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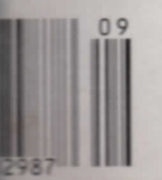

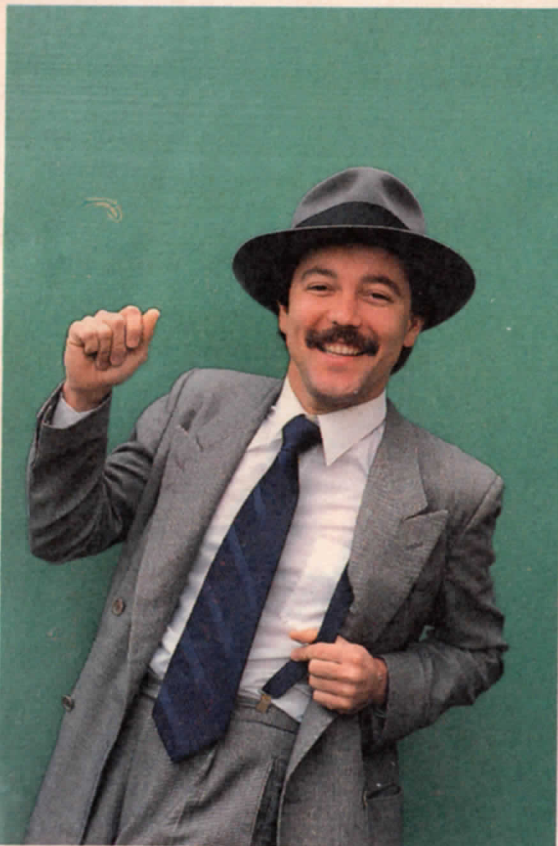

Andy Freeberg

Blades Running

The proposition: *Thwack!* Hand on skin. Fingers, palm, heel. *Pop pop thwack!* The answer: *Thwack pop! Pop buh buh thwack!* The conversation: rhythm. Hand-drum rhythm. Dense, complex Caribbean rhythm, snaking its way from Africa through Panama City, rising like steam off the barrio streets of East Harlem and the South Bronx. Rhythm that sounds like singing, tastes like pepper pot, and smells like sweat—and sex.

Then: *Boom! Crack!* Beat. Stick, foot, cymbal. A rock beat raging through the adolescent rebellion of a million horny teenagers, trashing tradition and distilling sex, anger, and frustration into a cry. The beat that makes the dancers shake.

The dancers. Satin Latin couples, gliding fluidly across the floor, contradicting each other's body moves as they grind to the beat, flow with the rhythm. Funkateers and dreads slipping effortlessly into the pocket. Middle-class radicals, drawn to a message but getting loose. *Salseros* aching to hear some horns. Post-collegiate types casually improvising. All on the scene to hear *the singer*.

The singer. Six feet tall, Latin-ly handsome, surveying the festivities through piercing brown eyes. Salsa rebel. He twists and turns, shaking maracas and spurring on the dancers, taking a playful swing with a maraca at one. He's everybody's old friend, a gracious and accommodating host. His bowler hat is near vertical on the back of his head. As bass, guitar, and synthesizers fill the gaps in the drummers' syntax, he rolls one sleeve of his black T-shirt and beckons coyly to the fence-sitters by the door.

"Come on in," he says, flashing some skin. "You'll have a good time."

Mae West with a Panamanian accent. The groove settles, and he pulls a long, crumpled sheet of galley paper from the pocket of his black jacket, which is hanging on the mike stand.

"I hope you're all as interested as we are," he says, breaking the rhythmic flow, "in establishing channels of communication."

He begins to read in English the lyrics to the next song.

"Yo!" he stops. "Yo! Quiet. Poetry, pal. Yeah, I know, but pretend anyway."

Then Rubén Blades launches his strained tenor in Spanish into an impassioned denunciation of racism.

At 37, Rubén Blades is possibly the most popular singer in all of salsa. But he's more than just a sexy Latin

a couple dozen records. And yards of books. A dozen S. J. Perelman paperbacks. Fran Lebowitz, Woody Allen, Jimmy Breslin, Groucho Marx. Oscar Wilde. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Octavio Paz. Lots of formidable-looking Spanish texts. Complete collections of *National Lampoon* and *Mad*.

