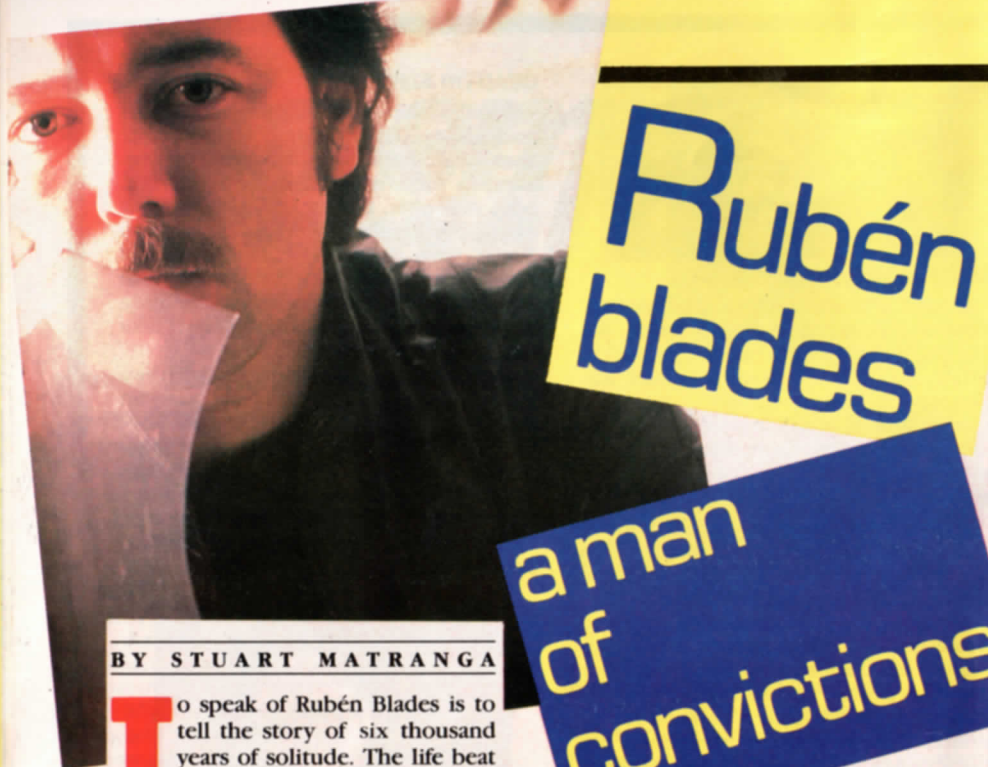
LIP SERVICE	6
Offhand remarks, new releases, rumours, lies, scandalous stories.	
DIFFORD AND TILLBROOK	8
"It never entered our minds that one day it might not be as good as it once was."	
THE THE	10
"It's nice to caress people's ears while they listen to music so they get drawn into it."	
COVER STORY	12
The beat bops into the General Public, uh-huh-uh-huh-uh-huh.	
RUBÉN BLADES	18
"Music has rescued the popular voice."	
THE JAMAICA DIARIES, II	20
I realize that the music is the escape and the escape is the music and the soul is in the struggle and the struggle is in the people and none could survive without the interdependency.	
GRACE JONES	22
"If I don't have variety, I get bored."	
THE BRONX BREAKS	24
"Sometimes you need that underdog music that gets you really rocking."	
A FAN'S NOTES	26
Long may Prince reign!	
MTV PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS	29
What's coming on MTV music television.	
THE GAME	30
The Eyes have it.	



More with Less

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Rubén blades

a man of convictions

BY STUART MATRANGA

To speak of Rubén Blades is to tell the story of six thousand years of solitude. The life beat of his songs reverberate in prison cells from San Salvador to Johannesburg. But, it is a tale told everyday on the streetcorners of the city to which we all belong. Boy George may pine about being a man with no convictions in "Karma Chameleon," but tell him not to sing it in Spanish in Latin America, where "you live and breathe politics because it affects your everyday life." No, Rubén Blades says. "If that line means we'll have a large portion of the youth without any convictions, then we're fucked."

