NEW YORK:
Latin music sound so well to me. I always thought of music as a way to influence the world. American-African and Mexican-American bands in LA have been a big influence. The Plugz, and other new coming of age groups in the salsa scene. Conditions of living in Cuba are different. As a musical person I'm centered upon Ruben Blades.

Blades has opened up the horizons for me. He became the genesis of my own sound, of that. Partly because he's a trombonist. And he's got the top five charts. And I've got a string of international albums. But mostly because of his entrenched musicality. His sound to me was a new kind of arrangement. And the kind of arrangements that I've been doing.

Blades represents the generation with the equalizers, the keyboard, the voice, and the style of songs about political change.

"I don't do much political writing. I write about things that have been changed — the songs that have been changed - the songs that have been changed.

The songs bring the sequence of the change. The man songs, the man songs,

and a human song.

"Disappearing man against an eye. A backdrop, the..."
BY BILL FORMAN

NEW YORK — A new generation of Latin musicians are developing a sound so vital it could affect popular music as profoundly as the recent influences of Jamaican, African and American Black music. While the Mexican-American sounds of East LA have been updated by Los Lobos, The Plugz, (now known as The Cruzados), and Los Illegals, a similar coming of age is lifting New York’s salsa scene out of the restrictive traditions of ‘40s and ‘50s-style Afro-Cuban dance music and into the present. As a focal point for this Latin musical renaissance, attention is now centered upon the rising career of Ruben Blades.

Blades began expanding salsa’s horizons back in the ‘70s, when he became the genre’s first vocalist to write his own songs, and political ones at that. Partnered with Bronx-born trombonist Willie Colon, Blades rose to the top of the Latin market with a string of internationally-acclaimed albums. But while Colon remained too entrenched in the New York salsa sound to venture far beyond traditional arrangements, the Panamanian-born Blades felt the need to grow. With his first LP for Elektra, the recently released *Buscando America*, Blades replaces the traditional horn section with guitars, vibes and synthesizers, adds a chorus effect to his voice, and presents a collection of songs about people living in a state of political chaos.

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"I don't want to be known as a political writer," Blades says. "I am writing about people. But their lives have been changed — and are being changed — due to a political situation. The songs become political as a consequence of that, but they are still *human* songs, with a human suffering and a human expectation."

"Disappearances" is the perfect example of Blades' lyrical craft. Set against an ominous dub-style reggae backdrop, the song follows a series of

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**Photo: Caroline Greyshock**

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**RUBEN BLADES' FUTURE SALSA**

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LATIN EXPLOSION

narrators who ask after missing relatives. The attention to every day details and the helpless bewilderment of these narrators inspires an identification that strikes deeper than a thousand headlines.

Equally powerful is "Father Antonio and the Altar Boy, Andres," based on the murder of Salvadoran Bishop Romero, which Blades would like to see as his first video. "I know it would blow everybody away," says Blades of the strong imagery that would have to accompany such a video. "But then, I don’t know what the reaction would be, when something as calculated as the Undercover video by the Stones was put out, and they don’t have the slightest idea what they’re talking about."

Blades is aware that if MTV had trouble with Undercover’s jagged-coated vision of Central America, they’d be even more wary of this real thing. “But there’s a need to present an alternative, done by a Latin American, not an English group that has no idea what’s going on,” he explains. “But then, will it get airplay? And will it get airplay in Latin America? I mean, all of a sudden you see this image of this priest being blown away with this altar boy ... will they play that?

"On the other hand, the alternative is ... what? To do a video like where I’m walking in the street and showing my hair and my hair on my chest and stuff? I won’t do that."

What Blades will do is record a 12" single, a Beatles cover he hopes his friend Joe Jackson will assist on, and another LP for Elektra which will be his first in English (Buscando America). But these influences would have to wait several years to come out in Blades’ music. First he had to settle his love affair with rock and roll: “The first group I ever joined was a rock and roll band called the Saints. We used to cover every band. Gene Vincent. A lot of Beatles songs, of course ... you couldn’t escape that. The Byrds, Bob Dylan. Anything we heard that we liked."

