

# Rock Express



## Talking Head

NATUR  
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**IRON MAIDEN** FOREVER HEAVY

**JOHNNY MITCHELL** SOUL'S AWASH

**MORRIS DAY** SUAVE SOPHISTICATE

REETBEAT  
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ONAL REPORT

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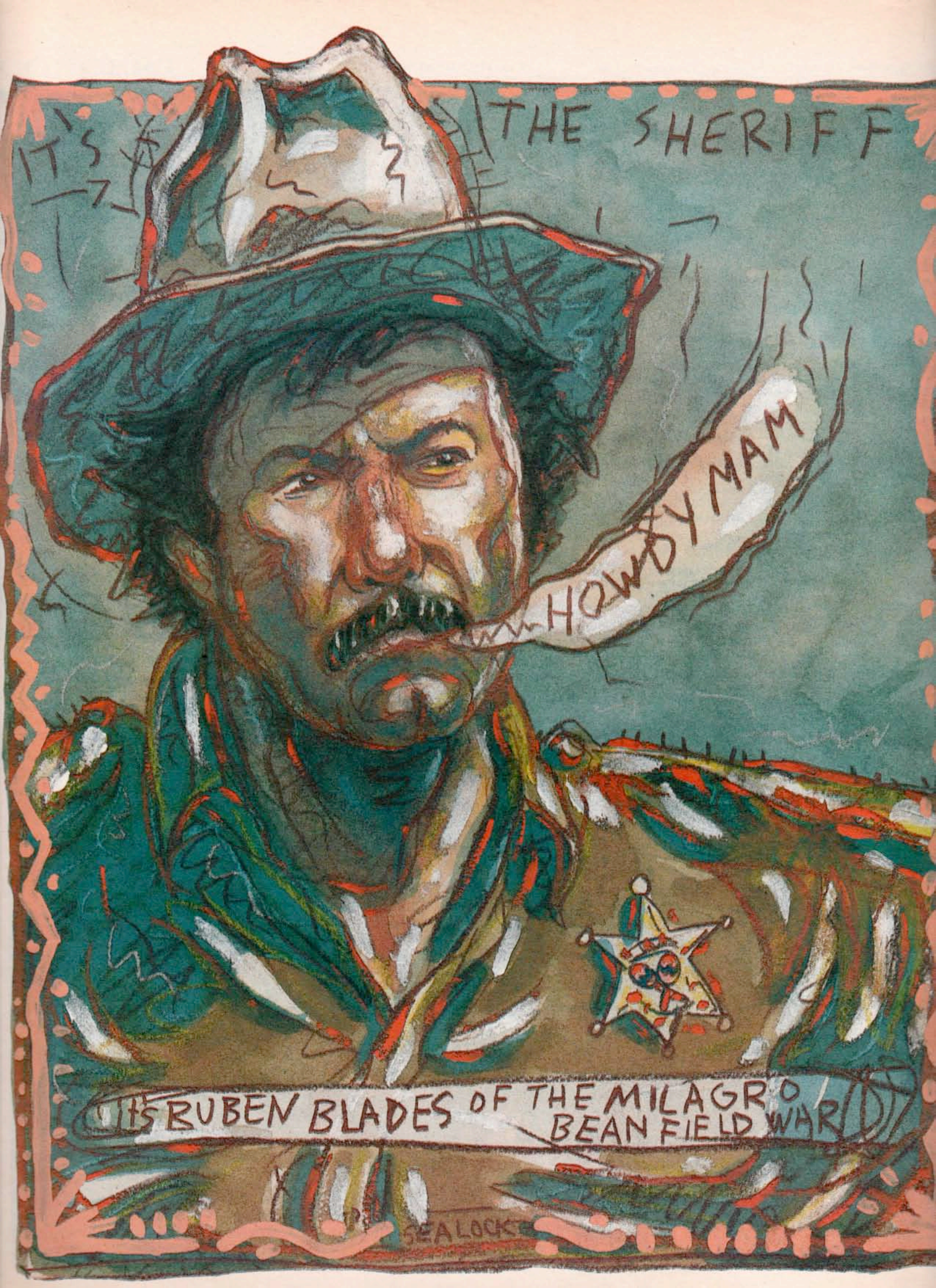
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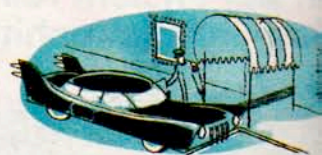
IT'S RUBEN BLADES OF THE MILAGRO BEAN FIELD WAR

SEA LOCKE



# NO QUARTER

Renaissance man RUBEN BLADES lives only to please his own strict personal integrity. In his music and film work, he expects to give his best, come hell or commercial acceptability



MOVING PICTURES

by KERRY DOOLE

Interviewing actor/singer/songwriter/lawyer/journalist and aspiring politician Ruben Blades is not a recommended exercise for anyone with a potential inferiority complex. Most of us struggle for competency in just one field; Ruben excels at any activity he attempts. Sickening!

