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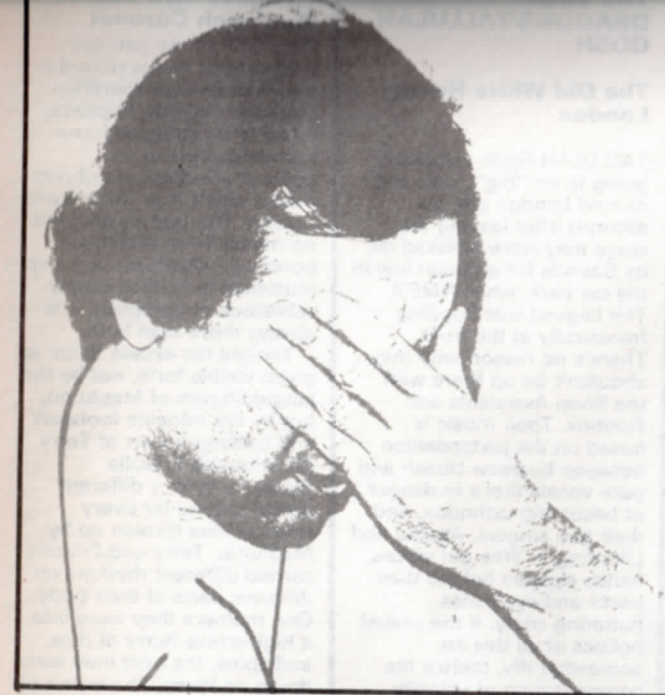
MINIS

ALIVE & KICKING IN THE UK: IBROX REPORT AND PICTURES PAGES 26-27

EASTERHOUSE THE MAIN CONTENDERS
RUBEN BLADES THE PANAMA CAT
DREAM SYNDICATE OUT OF THE WEST

WIN KATE BUSH VIDEOS

ALBUMS THE SMITHS DR & THE MEDICS



PANAMA RED

IN the movie "Crossover Dreams", Ruben Blades plays a salsa musician called Rudy Veloz. He aims for mainstream acceptance, but ends up stranded between the business and the barrio, disowned by both. It's difficult to imagine Blades getting caught in the same trap.

He was born in Panama City in 1948 and, after some 20 albums, he's beginning to get his message across to a world which has clung stubbornly to its cartoon stereotypes of Latin America, a place where they have bananas, revolutions and cigar-smoking Generalissimos. Records like 1984's "Buscando America" ("I'm Looking For America"), which made it into Time magazine's Top 10 for the year, and the

anyone.

"The fact is, the same way you have the Russians in Eastern Europe, you have the North Americans in America, period. The States colonise, they rape, they grab, yeah. But who sold? For every buyer there's a seller. Who sold? We did. Either we sold or we allowed the people who are running our countries to do it. So there's a double responsibility.

"The States are so insulated, they don't know anything about anything. You have to explain to them that the stereotypes of Carmen Miranda with fruit on her head or the sleeping Mexican with flies around him near a cactus, they've gone, in the sense of approaching a whole culture through

Taking salsa from the ghetto into the charts is as much a political act as a commercial one for RUBEN BLADES. Adam Sweeting chronicles the rise and rise of the Panamanian singer determined to alert the world to the troubles South of the border. Pics: Tom Sheehan.

hoodlum's music. All of a sudden you got a lawyer playing hoodlum's music, and they're going 'wait a minute, isn't he a lawyer? Why is he playing that?' You put dent in the stereotype and you've created a problem right there, because to put you down they've got to put themselves down too."

At 37, he reckons he may be getting a bit long in the tooth for endless touring, and film appeals to him as a medium for mass communication (he accepts promotional video as a necessary evil on the same basis). The critical acclaim awarded to "Crossover Dreams" in the States has boosted his fledgling acting

("a terrible movie").

"Crossover Dreams" was an independent production by a Latin American team, and a breakthrough in itself. But Blades has just finished work on Michael Apted's "Critical Conditions", where he co-stars with Richard Pryor, and may be in the running for a role in Robert Redford's new film "The Millagro Bean Field War", about a Latin community fighting a corporate land take-over. Blades makes no bones about it — in a money-based economy, you need finance to do the work you want to do, and you have to reach the maximum number of people.

"Success is a very relative word," he

light in the same trap. He was born in Panama City in 1948 and, after some 20 albums, he's beginning to get his message across to a world which has clung stubbornly to its cartoon stereotypes of Latin America, a place where they have bananas, revolutions and cigar-smoking Generalissimos. Records like 1984's "Buscando America" ("I'm Looking For America"), which made it into Time magazine's Top 10 for the year, and the recent "Escenas" ("Scenes"), where Blades duetted with Linda Ronstadt on the ballad "Silencios", are cultural documents as well as artistic statements.