Blades’ memories of Panama run the gamut from drinking and dominoes in the local bar to first hand views of the 1968 coup d’etat. “All of a sudden it came over the radio,” he recalls, “a statement saying there’d been a coup. My friend and I went over to find out what the situation was in the city, which wasn’t a real smart thing to do. There was a lot of confusion. The army was in the streets, and I remember an unmarked car pulling up next to us and giving us the look over. Thank God we didn’t have the bad news in Panama that exists in Central America, or like the pinocentos in Chile. As far as armies go, ours is pretty much popular-based.”

Blades plans to return to Panama some day, but as more than a pop star. “I would like to re-establish my credentials as a professional,” says Blades, who already has a Panamanian law degree and will begin attending Harvard in the fall to get the American version. “When you take into consideration that 50% of the population of Panama is 21 years old or younger, and that I have placed in polls among the three most popular figures there, I’d say I have a good chance ten years from now running for public office.”

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The streets of New York are heard directly on Blades’ song “G.D.B.D.,” which stands for the Spanish equivalent of “People Awakened in a Dictatorship.” Submerged under the vocal line, the story of a man’s early morning routine that could be about anyone except that he turns out to be a member of the secret police, is an other-worldly mechanical whirring sound, made by a musical sculpture commissioned by the city and hidden beneath a cement island near 45th Street. Blades discovered the sound by accident after a late night recording session, and decided to record it on a portable Sony. “I was going to do it at a later time,” he recalls, “But I kept falling asleep. Finally I decided some city sounds might also be in order, so I went there at one o’clock in the afternoon. I almost got trampled to death by tourists. There I was trying to blend in, and all these people started taking pictures of one of New York City’s nats hunched over a grate recording God-knows-what. I swear there were 50 Japanese tourists just staring at me.”

But the embarrassment paid off, because “G.D.B.D.,” turned out to be Blades’ most experimental song, and one of the most powerful as well. Still, Blades is more careful in his live presentation, judiciously mixing the new material with older favorites like “Pedro Navaja” and “Plastico,” for these are the songs which built his following and to which his fans know all the words by heart.
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What Blades will do is record a 12” single, a Beatles cover he hopes his friend Joe Jackson will assist on, and another LP for Elektra which will be his first in English (Buscando America comes with a Spanish-English libretto). “The next album is gonna go a little bit further in musical experimentation,” he promises. “We’re gonna be working exclusively with synthesizers. The rhythm and bass will be there always, but instead of vibes we’re gonna use synths. They’re as much an audience right now in Latin America. I like to communicate as much as I can, but I’m certainly not going to sacrifice myself in order to appeal to a current trend.”

Blades also favors non-Latin artists using Latin forms, as on recent Joe Jackson albums or Laurie Anderson’s new album, which features Latin percussionist Daniel Ponce. “If you are sincere about what you do, you just exteriorize and record the way you feel,” he says. “I wouldn’t see anything wrong with The Police trying to present a Spanish speaking song, because they are musicians and they would like to present that if they feel it. What I would criticize is The Police trying to rip off a Latin American situation in order to attain commercial gain. And this whole business seems to be oriented in that direction.”

Blades’ preference for combining musical cultures stems from the radio of his youth in Panama, which would mix Fats Domino, Tito Puente and Frank Sinatra indiscriminately. “Plus the fact that we had such a strong Jamaican and West Indian influence in Panama,” he adds. “You had over 44,000 people who came from Barbados to work on the construction of the Canal.”

New York is a constant source of musical inspiration. I live in a neighborhood where you walk three steps one way and it’s the equivalent of Rodeo Drive, and you move three steps in the other direction and you’re right smack in the middle of the Dominican neighborhood.”