"Whenever you see a Latin on film, we’re either selling dope, using dope, or breaking into someone’s home to get a Sony," says Rubén Blades, the Panamanian-born actor and salsa superstar who’s never done any of those things on screen—and never will. "No, they’re not from Mars, the ones that are dealing dope in Miami," he says, sitting comfortably in his unpretentious hotel suite on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the on-again/off-again beard and mustache growing in yet again. "My point is, the attention of the entertainment industry has zeroed in on the corrupt side of one ethnic group and hasn’t provided it with the same showcase to expose the good side, the working side."

That’s why, although he’s been asked several times, you won’t see the thirty-eight-year-old Blades on Miami Vice, a show with its share of Latino coke dealers. But you will find him playing an ambitious musician in Crossover Dreams, a helpful orderly opposite Richard Pryor in Critical Condition, and, later this year, a gentle sheriff in Robert Redford’s The Milagro Beanfield War as well as Whoopi Goldberg’s police-detective partner in Fatal Beauty.

If he seems to be overly picky about his roles these days, it’s because Blades, who is also a lawyer, journalist, record producer, tenor, and songwriter, is, more than anything else, a political animal. And if his star is ascending in Hollywood, that’s fine, because it means he’ll soon have the clout to raise the profile of the Hispanic population’s "good side."

It’s taken Blades some twelve years to begin to exert any kind of influence from his soapbox. He was already a practicing attorney in Panama City when, at age twenty-six, he decided to become a musician full-time and emigrated to New York City, fertile home turf of salsa, that crafting of rock, jazz, and rhythm-and-blues onto traditional Latin beats. Slowly, Blades caught on, first as a singer for top salsa orchestras, later as the leader of his own band. And his songs revolutionized the music, their lyrics spinning tales "about the city, about relations between men and women, mothers and sons." On the international salsa circuit, he became a superstar.

It was, however, Blades’ major-label debut—the 1984 Elektra release Buscando América (Searching for America)—that opened the Anglo door. The media gushed over their "discovery," with Time calling the album one of the year’s top ten discs. Blades, meanwhile, had taken off for Harvard to earn a master’s degree in international law. Soon after his graduation, Crossover Dreams, filmed some three years earlier, was finally released, revealing its lead as a natural actor. Since then, and between films, he has cut two more major-label albums: Escenas (Scenes), which won him a Grammy last February, and Agua de Luna (Moon Water), filled with visceral interpretations of the short stories of his Nobel laureate friend and fan, Gabriel García Márquez. Another, his first in English, is in the planning stages.

Obviously, Blades is burrowing deep into mainstream American show biz. He and the former Lisa Lebenson, an actress he met in a New York restaurant three years ago and married last December,