This Panamanian-born Renaissance man is not yet a household name outside of Hispanic homes, but that may very well soon change. Starring role in a major movie directed by Robert Redford, an English language record featuring Lou Reed, Sting and Elvis Costello, and a new Latin album set for release?

Ruben Blades is on a bigger roll than the Michelin man.

His workload makes Hercules seem like a shirker, but Ruben claims, "I'm just a very disorganized organized person. I need to think about things a long time before they materialize. It is not the creative process that takes so long but the execution. So when I move, I MOVE and get it done!"

His part in Redford's warmly received new film, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, is giving Blades' handsome features wide exposure, and he and Bob have formed a mutual appreciation society.

"Ruben is a natural actor. I instantly felt he was right for the film," Redford said recently. "He understood the part quickly and expressed his own good instincts. He's a very talented man, and his performance is quite fine."

In *Milagro*, Blades plays the town's laid-back sheriff, an amiable peacemaker caught between the angry locals and the rapacious land developers threatening their very existence.

The making of *The Milagro Beanfield War* was a long and troubled process; problems ranging from casting and script conflict to unseasonably bad weather and Robert Redford's legendary tardiness.

"The only flaw I can find in Redford is that he has no notion of time. He has his own watch, but he's a perfectionist. He's trying to capture the right feel, the right moment, and that accounts for some of the delay."

That aside, Blades found *Milagro* "a very rewarding experience, on many levels. I'd never been to New Mexico, and I loved the area and the people there very much. Working with Redford was a delight. He's a person that protects the actors and encourages them to experiment and show emotion. He looks for truth in terms of acting."

Ruben's name comes first in *Milagro's* credits, but that is because the ensemble cast is listed alphabetically. More recognizable names include Christopher Walken, John Heard, Daniel Stern, Melanie Griffith and Brazilian beauty Sonia (*Kiss Of The Spider Woman*) Braga.

Despite his fine performance, Ruben rates it as his second best work to date. "I feel my best was in *Crossover Dreams*, but one of the problems with that film was that people thought I was just playing myself (he portrays a salsa star seeking wider acceptance). That was not so, but that view took something

away from my acting."

Prior to *Crossover Dreams*, Ruben appeared in B movie *The Last Fight*, then went on to star alongside Richard Pryor in *Critical Condition* and with Whoopi Goldberg in *Fatal Beauty*.

The latter film, in particular, was scarcely art, but Blades has a consistent philosophy behind all the roles he accepts.

"*Fatal Beauty* gave me the chance to do something I've always advanced — the need to present other than the usual negative stereotype of the Latin. The fact that this was a role where I didn't have to climb out a window with a Sony on my back but played a detective was very appealing.

"And I have tremendous admiration for Richard Pryor. When I work, I'm also watching others work. I'd eventually like to direct, so this is a hands-on apprenticeship."

Without denigrating those two films, Ruben tellingly admits that "in the future, I hope to be offered and do better roles."

In both his movies and music, Blades stresses the need for more cultural tolerance. "We'll be forced to admit that the key to survival is to deal with each other. We cannot survive separately."

Interestingly, Redford voices almost identical sentiments. "Chicano culture has to be respected as a major part of our country. Before, stereotypes and caricatures of Hispanics were cartoonish and unfair. Hopefully that is changing."

His career as an actor may be flourishing, but Ruben Blades is not about to forsake his first love, music.

He's acknowledged as the reigning superstar of salsa and contemporary Latin music, and has four Grammy nominations, hit albums, and sell-out tours to prove it.

Unlike most of his peers, he doesn't rely

on romantic ballads and a he has revolutionized the (wide use of synthesia (hard-hitting social and pol novations. His major labe *cando America*, *Escenas a* — have helped draw a salsa, and now Ruben is crossover dream by releasin language album, *Nothing B* Via involvement in the the Amnesty tour, and wor and Linda Ronstadt (desp link with South Africa), B the attention of the North dustry, and this new LP wi process.

