

LOS ANGELES' ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT MAGAZINE

venice

11th anniversary issue

october 1999

beth hart
faith ford
save ferris
ruben blades
alan cumming
sydney pollack
lesley ann warren
richard farnsworth

\$1.50 l.a. area
\$2.50 elsewhere



**TOM
SIZEMORE**
MILLENNIUM MAN



volume XII, number 1
 october 1999
TOM SIZEMORE
 photographed exclusively
 for venice magazine
 by greg gorman

black fedora, hollywood pattern;
 black cotton shirt; armari at
 neiman marcus, beverly hills

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RUBEN BLADES

Sign of the Times

by **Jose Martinez** photography **Astor Morgan**

photographed at
House of Blues
Sunset Strip



Whether he's running to make the last boat back to the mainland or taking his time during a recent three-hour-concert-to-end-all-concerts at the House of Blues, salsero, actor, activist, and lawyer, Panama's favorite son Ruben Blades is a modern Renaissance man. A musician all his life, the 51-year-old charmer has also acted in over 20 films and even ran for President of his native homeland.

On the road for the first time in nine years in support of his latest release, *Tiempos* (*Times*), with Costa Rica's Editus backing him up, the Grammy-winning Blades always combines danceable salsa with reflective, socially biting lyrics. When it comes to penning his songs, Blades takes his cue from the likes of Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Carlos Fuentes.

A law school graduate from both the University of Panama and Harvard, Blades was recently honored with a lifetime achievement award from the Catalina Music Festival. Unfortunately, after delivering a blistering set, the singer was already on his way to catch the evening's last ferry and missed the presentation. Seeing how his band was not provided with accommodations on the island, the singer refused to stay in his suite and opted to stay with the band at their hotel in Long Beach.

Fairness and equality are paramount to Blades, who is charting a fresh course with *Tiempos*, defying the Latin rhythm craze. Don't mention *crossover* to him. He's been here for nearly 30 years and isn't going anywhere.

How does it feel to be on the road again?

I'm glad about the fact that I'm working, supporting an album that I think is very good. And I'm also glad to be working with a band that I believe to be very talented. That's what makes me happy. The actual fact of being on the run, as it were, I've never liked.

Is that why it's been nine years since you last toured?

Part of it has been that, and the fact that I've been trying to do other things. I have several different interests. The fact is that you have three hours of play and the rest of the day you're in a situation where you're just running around and don't have enough time to settle and look at the place that you're in.

Are you more comfortable these days calling yourself a musician, actor, or activist? What do you declare yourself when you enter a foreign country?

I think that each one of those things that I do are things that I really feel very strongly about, but I always say I'm an artist.

What inspired you to make this record?

I make my living as a musician and an actor. Making a record is also part of my

need to generate income. But at the same time, I don't put out a record every year just to make an income. There has to be something that I feel interested in saying. In this case, the connection with the group, Editus, was the one thing that I felt was interesting and new. Doing this record with a different intention, it's a classical background weaving Central and South American rhythms with Caribbean rhythms. I think this is a very interesting direction to go towards. It's completely different to what's being put out now, and it's somewhat different to what I've done in the past.

How did your collaboration with Editus come about?

I heard these guys in '95 and was very struck by what they were doing. They're one of those talented groups that have put out five CDs on their own and do not have distribution worldwide. I immediately grasped the quality of their background. They have a very strong knowledge of Central and South American rhythms. I've been trying for a long time to investigate a connection with Europe in terms of popular music. So I went to Costa Rica and met with them. I always think in terms of world music. Some people feel they have to continue looking at their lives as an extension of the immediate place where they were born. I'm looking at it from a position where I am from Panama, but Panama is a part of the world and as such the interests that I have are interests that go beyond the immediate place where I was born.

What inspires you to write?

Basically, my songs are stories that have some kind of lesson or is worth mentioning. I try not to do the same thing that other people are doing. If you're going to sing a love song, I want to come up with something that is different. I'm writing about stuff that I've either witnessed or am involved in one way or another.

Do you tend to labor over your songs?

It depends. Some songs are easier to write than others. It's not a matter that you don't know what the song is about, it's a matter of structure and being concise. You have to tell the story in four minutes or less. You don't have the latitude that a writer has when he writes a short story. That's when the process becomes trial and error. And you don't want to write a pamphlet or something that is demagoguery or insincere. I do tend to edit myself a lot.

What songwriters influenced you?

I have not been influenced by songwriters. I don't follow what other writers do. There are very good songwriters out there like Lou Reed, Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello, and Paul Simon. As far as the Latin side, there are some very good writers like Tita Cureta

Alonzo from Puerto Rico and any writer you want from Brazil. The writers in Brazil are excellent. But I don't really look at what other people are doing in order to draw inspiration.

If you're not interested in writing commercial material, how important is Billboard success to you?

