RUBEN BLADES: UP FROM SALSA

By Anthony DePalma

crossing the stage of Washington's Kennedy Center dressed in a loose gray suit and dark tie, Rubén Blades looks more like a lawyer (which he is) than one of today's most popular Latin American singers (which he also is). Squinting into the spotlight, he looks out at the 2,000 people filing the elegant concert hall and asks to hear from those who do not speak Spanish. The clapping is measured, but substantial. Then he says: "Y aquellos que hablan español, aplauden" — "And those who do speak Spanish, applaud." This time, the roar is thunderous.

"I'm going to ask a favor," he says courteously in Spanish, quickly translating into a nearly accentless English. "I'm going to speak in English tonight, but don't accuse me of selling out or anything. These people came here to share our culture with us, and this will help them understand what we're trying to do."

With a coy smile, Blades presents his music, strutting with a smart-alecky self-consciousness. He grabs the maracas, flicking them toward the crowd in salsa's 3/2 rhythm. Behind him, a combination rock band and Latino ensemble — drums and conga, electric guitar and timbales, piano and synthesizer — blares in the background. He banter with the audience, a Latino Johnny Carson. "How about those Iran-contra hearings?" he says. "That Elliott Abrams thinks he's Elliot Ness."

But Blades's lyrics belie his insouciance. The words he sings are not of partying, but of protest, of indignance against greed, corruption and spiritual sloth. Although he has angered the political left for refusing to side with it in Nicaragua, his lyrics convey populist messages: "No hay bala que mate a la verdad cuando la defiende la razón," he sings — "There's not a bullet that can kill truth when reason defends it."

He sings of the "disappeared ones" of Argentina and of the working men in the barrios of New York. His call is not salsa's usual "Let's Dance," but a rallying cry urging all Latinos in North and South America to "Get Moving."

His multilingual audience is evidence that, after years playing New York City's salsa circuit, the crowded, second-floor nightclubs of upper Manhattan, Blades is on the verge of crossing over into mainstream culture. Earlier this year, the 38-year-old salsero, who came to the United States from his native Panama in 1974, won his first Grammy

Anthony DePalma is a reporter for The New York Times.
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Lisa Lebenzon, to ferry him around, even to give directions to his apartment.
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he intends to release his first English-language album, a collaboration with such established
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Later in the fall, he will appear in "The Beanfield War," a film directed by Robert Redford.
Around the same time, another film in which he stars, "Fatal Beauty," an adventure comedy
with Whoopi Goldberg, will hit the theaters. He's
restless. In Kennedy Center was the opening show
of his national tour that will see Blades and his band, del Solar (Six From the Tenement), playing the
Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall next Saturday.
Blades bears no little resemblance to the musical
writer and composer. He writes salsa — which, in Spanish, means "sauce" — is a hybrid musical form, a blend of various Afro-Caribbean folk-musical styles
promoted by Manhattan's top Latin record producer.
Blades himself is also a composer, singer, lyricist and actor, he writes essays for Panamanian newspapers and boasts a law degree from the National University of Panama. In 1984, he
took a year off from music to earn a graduate degree
in international law from the Harvard Law School. He
once asked once if he should consider a career in politics, even a run for the Panamanian presidency, Blades presumes to be
Why not?
This unusual combination of talents and interests has taken him as far as, perhaps further than, any other third-world entertainer has ever gone in the United States, but not without criticism.
"He's very confused," says Leon Ichaso, the
actor of "Beyond Dreams," the 1984 low-budget film that first brought Blades to the attention of audiences. "A man who wants to be a singer, an actor, a president of Panama and the sage of Latin America has to definitely be confused."