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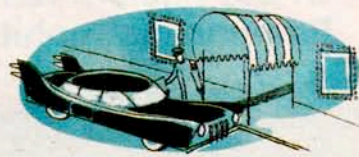
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Illustration by RICK SEALOCK

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Unlike most of his peers, he doesn't rely

on romantic ballads and an orthodox sound;  
...he has revolutionized the genre with musical  
... (wide use of synthesizers) and lyrical  
... (hard-hitting social and political messages) in-  
...novations. His major label albums — *Bus-  
...cando America*, *Escenas* and *Agua de Luna*  
... — have helped draw a wider audience to  
...salsa, and now Ruben is pursuing his own  
...crossover dream by releasing his first English  
...language album, *Nothing But The Truth*.

Via involvement in the Sun City project,  
...the Amnesty tour, and work with Joe Jackson  
...and Linda Ronstadt (despite, ironically, her  
...link with South Africa), Blades has come to  
...the attention of the North American pop in-  
...dustry, and this new LP will surely speed the  
...process.

But don't go accusing him of musical com-  
...promise or concessions to the Anglo pop  
...machine.

"I believe people will see this as an honest  
...choice that follows the line of integrity in my  
...work. I didn't go for the easy formula. I kept  
...the honesty in my lyrics, and I believe I came  
...up with an album that is interesting and  
...provocative."

Indeed he has. Biggest surprise on *Nothing  
...But The Truth* is the strongly anthemic rock  
...feel of a couple of songs, courtesy of co-  
...producer, co-writer Lou Reed. Ruben quickly  
...stresses he's no stranger to rock'n'roll.

"I didn't need a crash course; that would  
...have been false. In Panama, I was exposed to  
...music from all parts of the world. I'd heard  
...Frankie Lymon, Eddie Cochran, Bill Haley,  
...The Beatles — everybody."

Is he expecting the switch to English to  
...draw flak?

"That would only come from close-minded  
...people, and I don't think they make up the  
...majority. If people grant me the intelligence I  
...think I've shown in my professional life and

Illustration by RICK SEALOCK

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## RUBEN BLADES

achievement, then they'd have to admit this is not an easy first album to make.

"It doesn't cater to the format, it doesn't patronize the audience, and it jumps right into the fray of what is happening today without any concessions. When you make those concessions, that is when you're selling out!"

Ruben's long-awaited English debut was once expected to include collaborations with the likes of Dylan and Springsteen, but it still sports a heavyweight credit list via Reed, co-writer Elvis Costello and Sting, who donated *I Can't Say*, written specifically for Blades.

"The people I chose are ones that feel like me. They're mavericks in terms of the industry because they're songwriters who write what they feel is important; not necessarily what they feel will sell a million."

Certainly if Ruben was chasing the Yankee dollar greedily, he wouldn't include such angrily political songs as *Ollie's Doo-Wop* and *In Salvador*. Sticking it to that dubious 'hero' Oliver North may be risky, but it is also long overdue.

"I find it amazing that after the Iran-Contra affair, it would take a Latin to write such a song. Why didn't someone here do it?"

"Perhaps because they have to take commercial risks into consideration. The idea is not to turn off anybody, so you produce bland stuff that never attacks directly or clearly."

Even Ruben's satirical or protest songs possess a deft melodic touch. "I've always written like that. People who don't know Spanish often said to me that if they listened to a song before they read the translation, they'd find it to be pretty, then be shocked to hear the lyrics were so strong."

"What I've always answered is that life is a little bit of kiss and a little bit of slap. If you want a balance, you present both."

Ruben's 'kiss' songs are equally unconventional.

"To me, most love songs ring false, they seem to be a formula. The love songs here are my interpretation of the reality of love — where you're surprised by it and don't know what to do about it. Love is a constant reassessment; one can be in love, yet be afraid of that."

Regardless of its commercial fate, Blades expects *Nothing But The Truth* to act as his calling card in the rock world. "I think I'll hear a lot more propositions now. People will ask Sting or Lou or Bob Dylan, and they'll say 'Sure, he's smart, he's got ideas, I've worked with him.' Musicians should get together; music should unite."