I've never really cared about that. I care about doing things the most honest way. But, at the same token, I have to say that's important when you come out in Billboard or in the paper, because that's what the industry reads. At a time when I'm better known, not only because of the cumulative effect of my work in terms of music and the 23 movies that I've done, people know who I am around the world. We just played seventeen concerts in Europe in six countries. At this time I still lead an underground life as a musician in the media. I'm not 25 years old. I'm not into going out with known women in the business. There are no scandals. I don't have any "returned from drug problem" headline. I lead a very quiet life. I'm not looking for the limelight and I don't network. And if you don't play that game, you don't get mentioned, and if you're not mentioned, then you don't exist, no matter what you're doing or how good you do it.

What was it like growing up in Panama in the '50s?

I was born in '48 and it was wonderful. It was a time when there wasn't any television and families tended to be tighter. I had a very benign poverty. I didn't even know that I was poor growing up. It was an easier, less complicated existence and it was the perfect medium to develop, as a human being, your social graces.

Were you influenced by groups like the Beatles?

Not only when the Beatles came, but I was there when Elvis came. Definitely. The thing with Panama, especially because of the U.S. presence, the first television channel was the Armed Forces channel and whoever had a TV by the time televisions became less expensive, could see "The Ed Sullivan Show" one week after it aired in New York. So I saw the Beatles one week later. I had already heard their music, I just didn't know what they looked like. Then I saw them.

In Panama you were singing locally while going to law school...

That really didn't last very long, I was told in no uncertain terms by the Dean's office and the Political Science faculty to stop it. So I didn't really pursue (music) after my first year.

Lawyers don't sing salsa?

That is right. Especially in a small country



Relaxing in a John Bok chair upstairs at House of Blues

like Panama where you'd be playing somewhere and one of your teachers would be there. It's very uncomfortable.

At the time, your goal was to become a lawyer?

I think that the fact that my family had to leave (Panama) because of my father's problems with the military in '73, set it for me. I left the next year and got my degree. I was attracted to law because I always saw the law as an instrument for social change in a democracy. I thought of it as an acceptable way to change and better the conditions of society. On the other hand, the need to secure a way of making a living, coming from family that had not been fortunate to study as much as they would have liked to because they had to work in order to sustain themselves. I was the first one to graduate from college in my family.

What did your family think about your deciding to pursue a music career after becoming a lawyer?

They were very quiet about it, but they already knew I had the diploma. And because of the conditions, I didn't want to stay in Panama, and they understood why.

Do people in the United States tend to recognize you more for your music or for your movies?

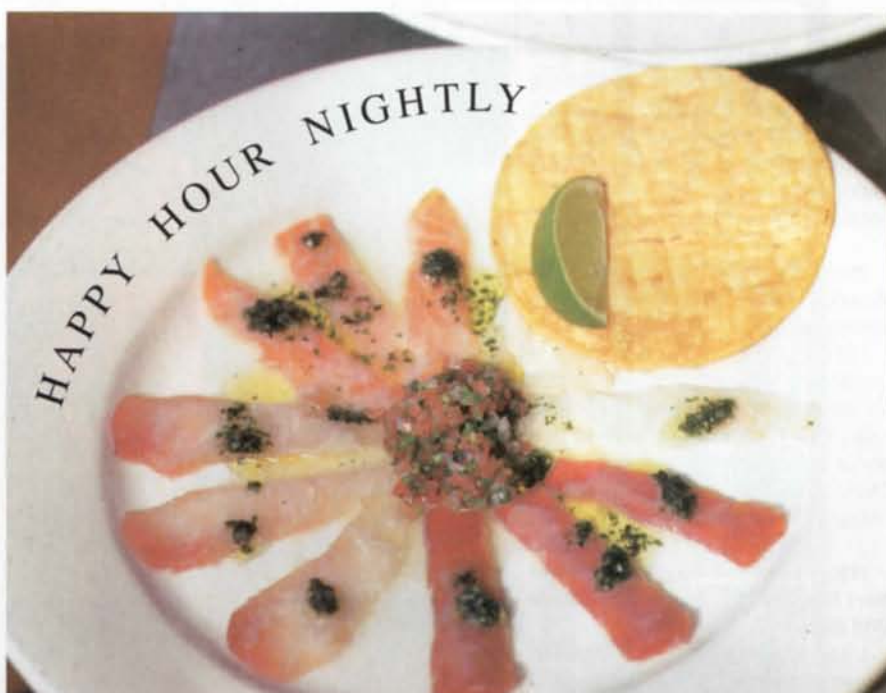
It depends. A tremendous amount of Anglos and blacks don't know I sing. They've seen me in films and they'll say they really admire my work as an actor. The Latino community tends to know me as a musician first and also as an actor. And some people just mention the politics.

Which industry was harder to break into, music or film?

