

Looking For A Love Supreme

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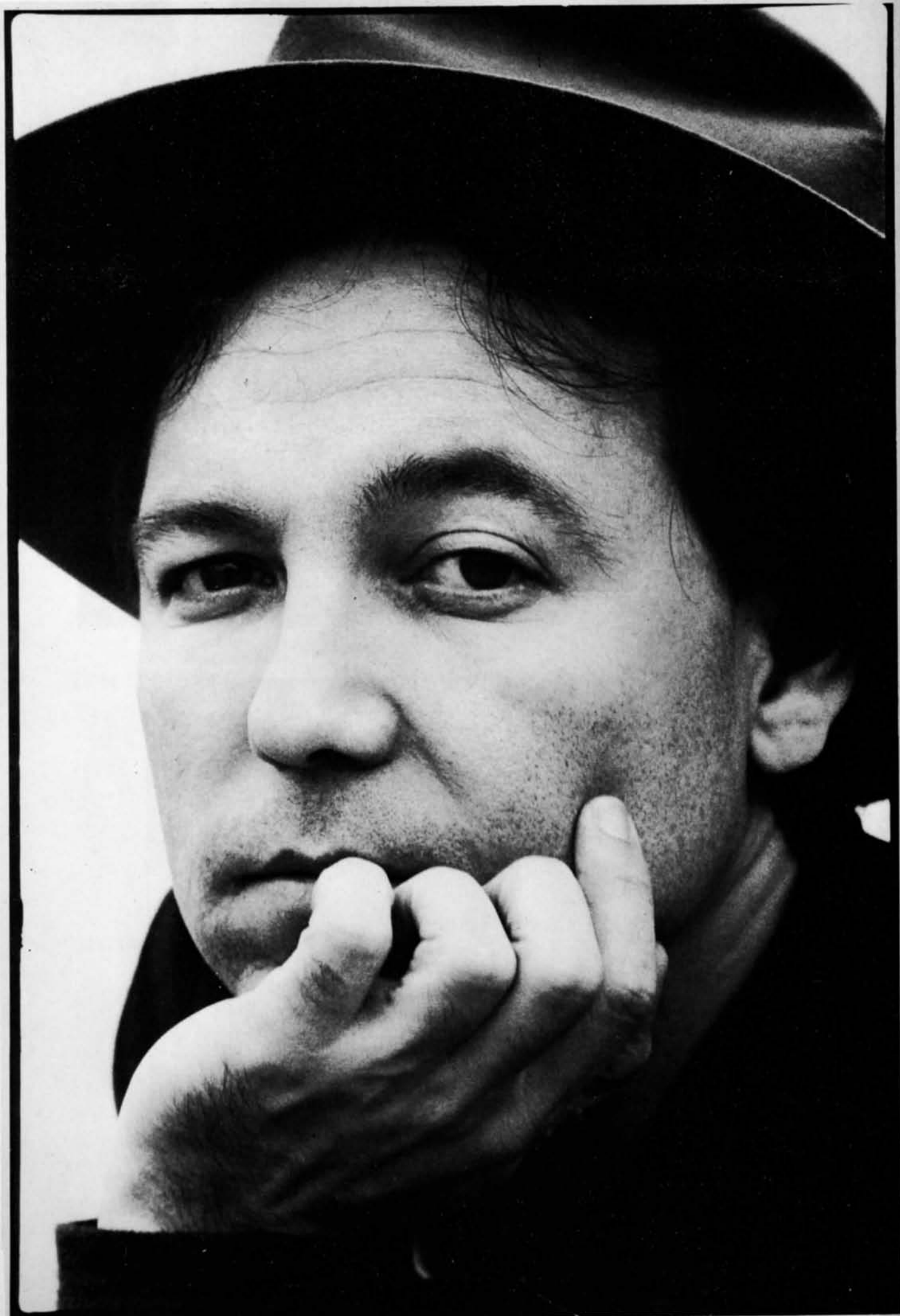
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**COLTRANE**  
**NEW MEDITATIONS**

**THE GUEST STARS RUBEN BLADES TOM WAITS**



## RUBEN BLADES: THE CUTTING EDGE

**SUE STEWARD** meets the Panamanian national hero whose music takes the pulsebeat of his people — in between his law studies.