The heightened social and political conscience of some rockers pleases him. "Look at U2 and Midnight Oil. Things seem to be going in a more real direction."

Ruben Blades is not about to desert his Latino following. A new Spanish album is now due, and he's already writing for the next.

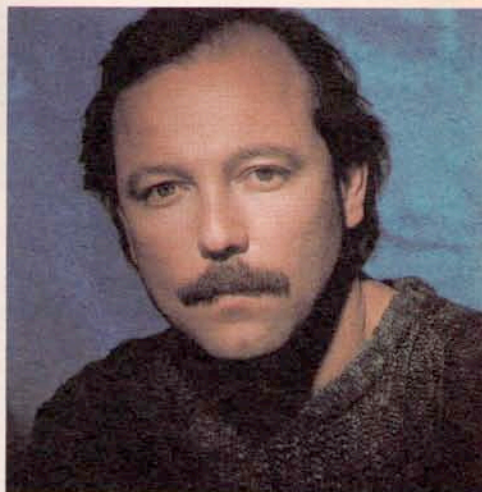
He blames the rigidity of radio for salsa's failure to gain a stronger foothold in North America, despite the seemingly universal appeal of this most sensual and romantic of genres.

"Radio formats have impeded that possibility. They're geared to certain people and cultures, certain ages, economic and racial groups. When you don't hear certain cultural expressions, people don't even acknowledge them. Hopefully that is going to change."

Always a man more interested in the welfare of his people than his latest chart number, Ruben still intends to return to Panama, his highly troubled homeland. Given his public profile and a Harvard masters degree in international law, he has been seriously tipped as a potential future President of Panama.

"I can't really set a timetable, but eventually I will go back. I HAVE to go back; it is where my cycle will end. It began there and will end there. It is where I can be most effective."

"In Panama, we have to create the conditions that could lead to the work I want to do. We need an independent judiciary and a constitution that is not interfered with by the military."



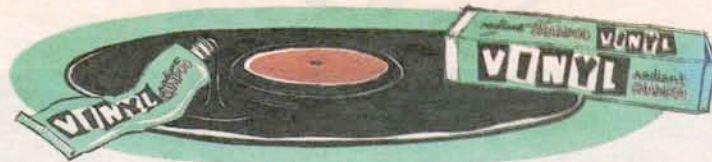
**'LIFE IS a little bit of  
kiss and a little bit of slap.  
If you want a balance,  
you present both'**

Whew! While we worry whether our rent checks will bounce, here's a man with the destiny of his country riding on his shoulders. Tiffany and Rick Astley don't have such problems. Doesn't the pressure of acting as a role model, as the conscience of a nation, get tiring?

"Not really, because I never confuse myself with Jesus. I pride myself on trying to find the truth, and doing what I understand to be right. I want to become part of the solution, not part of the problem!" □

BACKBEAT

# CAPTURED ON VINYL



## New Releases

### TALKING HEADS

*Naked*

(Sire)

What makes the Talking Heads great is their constant forward momentum. Not content to rest on past successes, they are always poking, prodding, exploring and pushing the boundaries of the pop song. And, as they endure, they refuse to become formulaic. Consequently, they just get more influential. *Naked* is a case in point. This is a United Nations celebration of musical forms, all synthesized through the Heads' peculiarly American sensibilities. Musicians with names like Yves N'Djock, Philippe Severain, Manolo Bandrena, Moussa Cissakao... You get the idea. All of these individual influences show up in the music, and so the album ends up becoming undefinable in its style — except that it's all distinctly Talking Heads. Making use of exotic instruments like the talking drum, kora, oil drum, dobro, cor anglais, and the innovative insertion of horns, accordion and quirky percussion devices,

the music has both a compelling sound and a fun, party-style atmosphere. There's a distinctly African percussion feel, a touch of Cajun, a healthy smattering of jazz horn arrangements and a smorgasbord of other musical genres here. Add to that David Byrne's finely honed sense of the satiric and you've got an album that is both challenging and fun. Notable tracks include the salsa-flavored *Mr. Jones* with its Latin horns and the eerie samba of *The Democratic Circus*. A current favorite is the delightfully satiric (*Nothing But Flowers* with its exuberant highlife sound. Here, Byrne turns Joni Mitchell's *Big Yellow Taxi* completely on its ear. "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot" becomes "Once there were shopping malls/Now it's all covered in flowers/If this is paradise/I wish I had a lawn mower." The point's the same, but Byrne's edgy humor updates it and brings it home. The best thing about this album is the good-natured way in which significant points are made. No pontificating for this band. Epic they may not be, but their vital humanity keeps them a very alive musical force. Who's to say there's no glory in day-to-day life. That's where most of us perform our small deeds of heroism. And that's what this album celebrates.

