

MUSIC NEWS

# Meet Latin Grammys winner Ruben Blades

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Heard on All Things Considered



FELIX CONTRERAS

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Blades won Album of the Year at the Latin Grammys Thursday. At 73, it was a surprise win in an industry that emphasizes youth.

## MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

The 22nd annual Latin Grammys were awarded this week. In an industry that emphasizes youth, one of the biggest surprises was that one of the top awards went to a 73-year-old musician. Vocalist and composer Ruben Blades - or Ruben Blades, as he's also known - won album of the year. He was also recognized as the Latin Recording Academy's Person of the Year. Felix Contreras is the host of NPR Music's Alt.Latino podcast. He says Blades' is one of the most fascinating musicians in any genre.

FELIX CONTRERAS, BYLINE: The story arc of Ruben Blades career is one of deep compassion and a forward motion that I always thought has a hint of creative restlessness. As a composer, he almost single-handedly gave salsa a social consciousness just as the genre was reaching its peak of worldwide popularity in the late 1970s.

(SOUNDBITE OF RUBEN BLADES SONG, "PEDRO NAVAJA")

CONTRERAS: His 1978 track, "Pedro Navaja" relocated the German roots of the song "Mack The Knife" to the barrio. And it became a call to arms for Latinos or anyone with a conscience to pay attention and call out social inequities.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "PEDRO NAVAJA")

RUBEN BLADES: (Singing in Spanish).

CONTRERAS: When talking about social issues, the songs that have always moved me are never about slogans or demands. When the victim in this story has a name, the crime or injustice is humanized and made more real...

(SOUNDBITE OF RUBEN BLADES SONG, "EL PADRE ANTONIO Y EL MONAGUILLO ANDRES")

CONTRERAS: ...Like his 1984 song "El Padre Antonio y El Monaguillo Andres," "Antonio The Priest And The Altar Boy Andres." It's a fictional telling of the very real story of Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was gunned down by death squads while delivering a Mass in San Salvador in 1980. The tragedy of that shooting and the violence the entire region suffered is felt so strongly in the story of a death of an innocent little boy that I still can't listen without tearing up.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "EL PADRE ANTONIO Y EL MONAGUILLO ANDRES")

BLADES: (Singing in Spanish).

CONTRERAS: I mentioned Blades' restlessness. Here's why. He studied politics and law both in Panama and at Harvard and acted on his political ideals when he ran for the Panamanian presidency in 1994. A decade later, he took a five-year break from music when he was minister of tourism for his home country. He also has a career in film and television that now stretches over 40 years. In fact, he's in his sixth season on the show "Fear The Walking Dead." And his Latin Grammy win and recognition last week was proof that he's still a vital and creative force in Latin music.

(SOUNDBITE OF RUBEN BLADES SONG, "WATCH WHAT HAPPENS")

CONTRERAS: His album "SALSWING!" mixes salsa and big-band swing in a seamless statement of the bicultural life that so many of us live - we love Sinatra as much as we love the Cuban vocalist Benny More.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "WATCH WHAT HAPPENS")

BLADES: (Singing) Let someone start believing in you. Let him or her hold out their hand. Let him touch you and watch what happens.

CONTRERAS: Ruben Blades had a big week at the Grammys. But it's also an indication that the future is a blank canvas for him, and so many of us can't wait to see what comes next.

Felix Contreras, NPR News.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "WATCH WHAT HAPPENS")

BLADES: (Singing) Cold. No, I don't believe your heart is cold, maybe slow to warm in an evening such as this.

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