**W**HEN *LATIN NY* magazine ran an open debate on whether salsa's male stars should keep or shed their facial hair, whiskers won. Of course. Salsa men take their stereotypes very seriously. As a passionate fan and advocate of the music, I'm not about to turn evidence here, but I can't deny that the salsa star — and the music he (for it almost always *is* a he) makes — is macho, conservative, and conformist. It is almost fiercely self-contained and nationalistic.

Friends in New York used to complain that salsa was becoming fossilized, was losing the attention of young Latin Americans who were increasingly drawn to the music of their Afro-American neighbours: salsa was for the older crowd and young couples, sentimental and nostalgic and populated by unchanging faces and music. Rocking the boat is generally discouraged, but of course, every generation creates someone who does *not* conform. It is precisely those boatrockers who have the chance to take their music, and their audience, across the big divide into the mainstream crossover (white) market. Sometimes, as in the case of Ray Barreto and Joe Cuba with their early 60s hits ("El Watusi" and "Bang Bang" respectively) the result is

everyone is happy, because the music still bears all the trade marks of the culture which produced it, and is not seen as critical or a desertion.

In the last few years, one man has emerged who has created more ripples and ructions in the salsa universe than anyone before him: a 37-year-old Panamanian, singer, songwriter, fiction writer, journalist (for a Panamanian daily, on arts and politics), fabulist, film star and Attorney-at-Law: Ruben Blades.

Blades' position today is the most contentious in the industry, and no-one seems to be without an impassioned opinion about him — one way or the other.

Last year the release of his first album *Buscando America*, with the sextet Seis del Solar (six from the tenements), brought him massive media attention from those areas of the press which barely ever acknowledge the rich, sophisticated music which surrounds them in New York City. It went beyond that town into national coverage, with articles in *Rolling Stone*, *People's Daily*, and *Time*. The liberal pages of *Village Voice* and *Soho News* have their ears to the salsa ground, for the artists and music which approximate *their* sense of culture and artistic merit (ie not the majority of Latin music) and they covered him seriously and sensibly. To clinch the situation,

Blades took the lead role in the film *Crossover Dreams* – about a young salsa singer trying to make the switch into the 'other' market, and ending up lonely and unloved on each side. Not a great movie, I'm told, but quite a cautionary tale for the man in the part, who does not appear to enter into anything without having written or studied the small print and consequences first. All part of his master plan . . .

There are many theories around Ruben Blades' changed fortunes and fantastic success over the past year. Why does a Latin artist who can sell 150,000 albums in Venezuela alone (and an estimated 300,000 plus in all of Central and Southern and North America), who has a perfectly solid career, need or want to cross into a white market which basically doesn't give a hoot about him and does its best to pretend that he and his kind don't exist? Well, of course, money has something to do with it: salsa stars are not fabulously rich, not even as rich as jazz stars.

Part of it must be in his case a need to redress this state of affairs, where the population group with the biggest number in NYC is the least visible, the least respected and the least represented. When Willie Colon played Reagan's inaugural ball last year, there was proof that the government realized it had to acknowledge the Hispanic electorate, while grossly neglecting it at the same time. Market research in the States has just revealed that Latinos buy more beer and records than white or black Americans, and quick to respond, beer ads now feature Hispanics. "But we're still members of the underground," comments Blades, bitterly. You notice that though they are clearly Hispanics, the models in these ads are light-skinned and glamorous in an Anglo-American style (just as with black models).

**IT'S CERTAINLY** no coincidence that both Ray Barreto and Ruben Blades, the two Latinos whose music has been accepted into the white fold, are noticeably whiter than many salsa artists. And both speak perfect English. It's unnecessary to point out the attraction to the industry of both features in an artist being groomed for international success, which is Blades' current fate. The story goes that when Ruben was pictured on the cover of *Latin NY*, sales skyrocketed that week, presumably because of the non-Latin browsers drawn by his 'good-looking' Anglo face. A multi-national company ain't gonna choose an *Afro-Hispanic* to feed to the world market to exploit a whole new culture's music. Ruben Blades is fully aware of these processes, and of the delicacy of his position. I'd guess he'll go so far with the marketing and the tricks of the company machinery.