(By Dianne Collins)

### RUBEN BLADES

*Nothing But The Truth*

(Elektra)

This long-awaited album marks the English language debut of salsa superstar Ruben Blades. The likes of Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen had been rumored as collaborators, but instead we get Elvis Costello, Sting and Lou Reed helping their friend out with songs. Their presence will help give Blades long overdue exposure beyond his Latin audience, but this is not a wholly suc-

cessful project. Blades' music has always incorporated a myriad of styles, but the range here is somewhat disconcerting. Uncle Lou's raspy guitar doesn't sit easily with Ruben's smooth, melodic voice, so an attempt at a rock anthem (*Calm Before The Storm*) sounds forced. Elsewhere, you find romantic soul, upbeat salsa, R&B, and even doo-wop a cappella (*Ollie's Doo-Wop*). Some consistency is imparted via the excellence of Blades' lyrics, which combine strong political and social comment with evocative vignettes of life on the street. *The Hit* describes a barrio gangland murder with vivid intensity, while *Ollie's Doo-Wop* sticks it to that most dubious of heroes, Oliver North, and Reagan's vicious 'better dead than red' Latin American policy. Such tough lyrics won't grant Ruben easy access to radio play, but ballads like the Sting song *I Can't Say* and *The Letter* would fit right into adult contemporary formats. A large cast of top session musicians and backing singers (James Ingram included) ensure a full sound, and the inventive vocal arrangements are highlights. There is some excellent stuff here, but it doesn't quite measure up to the standards of such recent Blades albums as

*Buscando America* and *Agua de Luna*. Look forward to a new Spanish language record from the ever prolific singer/songwriter soon.  
(By Kerry Doole)

### THE TRAGICALLY HIP

*The Tragically Hip*

(Rock/BMG)

Ever so rarely, a new band emerges from the pack, so unpretentious in nature that you immediately want to clasp them to your bosom and tell everyone you know that YOU have discovered this treasure. It's like the first time you heard R.E.M. or the Georgia Satellites or the Fabulous Thunderbirds. There was something so totally honest about their music that it defied description. All you knew was that playing their records was a totally addictive experience. The Tragically Hip are that kind of band. So earthy and honest that you just have to like them. Musically, they've been compared to the Rolling Stones, The Animals and The Doors — justifiably so, considering the raw intensity of their songs. Lyri-



ZODIAC MINDWARP (above) AND L.A. GUNS: TWO BANDS, FROM OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE OCEAN, WHO THINK ALIKE.



cally, the Hip have... that their songs are at... Canada, with the U... presence in their liv... *Town Bringdown*, *L... Cemetery Sideroad* ca... the band's kaleidosc... by Red Rider's Ken... will succeed because... of honesty. It's instan...fectious — the stuff c... (By Keith Sharp)

### ZODIAC M

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There's a weird ne... world of metal — Sl... that Motley Crue, Ra... the glam metal dudes... nothin' yet. The guy... and L.A. Guns are... ironic thing about thi... simultaneously in bot... From the U.K. we ha... quintet of bikerish h... trip. The notorious... ning) and his hench... Flash Bastard, Trash... Thunderhide) have... English metal charts... lease, *High Priest Of... cess with its grungy... from three-chord gra... like *Backseat Educa... Gasoline*, *Spasm Gan... off their newest rele... siah*, leave no doubt... comin' from — stri... tudes. It's one of the... The Cult's *Electric* a... they tour the U.S. G... globe, the L.A. Gun... their long- anticipat... as "The Sleaziest... riding the coattails of... and Roses and Faste... and innovative as G... than FP, L.A. Guns s... ZM that you'd think... corner from each ot... miles apart! Yet sing... cohorts Tracii Guns... (ex-W.A.S.P.), Mik... Michaels lack ZM's... Hollywood hype is... album packs am... double-barrelled effo... *Gypsy*, *One Way Tic... major tour plans ahe... shooting stars. Wh... timely, not timeless... these bands are. Ar... today, but can these... over future releases?... be more than accou... money's on power... second — but there's... (By Drew Masters)**