



Latin Music Legend Rubén Blades Turns Teacher For New York City High School Students

By Thom Duffy | March 20, 2015 2:26 PM EDT



Singer **Rubén Blades** is known as a legendary star of Latin music, a winner of multiple Grammy Awards, an acclaimed TV and film actor, a political figure in his native Panama, a committed social activist -- and now, for at least one day, a New York City high school teacher.

In a recent session with students at the Manhattan campus of Bard High School Early College, a public high school on New York's Lower East Side, Blades kept dozens of students riveted for more than an hour with a low-key chat filled with high-powered names and advice for life.

"What good is it to know something, if you don't share what you know," asked Blades, 66, who won the Grammy Award in February for best Latin pop album for "Tangos" on Sunnyside Records.

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The school visit resulted from Blades' earlier participation in a master class for Spanish teachers organized by the Academy for Teachers and hosted in December by the New-York Historical Society, where the Blades met Bard High School Early College teacher **Julia Guerra**.

Blades asked if he could come speak at the high school, Guerra recalls. "I said to him, 'Why are you doing this for us?' He said, 'I'm happy just to be of service.'"

Recognizing that his high school audience might not know of the wide scope of his career, Blades began by dropping names of his musical friends and collaborators: Latin music greats **Willie Colón**, **Tito Puente**, **Celia Cruz**, and **Mongo Santamaria**; and jazz masters **Miles Davis**, **Dizzy Gillespie**, **Dexter Gordon**, **Chet Baker** and **Wynton Marsalis**, (with whom he sang in in November accompanied by the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra).

He recalled his early days in New York in the 1970s, "where you could go into a [club] and meet all these people. I remember once I bummed a cigarette from Chet Baker; I didn't actually realize he was [the guy] next to me" To his teen audience, Blades quickly added: "I don't smoke

anymore. If you smoke--don't."

Establishing his pop and rock bona fides, he recalled co-writing "Todo Mi Amor Eres Tu" with **Michael Jackson** ("I'm sorry he's not with us anymore") and talked of the "one record in English [I did] in my life. It was not well-received at all." But it allowed Blades to collaborate with the likes of **Lou Reed**, **Elvis Costello** and **Sting**.

And he spoke of his film work with **Robert Redford**, **Danny Glover**, **Jack Nicholson**, **Harrison Ford**, **Diane Keaton**, **Christopher Walken** and his upcoming collaboration with **Robert DeNiro** on "Hands of Stone," an upcoming bio pic about Panamanian boxing legend, **Roberto "Manos de Piedra" Durán**.

He described his reason for moving from art to politics in his native Panama, where he ran for president in 1994 (coming in second). Through a song he could describe the hardship of a working man in Panama he said. "But I didn't change his life at all. Which is what led me into the trenches" of political activity.

"I never expected to have experienced as many satisfying moments as I have, in as many different areas as I have," Blades told the high school students.

Then he emphasized why he had come speak with them.

"Education was instrumental" in his life, said Blades, who holds a degrees in law from the University of Panama and international law from Harvard University. "I think the fact that I was educated helped me tremendously, not only in terms of my appreciation of the opportunity but in my capacity to sustain it."

Blades offered students advice on topics ranging from coping with rejection to keeping a personal budget to dreaming big.

Most of all, he told them, stay true to yourself.

"Trust me in this," he said, "whatever you want to do, however incredible it may sound? You may do it. It can happen. It happened to me.

"There was no plan," said Blades. "I just tried to be as honest as I could in everything I did. I tried to be as clear as I could in why I wanted to do it, and how I was going to do it. And most importantly, I put my sense of honor in front of everything else. I did not do anything that would betray my sense of self. And I'm proud to tell you that."

As his talk concluded, Blades learned some of the students in the audience had traveled from the Bard High School Early College campus in the New York City borough of Queens to hear him speak.

"So, can I go there too?" he asked. "Make sure you give me the right subway."