The problem for WEA's execs is not that Blades speaks English, or sings in Spanish. It's what he says.

Ruben is primarily acknowledged – loved or loathed – for his lyrics. They forced him into wearing a bulletproof vest for a while last year, and they led to a campaign against him and his music in Florida, which culminated in the banning of his music from the radio there. "If you speak to a Miami Cuban," he says, furious, "they'll tell you I'm a Communist." And he's careful to deny any party affiliation – instead stating his position as "outside – so I can criticize effectively" and as occupying "a centre, a centre compromised with truth, leaning towards the left – yes, well, where else are you going to lean? – but it's a centre that tries to deal objectively".

There are many rumours and quotes about his ambition to be President of Panama by the time he's 40. I asked him directly about that, and he said it was a misquote. All the same,

stranger things have happened in white houses. And in the Dominican Republic, that island's greatest merengue star and idol Johnny Ventura is also Senator Ventura. And as Ruben sat in the All-American diner, picking the pips out of his tomato slices (a childhood suspicion), analysing his career in the context of both North and Latin American music; his finger crooked, points enumerated in every sentence, the logic and rationale carefully, calmly unfolding, I saw no reason at all why this man with the magnetic brown eyes and soft-spoken voice, should *not* become President – or any other thing he wanted.

His friends affectionately refer to these monologues as the Ruben Blades one-man show. I felt vaguely redundant.

**LET'S GO** back to the beginning. Unlike any other artist on the salsa scene in New York, Ruben Blades is not Puerto Rican or Cuban, but Panamanian. The key figures in his life were father and mother, both musicians who seem to have been away a lot, leaving him and his six brothers and sisters with their grandmother. This woman is a legend, mentioned in every biog of Ruben – a vegetarian, yoga, rosicrucian, who sent her girls to school in favour of the boys because of their disadvantaged position in society, and who instilled in Ruben what he describes as "his desire for a sense of justice". That goes some way to explaining why he studied law.

His class background is hard to establish; he sometimes gives an impression of being a ghettokid, but his family's education and attitudes don't coincide. Musically his career began with doowop and rock n'roll, like every other kid anywhere in the world in the 60s. ("Buscando America" launches with an ironic doowop reference before plunging headlong into a salsa delicacy.) At that time, America was a source of film, music, entertainment and envy. And then came student riots in '64, when the US Marines marched in and shot up his campus, killing two and injuring over 500 people. From that day on, he didn't sing in English again (and even though he said last year that this album would feature some English lyrics, it hasn't, though his last two albums provide English translations).

His politics gelled from then on, and like Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso further across the continent in Brazil, he merged his ideals and politics into popular song lyrics. He arrived in New York in 1970, and the closest he could come to a 'break' into music was a job as mailroom clerk in Fania Records, powerhouse of salsa. Mailrooms are always good for gossip and news of jobs before they go public. In this way he heard that Ray Barreto needed a vocalist in a hurry, auditioned for the job, and was singing in Madison Square Gardens – to 20,000 people – within weeks.

In '74, he appeared on Ray's album, *Barreto*, but his own material would have to wait until he teamed up with another Fania artist, Willie Colon, who already had a tremendous reputation as trombonist, arranger and bandleader since his late teens. These two seemed to be made for each other, and were soulmates and partners on some of the most effective and popular albums in the 70s. Their fertile partnership lasted until 1982, since which both have new bands, contracts with multinational companies (RCA and WEA) and a couple of albums, apiece. Their first record together, *Metiendo Mano* (1977), featured a song which had taken him three years to record. No-one until Willie Colon would touch it. "Pablo Pueblo", still one of his most popular songs, is a story of Latin Everyman, a vignette of Pablo's life, and

therefore of the life of millions of other urban, poor Hispanics. In a lyrical tone, he paraphrased the words for me:

. . . "the man that comes home from work in a factory walks into the same neighbourhood with the same old half-torn, political advertisements with half-smiling faces, promising new tomorrows; he goes into the same reality of the neighbourhood, same dog peeing on the corner, same music coming out of the jukebox in the same bar where he goes to drown his sorrows on Saturdays and Sundays, to his room where he sees his wife and the children sleeping in the same bed where he's gonna crawl into. And he thinks, how long is this gonna stand . . ."