Blades is keyed up. Harvard graduation yesterday, Letterman today. In the past two months he'd recorded a duet with Linda Ronstadt, spoken with Gabriel Garcia Marquez about a future album based on the Nobel Prize–winning writer's short stories, and made tentative plans with Jellybean Benitez for his first English 12-inch. The channels of communication are open, and Blades is establishing ties that have him jazzed. "I don't give a shit who it is," he says, embarking on a tempestuous adventure in English syntax, "how big the person may be, how good it may be for me, but I already have the things that are needed, that are basic, like eating and a roof over my head, and I've gone through all my things, I don't forget nothing—if it's somebody that can help me and he's an asshole, I pass. So it's really refreshing to find people like Linda and Jellybean, who are really nice people."

People who can help him to bridge some gaps and desegregate his music—to reach Latins and North Americans with a new Latin American message. That is Blades' consuming passion. "Interrelationships," he instructs, "are the key to the future."

They're also the key to why Blades does what he does. It all follows a pattern. His music, his film, his writing, his political goals are all geared toward resolving—bringing people together. And while he likes making people dance, he isn't out there to be an entertainer. He is quite serious when he jokes, "I became a singer because music is a vehicle through which the world can be made better." It is, needless to say, a more interesting way to improve the world than wading through the morass of lower Panamanian politics.

Thwack! On top of the rhythm: the word. Angry. Topical. Not the usual salsa fare of faithless women, invitations to dance.

Blades tapped the folk protest of the *nueva cancion* ("new song") popular among student radicals and took it to the street, bridging a gap and giving street music more power. "I always understood," he says, "that this music was not just music to dance to. This was part of

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Blades Running

Would you bet on a salsa rebel who wants to be president of Panama? Only if his name's Rubén.

Article by John Leland

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At 37, Rubén Blades is possibly the most popular singer in all of salsa. But he's more than just a sexy Latin bandleader, a disco inferno set to burn-baby-burn dance floors from Tierra del Fuego to the Bronx. His aspirations aren't found on the *Billboard* charts. He is a musician with a degree from Harvard Law. A lawyer who stars in films. An actor who writes. And a writer who may someday be president of Panama.

In his bachelor apartment on New York's Upper West Side, Blades apologizes for not having anything to drink in the house. He finishes a phone conversation—he's taping an appearance on the Letterman show later that afternoon and is making last-minute arrangements for a special rehearsal with the house band (they won't let him bring his own). It's a hot summer afternoon in Fun City, and the street sounds from Columbus Avenue blare through the open windows to fill the empty apartment. The place barely seems lived in. A few framed salsa festival posters on the walls, some sheet music on a Fender Rhodes electric piano, a color TV with cable box stranded in the middle of the large white living room. Nascent dustballs scurry across the polished wood floor. The kitchen is spotless: no glasses in the sink, no garbage in the can. The only signs of urban clutter are on the large bookshelves. A modest all-in-one stereo,

adventure in English syntax, "how big the person may be, how good it may be for me, but I already have the things that are needed, that are basic, like eating and a roof over my head, and I've gone through all my things, I don't forget nothing—if it's somebody that can help me and he's an asshole, I pass. So it's really refreshing to find people like Linda and Jellybean, who are really nice people."

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Blades tapped the folk protest of the *nueva cancion* ("new song") popular among student radicals and took it to the street, bridging a gap and giving street music more power. "I always understood," he says, "that this music was not just music to dance to. This was part of the culture of the city. In a country where culture became only what was accessible to those who had money or were the elite, this type of music wasn't important. And I said, 'No, it *is* important.' I believed that what was being written was poetry, and was interesting, and was valid."

"One day I pulled a mattress from the street to sleep on, which was really a traumatic thing to do since I come from a family where you don't pick things up from the floor."

Street poetry. Art rising out of ghetto culture. Gil-Scott Heron, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Afrika Bambaataa, Bob Marley. Ultimately, popular political art. Bridging a gap.

"Being aware of the political realities of Latin America," Blades says, "I realized that through music you

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could end the political polarization. You can say something in a song that can cut through all the bullshit and politics and factions and hit the nitty-gritty of the matter. And it becomes a voice of the people. In countries where people do not have access to the media, where the media are government-controlled, a song becomes a way of communicating popular beliefs and expectations and anger and hope."

The people. Not "The People." Blades doesn't sing slogans. He sings about real lives affected by politics. Last year, he released *Buscando América* ("Searching for America"), a chilling collection of musical stories about people whose lives are torn by the political divisions in Latin America. People like Father Antonio, the pacifist priest who is murdered while administering communion. Or Ernesto X, who is missing without a trace. Or the police agent who wakes up, steps in cat piss, yells at his wife, and goes out to do his dirty work. Blades considers his lyrics "the chronicle of the city," and he speaks to and for a subpopulation that has no voice, a group the media don't address. Eventually, this will be his constituency.