Blades has given salsa music new dimensions of narrative scope and characterisation. Added to the music's infinite rhythmic permutations, it's a formidable means of persuasion, even if you have to rely on English translations of the writer's original Spanish.

Blades decided early on that he had to carry the attack to the United States, where there's a 20-million strong Latin population divided into nationalistic factions and sorely lacking in lobbying power. His early infatuation for the States and its rock 'n' roll culture was brutally soured in 1964, when American guardsmen killed 21 Panamanians during Canal Zone rioting. The incident was provoked by Americans refusing to fly the Panamanian flag alongside the stars and stripes. Blades immediately stopped singing in English in barrio rock bands, and turned instead to Latin music.

He wanted an academic grounding too. After studying law at Panama's national university amid ferocious competition, he went north across the border. He earned a law degree from Harvard, as he tells it, to gain acceptance and access in the country which holds ruinous sway over Latin America.

"That's a name they understand. You say 'Harvard' and that's it, you're smart," Blades declared flatly to a hotel-room full of journalists, the morning after his first show at the Brixton Academy. Supposedly exhausted, he talked energetically for an hour, apologising occasionally for the blunt certainty of his statements. The chap from Gemini Press who suggested that Ruben's politics were "rather vague", for example, found his words rammed firmly back down his throat.

"No changes will happen in Latin America without the perception of the United States changing first," Blades resumed. "We have a very big problem in Latin America with the different groups. People don't understand because they get involved in this nationalistic bullshit stance that doesn't help them and doesn't help

settle. Who sold? We did. Either we sold or we allowed the people who are running our countries to do it. So there's a double responsibility.

"The States are so insulated, they don't know anything about anything. You have to explain to them that the stereotypes of Carmen Miranda with fruit on her head or the sleeping Mexican with flies around him near a cactus, they've gone, in the sense of approaching a whole culture through those stereotypes. How do you do that? By competing in your own arena."

Blades had to do the job on himself first, clawing his way out of the working-class ghetto where he was brought up to take a look at the wider world beyond. Salsa music had been preoccupied with narrow, parochial concerns, and had fallen into a self-referential rut. The formidably well-read Blades brought a little intellectual leverage to bear.

"We came from a working-class place, a small room where I would never want to bring my children up. That's another bullshit thing, that romanticism - 'come from that small room with the mice and you really have a strong character'. If you survive. Why live like that? Fuck that. Who wants to live like that? Nobody.

"It's tough enough to live physically on a ghetto. Must you live mentally on a ghetto too? The songs in the salsa field were directed to the ghetto, to a corner exclusively, and the themes were always the same - my girl's left me, my friend betrayed me, when I get you I'm gonna beat you up, or let's dance let's dance let's dance.

"What I did was instead of looking at the corner I started looking at the other street, and then I look at the city, and then I look at the world. What happened was before, 40,000 sold overall was a big hit. Then we started selling 100,000 in one country."

Blades had broken salsa out of the ghetto, as he sees it, by turning the songs into stories which cut across social or economic boundaries. Anything began to look possible. On "Buscando America", the track "GDBD" is a three-and-a-half minute short story declaimed over a minimal musical backing, a manifestation of Blades' refusal to put limitations on his music. He's still working on a collection of musical settings for early short stories by his friend, Nobel prize-winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Even Blades has conceded that a full-scale novel might be a bit of a handful.

"People began to look at the music as perhaps something more serious than they had determined it to be," he reckons. "This is jungle music, this is drums, this is

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Michael Apted's "Critical Conditions", where he co-stars with Richard Pryor, may be in the running for a role in Rob Redford's new film "The Millagro Bear Field War", about a Latin community fighting a corporate land take-over. Blades makes no bones about it - in a money-based economy, you need finance to do the work you want to do, and you have to reach the maximum number of people. "Success is a very relative word," he observes philosophically. "I think if you've already succeed."

THE-ESCAPE-CLUB

SEE THEM LIVE

SATURDAY 14TH JUNE - DIVISION ONE CLUB, WENDOVER
SUNDAY 15TH JUNE - TOWN AND COUNTRY CLUB, LONDON
(SUPPORTING THE FIXX)

TUESDAY 17TH JUNE - MERMAID HOTEL, BIRMINGHAM
WEDNESDAY 18TH JUNE - PRINCESS CHARLOTTE, LEICESTER
THURSDAY 19TH JUNE - CUMBERLAND TAVERN, LIVERPOOL
FRIDAY 20TH JUNE - YORK UNIVERSITY, (LIVE AID BENEFIT)
SATURDAY 21ST JUNE - QUEEN MARGARET UNIVERSITY,
GLASGOW

SUNDAY 22ND JUNE - HOOCHI-COOCHI, EDINBURGH
WEDNESDAY 25TH JUNE - MARQUEE, LONDON
(RECORDED LIVE FOR CAPITAL RADIO)