To a non-Spanish speaker that song, with its catchy, danceable tune, with the soft clear voice riding between Willie Colon's sweet trombone and softened horns, could just as easily be about love, romance and dancing – the perennial themes of salsa which Blades and Colon were turning their backs on for the first time. Its mournful quality, underlying that vigorous instrumentation, is enhanced by Willie Colon's arrangements – which all through their partnership breathed extra meaning into Ruben's lyrics. This and the following record, *Siembra*, was the beginning of what has been described as "The Dawn of the Salsa Renaissance".

Blades' idea is to turn songs into vignettes, comments on lifestyles, life conditions: "Plastico", like Poly Styrene's "Art-i-ficial" was an assault on the plastic life, plastic relationship, the superficiality imposed on our lives; "Pedro Navaja" introduced a character who re-appears in Ruben's songs like an old enemy – in his latest album, released last month, Pedro turns up in "Sorpresas" (surprises), a story about a thief robbing a drunkard and being knifed by a ghostly character – who turns out to be Pedro Navaja – "with a previous bullet wound in him, took both knives (from the body): he always carried two when he went to 'work' . . .")

**THE FLAK** started flying with "Pablo Pueblo": criticisms that the song was too long for radio play (proven to be rubbish), containing too many complex words for the illiterate Spanish audience, too undanceable, and too damn depressing.

"They were saying this song's too depressing," Ruben remembers, wryly. "Which is absurd. They said people want songs to forget, which is absurd – we cannot exercise time in forgetting, but in remembering and fixing; at this point, we are so close to destruction, that every single possible social and cultural instrument we have to create awareness . . . it's an emergency situation . . . anyway," he tailed off, "it was very difficult. And still is."

But Ruben Blades is tenacious. Those records sold in hundreds of thousands, kept Fania afloat for years, and made Ruben and Willie stars throughout the Spanish-speaking world. I gradually realized during our conversation that New York is *not* the only focus for Latin Music; "Latin American countries are like different rooms in the same house," he once said. The house is, presumably, owned by Washington, but still contains music of different accents and flavours in each room. He had stressed from the outset that one of the reasons for his unpopularity in certain salsa quarters is that "First of all, you have to remember I'm a Panamanian. A Latin American, and I'm invading areas that have been occupied by American Latinos – descendants of Latin Americans – for a while.

"And Latin Americans do not have a direct

contact for information about what is truly Latin America's reality. The music has been undergoing radical transformation due to radical transformation in politics. Popular philosophies are being applied to music that although not radical in content does present a

in the face of tradition and discarded the horns) now bring them back in the shape of synthesizers, broken into two sections by a watery, funk piano solo, not as light and fetching as an Irakere idea, but clearly under the same influence.

saying this music is not just for dancing. I'm going to make music that is a commentary, utilizing any pattern, any rhythm, any construction that I want. Forget dancing as the only way, but I'm not advocating the disappearance of dance music – we always want to dance – I'm only saying that we must also consider other needs."



Ruben Y Los Seis del Solar

form of rebellion, of acknowledgement, of certain asphyxiating aspects of Latin American life. People like myself – and I am not the only one – started writing songs that went a little bit beyond the mere understated rebellious happy song . . . we started confronting issues that were more refined."

Songs like "Pedro Navaja", "Pablo Pueblo" and the extraordinarily powerful "GDBD" off last year's *Buscando America* have far more in common with the modern realist Latin American authors – particularly Gabriel Marcía Márquez – than the traditions of Cuban songwriting. Márquez is, in fact, a regular correspondent with Ruben Blades, and the latter is supposedly putting some of his poems to music. "I would like to have the simplicity of a guy like Márquez and the honesty of a man like Camus," he said.