Back amid the primal street blare of Columbus Avenue, Blades lectures. "Here we are, like dinosaurs, repeating the same formula that worked 45 years ago. I'm trying to create a sound that is not reminiscent of the early '40s Cuban formula."

In his band, Seis del Solar ("Six From the Tenement"), Blades replaced the traditional Latin horns with a pair of synthesizers and added a trap drummer, bridging the gap between salsa and rock. While the hand drums beat out Afro-Caribbean messages, Blades crafts what he calls an "international pop sound" of rock, funk, soul, and Latin rhythms. A sound for young Latins alienated by music they associate with their grandparents. A Pan-American sound that puts Kid Creole to shame.

Rock. Rubén Blades knows it. He grew up on it. His first band covered tunes by the Beatles, Dylan, and the Byrds. The airwaves in Panama City in the early '60s shook with a reckless mix of hot salsa and rock 'n' roll. Blades grew up with the beat, in love with Big Daddy *el Norte*. Busby Berkeley musicals, malt shops and tailfins, the U.S.A. Sinatra and Mathis. Ride Sally ride. But before he could go to the U.S., the U.S. came to him. In '64, the Marines came to show the folks in the Canal Zone what it meant to be American: 21 Panamanian students were killed and hundreds more were wounded.

Your office could be crawling with Walkerschnappers.

along with Puerto Rico, pumping out the Afro-Cuban groove.

Blades gave up his comfortable law practice in 1974 and moved to the home of the beat, where he got some more schooling—this time in the music business. An immigrant stripped of his middle-class status, he found himself shuffling crates of albums in the mailroom of Fania Records and sleeping on the bare floor in a flea-bag studio apartment.

"I managed one day to pull a mattress from the street," he remembers with discomfort, "which was really a traumatic thing to do. I come from a family where you don't pick things up from the floor. If you dropped a

him it couldn't be done. Blades opens his own doors. He quickly got out of the Fania mailroom and landed a job with Ray Barretto's band. By '78, he formed an alliance with Bronx-born trombonist Willie Colón—a radical alliance that for the next five years produced the most socially powerful *and* best-selling records in salsa.

This June, Blades received his master's degree in international law. Not a typical musician's way to woodshed, but Blades isn't in music for typical reasons. His year at Harvard wasn't so much a year off as another part of a plan.

"I needed the degree," he explains, "to reestablish my credentials as a professional. Harvard is one of the mightiest symbols in the world. It's right up there with Coke and Alka-Seltzer. Eventually, I'm going to end up

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In Panama City at the time, the universities were the seat of political dissent. For the newly political Blades, that was the place to be. He went to the university, where he was exposed to new political ideas, to the *nueva cancion*, and to the literature of the great Latin American poets. Blades became "Latinized," learning to see from a local perspective. He became fascinated with the loud, brassy music blaring through the barrio streets. Looking for a way to put it all together, he finished law school. But after practicing law for two years, he felt the tug of the barrio rhythms.

"I think artists become artists because they're seeking some kind of love or affection," he says of his decision to trade the bar for the bars. (Previously he told me he returned to music because it had more social value, but today he is uncharacteristically modest.) "There's some kind of insecurity," he continues, "that can only be alleviated or resolved through approval from an external source. I think I became a singer because there was something lacking in my emotional life."

Thwack! New York City. The high seat of Latin music, along with Puerto Rico, pumping out the Afro-Cuban groove.

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"I managed one day to pull a mattress from the street," he remembers with discomfort, "which was really a traumatic thing to do. I come from a family where you don't pick things up from the floor. If you dropped a piece of candy or something, my mother believed that every germ in the world was ready to jump on it." The man who always prided himself on his affinity for the funk of the street was now sleeping there.

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Thwack pop! The congas begin an ancient dialogue with the cowbell, a mixture of sorrow and remorse. Rhythm fills the room like a kitchen aroma, enticing both the Latins and the North Americans, saturating their clothing, moving their progressively more supple bodies. The beat turns, twists.

The beat Blades changed, updated against staunch resistance. The beat he politicized when people told him it couldn't be done. Blades opens his own doors. He quickly got out of the Fania mailroom and landed a job with Ray Barretto's band. By '78, he formed an alliance with Bronx-born trombonist Willie Colón—a radical alliance that for the next five years produced the most socially powerful *and* best-selling records in salsa.

This June, Blades received his master's degree in international law. Not a typical musician's way to woodshed, but Blades isn't in music for typical reasons. His year at Harvard wasn't so much a year off as another part of a plan.