People are disappearing south of the tropic of cancer. They're falling off the face of the Earth and nobody talks of it in the daylight. But Rubén Blades is singing about people waking up under a dictatorship, and he's waiting for the world's youth to free themselves from the bonds of physical, spiritual and mental slavery.

A Panamanian of West Indian heritage, Blades began his career in a rock band back home. He moved over

into "salsa" dance music becoming world-rekknowned working with his band Seis del Solar (Six from the Tement) and South Bronx tromponist Willie Colon. Somewhere in there he achieved a law degree, and after ten years living in New York, he's commuting to Cambridge in the fall to work on a doctorate in International Law at Harvard. One day he could become president of Panama, but for now he's expanding his audience beyond the Latin clubs. Though his latest LP, *Buscando America* (Looking for America) is sung in Spanish, there is at times a radical break from "the confinements of structure set by the Afro-Cuban music of the '30s and '40s" and he's included translated lyrics. His goal is to touch the youth of the world—but he's moving at his own pace, careful to bring his loyal and growing audience with him by increments.

T E R R A N O S T R A

It will be on his next album, probably to be produced by his friend and fan, Joe Jackson, and sung in English, that Rubén Blades will draw the ears and hearts of most *Norteamericanos*. Comparisons to Bruce Springsteen, Tom Waits and Laurie Anderson as other urban story-singers come easily. "We don't take the intelligence of our audience for granted," says Blades. "We address (our subjects) from a fresh point of view, with respect, and we're careful about the honesty and quality of what we're doing... We're not thinking in terms of how we are going to please people. We do something because it is in our guts. The nature of our sincerity and whatever inherent talent our presentation has makes people react to it. For me, it's the valid measure of touching someone."

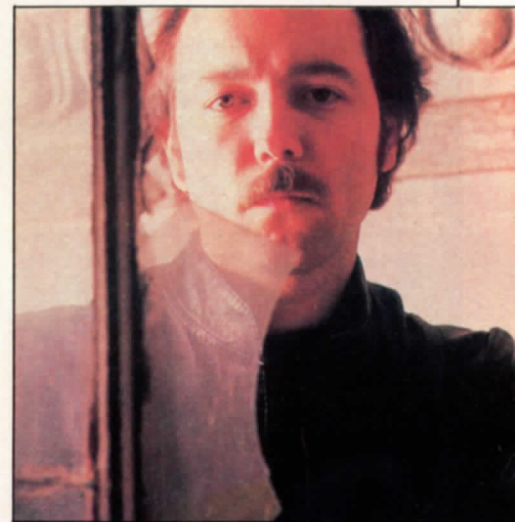
Beyond the doctorate and a summer tour and working with Joe Jackson, the inexhaustible Blades is at work on an album inspired by the early short stories of Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. "He asked me 'What exactly are you going to do to them, Rubén?' I said 'I'm not going to interpret you. Forget that! I'm going to write what I feel after I read them. You may not even be in accordance.' He was puzzled and wrote in a column that he didn't know what in the hell would come of it."

For Blades, a man with many convictions and wise enough to see the folly of political parties, it is always an issue of humanity above all else.

"What happened in Argentina (for example) is as horrible a discovery as what happened to the Jews in World War Two, because in Argentina the degree of cruelty and the sophistication in the administration of torture is unparalleled in South American history. Mothers whose children were killed inside of them! These (killers) were people who had mothers, fathers, sisters, friends. Then you ask how could these people do that? What is that nerve that prevents me from

doing that? I don't know. It is very easy to say 'I would never do it, but I don't think it's acceptable or wise to just wash away the possibility of us becoming like that. The idea is to say I could become that way and face it and watch it, so you don't end up being like that. Part of the reason for this album is to present, especially to the Latin American youth, these urban songs in the hopes that they'll be aware of the power of music as a social communicator. Music can work on behalf of those who do not have the facility of utilizing the media, television or print, because of censorship. Music has rescued the popular voice. Youth all over Latin America are going to prevent (dictatorships) in the future. It doesn't matter how much they ban us. We must ban forgetfulness. We can't forget...."

"This album is not going to go away. It's not a newspaper that hits you with 'Thirty people disappeared. President Reagan went to China' and it's gone—if it even appears at all. The song survives all that and stays. That's why it is especially important in countries where history is still being written. Sing it and it stays." ○



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