**THE CURRENT** album, released last month, is called *Escenas* – Scenes . . . a suitably doubletake title.

The same themes are present, the same depressing scenarios – in *Heart Dues* – "Cuentas del Alma" – a mother and her son, locked inside her tragic life – "Mother always tried to fall asleep in front of the television set: she always asked me not to turn it off; she could not stand her loneliness in that house, though she never confessed it . . ." "I grew up watching mother clinging to a hope (never explained) that buried her, all bitter, in an endless night . . ." This is another song which foils the critics who say his music is too serious. The band (a tight six-piece who flew

Last year, during our conversation, as Ruben was beginning rehearsals for this recording, he was full of excitement about these songs. His promised covers of the Beatles' "Baby's In Black" were evidently recorded, but haven't appeared, here at least. Instead, this album is further into the electronic field – not electro, certainly, but it is heavily drenched with synthesizers. Joe Jackson's contribution doesn't stand out above the rest of the band, but the synths are used appropriately and cunningly in most places. Occasionally the "sweet" button is over-used.

The surprise of the album – and certainly its selling point in the US – is the duet between Ruben and Linda Ronstadt on "Silencios". Last year he told me about this song, written to be sung as a duet, with as yet unnamed woman. It's another familiarly depressing tale of love: a bittersweet territory of a couple who "like each other, but there's no love", who are lonely but together, "prolonging the end" . . . a radical departure from the salsa and the track that will most certainly have brought him most criticism from some quarters. But it's another example of his skill at documenting the faultlines in people's relationships. It's basically a rock ballad, soft and gentle with long notes and sparkling details, sighs and stretched voices, deep echoed bass drum synths; it won't last, it hasn't got classic quality and it's his most extreme move yet.

But he's out in the waters of international pop now, and as he explained, "I'm breaking away from dancing scheme structures by

I'VE LEFT to last one of my favourites of this new batch of songs, awaited for over a year now. "Caina" (Cocaine) is Ruben the moral guardian, the man who is surrounded in the salsa world with drug tragedies and hopeless cases, who comes from a country – a continent – whose economy is buttressed by cocaine – and he's put himself on the line with this cautionary tale.

Starting with a false start, "I get no kick from cocaine . . ." – then silence, the twirl of a piano, a surge of a lush synthesized chord, and it's off into relentless classic salsa guaguano. Ironically this track, maybe above all others, would go down the best in some of the Manhattan salsa clubs where the women's rooms resound to the sniffs and snorts of customers who do get their kicks from cocaine . . .

Of course, Ruben Blades with his sharp analysis and his understanding of oppression, knows why that is. "I try to get the point across utilizing both popular and more sophisticated tools without falling into this trap of intellectualism where I would think I was above anybody else."

Turning back to some of his narrative songs – and it is impossible with Ruben Blades not to return again and again to the lyrics – I asked him about the gap between the illiterate people of Latin America and the intellectuals who espouse him in the States (and Europe); and how he manages to write songs to span each audience. He chuckled slightly, and as if he had been waiting to say this private revelation told me that he considers himself a short story writer. "On the strength of sales of this album, and because I have the short story 'GDBD' in it, I consider myself to be the best-selling short story writer in Latin America this year."

He ended our conversation by announcing his next character, to be played by himself – Panama Blades, who will work with The Gamboa Road Gang – "Named after a section of the Canal Zone where there was a Penitentiary. It's also the title of a very famous Panamanian novel about the inmates. They used to work on these roads that would lead some place that they weren't gonna go to. I found that this is pretty much what we've been doing in Latin America all this time – building roads for others to follow. Now it's our own chance to make our own roads and follow them. It's going to be a lot of fun."

And after paying the bill, he slipped back into the library, to continue his Law Masters studies. That Gamboa Road is going to take him far. ■

#### DISCOGRAPHY:

*Barreto* Ray Barreto featuring Ruben Blades (Fania)  
*The Good The Bad The Ugly* Willie Colon, Hector Lavoe and Ruben Blades (Fania)  
*Metiendo Mano* Willie Colon and Ruben Blades (Fania)  
*Siembra* Willie Colon and Ruben Blades (Fania)  
*Maestra Vida Parts I and II* Ruben Blades (Fania)  
*Buscando America* Ruben Blades and Seis del Solar (WEA)  
*Escenas* Ruben Blades and Seis del Solar with Linda Ronstadt and Joe Jackson (WEA).