"I needed the degree," he explains, "to reestablish my credentials as a professional. Harvard is one of the mightiest symbols in the world. It's right up there with Coke and Alka-Seltzer. Eventually, I'm going to end up in politics in Panama, and it's a good way of reminding people that I'm not just a singer—someone who takes out a maraca and beats out a song."

Harvard was as alien and as uncomfortable for Blades as his first fleabag New York apartment.

"The first seven weeks I freaked out," he says. "I started to think, 'Why am I here? Did I come here to be legitimized by this college? Am I still insecure to the point where I need to be blessed by a U.S. institution?' I really had a lot of soul-searching up there.

"But after all is done, let me tell you, I am proud as hell that I finished this course. Because it was really a difficult thing. Can you imagine what would have happened if I flunked? I would have been destroyed. Everybody would have said, 'See, who the hell does he think he is? *Panama!*' Forget about a political career."

The next door Blades opened was films. "When you see a Latin on TV or film," he says, his eyebrows drawing into a scowl as he lifts one leg onto a soapbox, "he's a drug dealer, a tinhorn dictator, a lowlife. It's up to us to change that." So he made his own film. Together with first-time director Leon Achaso and producer Manuel Arce, Blades independently produced

continued on p. 71

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beginning of this story because it's
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, then, you'd better head for the
what the Screamin' Sirens are all

Your best friend may be a Walkerschnapper.

BLADES from p. 69

Crossover Dreams, which he stars in and cowrote. (The film cost $600,000 to make.)

Crossover Dreams is Rubén Blades' worst nightmare. It's the story of Rudy Veloz, a New York salsa musician who wants to cross over to a rock audience. When he signs with a record company in hopes that it will magically transport him over the chasm between the salsa and rock markets, the contrived scheme fails and Veloz is left disillusioned and alone. The story could be Blades'. He says it isn't.

"I never believed in crossover." His tone is dry, pedagogic. He could easily be talking about tax reform. "I believe in *convergence*. Instead of crossing over to the other side, at the risk of abandoning what you already have and finding no one's there waiting for you, what I propose is 'Let's meet in the middle.' For instance, on *Buscando América* I translated the lyrics into English. That makes it possible for whoever doesn't speak Spanish to meet us halfway—as opposed to my trying to do it in English, which would have alienated all my Spanish supporters."

Blades hopes to sign an independent distribution deal and get *Crossover Dreams* into theaters by early September, to coincide with the release of his new album, which features his duet with Linda Ronstadt (a door perhaps best left unopened) and a cover version of a Cuban song Blades calls "the song that Lionel Richie wanted to write when he wrote 'All Night Long.' " It bridges a lot of gaps. But will Blades be able to bust out Latin music in this country?

"When does the influence of Latin music *stop* in this country? When Fidel Castro declares himself communist and the blockade begins. Right now there is no interest from radio stations in Latins in this country because we're considered second-string citizens. We're not dealt with. We're the biggest minority in this country. There are about 20 million Latins here. More Latins than blacks, more Latins than Jews, more Latins than any other group. And every group has more political clout than we do. The music is seen as an extension of vulgarity. When a political change occurs that is more sympathetic to Latin America, then you're going to see a change in films, then you're going to hear Latin songs on the radio. If that doesn't happen, forget about it."

His other scenario is chilling. "I think there will be one or two political situations—for instance, an invasion of Nicaragua—that will act as galvanizers to create solidarity among Latin Americans. And the media will attempt to compensate for a deranged leader by presenting more of the Latin presence in this country."

But Blades isn't going to wait. Since '64 he's had a message for this country, and his reasons for wanting to deliver it have nothing to do with selling records. He's revolutionized salsa, one of international music's most conservative genres, to the point where he can't be compared with anyone else. Any impact he has on North America he will create alone. But that impact, like everything else Blades strives for, is part of his plan. "I am not doing this to get to Las Vegas," he says heatedly. "I am in no wild chase, at the risk of surrendering my integrity, to jump on the bandwagon and become an E.T. But I'm going to do everything I can to become accessible to the people through the media, because I am pissed as hell about the present state of stereotyping of the Latin community.

"Because of my professional background, and because I am someone who is not involved with drugs, who reads, and who has an opinion about things, I think I am the person who's going to end up doing it."

The rhythm dances, the beat rocks. The couples revolve, mesmerized by the fusion. The Latins feel the rock beat, the young professionals absorb the unfamiliar Caribbean rhythms. The celebration whirls into high gear. And Rubén Blades moves one step closer to the Panamanian presidency.