I think all of them are difficult. As it turns out, I pretty much went into music quickly after I was working in the mailroom at Fania Records. I ended up being auditioned by Ray Baretto, an excellent musician. My first gig with Ray Baretto was at Madison Square Garden, and, of course, I quickly forgot the lyrics to the song I was singing. And as far as film, the first film I ever did was produced by the owner of Fania Records because he wanted to branch out into films. I got the opportunity to do a movie directly from the same person who was putting out my records. That wasn't so tough. Later on, the thing is not to be successful, but to sustain success. That's when it becomes more difficult. Right now, as far as work in film, it's very hard because Latinos are not thought of when they make movies. When people write scripts they don't write about Latinos.


Do you have a favorite film of yours?

"Dead Man Out" (1989) is the best movie I've worked in because I had a very demanding script. That was made for HBO. I



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played a death row inmate and Richard Pearce directed and Danny Glover played the psychiatrist. It was a study on the morality of the death penalty. I think that really earned me my wings as an actor because it was a tough role.

Your 1991 film "Crazy from the Heart" with Christine Lahti is always on cable.

"Crazy from the Heart" was a wonderful, touching movie. It wasn't as difficult to make as the other one. I've had people talk to me about that movie all over the world. They love that movie, and *The Milagro Beanfield War*, too.

What can you say about your next film, Tim Robbins's *The Cradle Will Rock*?

I play Diego Rivera, the Mexican muralist painter. It's an ensemble piece, with John Cusack, Joan Cusack, Susan Sarandon, Vanessa Redgrave, Emily Watson, Hank Azaria, and Angus Macfadyen, set in the '30s. It's really about the importance of freedom of speech and what the conditions were in the 30s. It's the true story of what happened between Diego Rivera and Nelson D. Rockefeller who commissioned Rivera to paint a mural in the lobby of Rockefeller Center in New York. Rivera was a Communist and painted the mural according to his beliefs, and Rockefeller had a fit when he saw what he was doing: putting a syphilis cell on top of the rich; the police beating up on workers; and Lenin's face pointing to a new direction. They ended up jackhammering the thing off the wall.

Was it difficult playing an historical figure?

It was for me because when no one has done it before, and somebody as larger-than-life, controversial and contradictory at times as Rivera's personality was, it's always risky to be one of the first ones to bring it up. People have romanticized ideas of these characters and there's always criticism that you didn't go far enough, but I think it's a very good presentation.

And how about Billy Bob Thornton's next directing effort, *All the Pretty Horses*?

I was about to leave for Europe to begin my tour and I settled for a role that didn't take too long for me to shoot. I play the father of Penelope Cruz. Matt Damon is involved and Henry Thomas, too. It was wonderful. I really like and admire Billy Bob's work. I think he's very talented.



Shaking up the House of Blues

What do you make of all the success Latinos are having "crossing-over" right now?

Well, it depends on how you see it. It's very nice to see people that have worked very hard like Ricky Martin. He's not somebody who just popped up, he's very talented and I'm very happy for him. He deserves it. And Marc Anthony, too. He has a great voice. I think he's going to be around for a while. Jennifer Lopez is very talented as well. It's nice to see them get the opportunity to present their talents to a broader audience. Now, having said that, the so-called "crossover," I don't really like that objective. I think it's very strange to have someone talk about crossover and refer to people who are U.S. citizens and singing in English, which is either their first language or a language they learned next to Spanish. It's absurd. Marc Anthony was born in New York, what crossover are you talking about? He was there already. But people have to explain the separations that exist, which I think are a consequence of cultural racism.

It's the sort of compliment that comes out of ignorance or fear. Now whether or not this is going to result in a sustained interest in Latin American culture, we're going to have to wait and see.

You recorded in English before.

But I didn't do it with the formula in mind and play all the stops to get myself on the radio. I recorded with people who are not easy people to catalog and are not in the Top Ten in Billboard. I'm 51, I'm not going to be interesting to teeny-boppers.

You mentioned you don't live a flashy life. Do you feel any pressure or responsibility to be a role model?

First of all, the best role model has to be Mom and Pop. I don't believe that you pass that responsibility to public figures. I think role modeling, as far as I'm concerned, has to do with how you conduct your life. At my age, I don't have any drug problems; never did have them. I have two law degrees and I manage to conduct myself in a way that I consider to be respectful. Other than that, those are parameters that people should pay attention to. I'm not a saint and I'm not perfect, but I do know that because of the failure of authority figures, you have a responsibility of sorts to talk about the positive.

Do you have a career highlight? What would you call your proudest moment?

Graduating from law school, both times. As far as the work, it's a wonderful thing to have your songs sung back to you 34 years later. That's very nice. There are a lot of things that you can say: okay, you have three Grammys; been nominated twice for Emmys, which is really an honor; Willie Colon and I were the first guys to come out with an album that sold over a million in the salsa field. Those are moments.

How do you see the *Tiempo* we're in now?

I'm very optimistic about the future. I think people are becoming more educated, and not only formally educated, but also in their experiences. People are beginning to understand that the government lies and that the media are not really doing their job of informing but are more concerned with entertaining. And as a result, we're evolving into a more mature society. I hope that maturity transforms itself into a capacity to make better judgments, and, therefore, elect better people. ▼