Other friends who knew him in New York tell me Blades forgot the barrio when he moved to Hollywood in 1985. When he married a strawberry-blond, blue-eyed actress, they said he had dye job in his heart, too. Blades, say his critics, has fulsome, his own "crossover dreams."
Even his name reveals a certain ambivalence. Spanish-speaking fans pronounce it — in two syllables — days; but English-speaking listeners use the snip-knife like Blades. That as well as his light complexion has facilitated his crossover. He accepts either pronunciation, and answers his phone simply "Ruben."
Blades insists that he is simply trying to say something — to himself, to North Americans and the people of Latin America. "You don't have to be a North American to write these words," Blades insists. "You don't have to be a North American to create these emotions. What I hope for is respected..."
Award, for his album "Escenas," which featured duet with the singer Linda Ronstadt. In late September, he intends to release his first English-language album, a collaboration with such established rock stars as Elvis Costello, Lou Reed and Sting.

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Blades bears no little resemblance to the music he writes and sings. Salsa — which, in Spanish, means a zesty sauce — is a hybrid musical form, a blend of various Afro-Caribbean folk-musical styles first promoted by Manhattan's top Latin record producers in the 1970's. Blades himself is also a composer, lyricist and actor, he writes essays for Panamanian newspapers and holds a law degree from the National University of Panama. In 1985, he took a year off from music to earn a graduate degree in international law from the Harvard Law School. Asked once in an interview if his plans for the future included a career in politics, even a run for the Panamanian presidency, Blades presumptuously responded: "Why not?"

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"He's very confused," says Leon Ichaso, the director of "Crossover Dreams," the 1984 low-budget film that first brought Blades to the attention of Anglo audiences. "A man who wants to be a singer, a writer, a lawyer, a president of Panama and the savior of Latin America has to definitely be confused."

Other friends who knew him in New York said Blades forgot the barrios when he moved to West Hollywood in 1985. When he married a strawberry blond, blue-eyed actress, they said he had dyed his heart blond, too. Blades, they said, has fulfilled his own "crossover dreams."

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Blades insists that he is simply trying to prove something — to himself, to North Americans and to the people of Latin America. "You don't have to be a North American to write these words," Blades insists. "You don't have to be a North American to create these emotions. What I hope for is respect."

FOR ALL HIS WORLDLINESS, BLADES does not know how to drive a car. He seemed lost in Los Angeles, dependent on his wife Lisa Lebenson, to ferry him around, unable even to give directions to his apartment to a stranger scheduled to visit. "Is it you?" he says anxiously, answering the doorbell ring, scarcely believing that anyone could negotiate the city's maze of highways.

Blades had no trouble with direction when he arrived in New York in 1974. He says he found a Latin music scene that survived primarily by "pillaging the old Cuban songs of the 40's and 50's," the big-band compositions performed by orchestras of ruffle-sleeved, conga-playing musicians. "I used to hear the bands play an old song, which typically went: 'On the golden hill, the rooster woke you up,'" Blades recalls. "I thought, hey, wait a minute. Most of these people never set foot on a mountain. And it's not a rooster that wakes them, but a G.E. alarm clock."

With his romantic good looks, trim build and (when he wants to use it) a Latin American swagger, Blades could have had a successful career as
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salsa, this hot sauce of hip music, could join together
Jersey City and Panama City, Hell's Kitchen and
Tierra del Fuego. Although club owners and record-
company executives repeatedly told him his own
songs were too long and too depressing for the salsa
circuit, Blades believed he could use Latino music
to confront, not to escape.

Soon after his arrival, he started working in the
mailroom of Fania, for $73 a week. Fania
was the Motown Records of salsa. The company cul-
tivated careers, but Blades says he never saw a roy-
alty statement. "Siesta," which Blades recorded
with the trombonist Willie Colon, sold some 3 million
copies worldwide, but to date he says he has re-
ceived no more than $15,000 in royalties.

Eventually, Blades's legal training enabled him to
spot the flaws in his contract. He sued Fania, win-
ing back the copyright to his songs and the right to
future royalties, and then left the company.

In 1984, Blades signed with Elektra/Asylum/
Nonesuch records, a division of Warner Commu-
nications. Other salseros had tried to cross over with
big-label contracts, but he was the first salsa star
under contract for both Spanish and English albums
with the same major recording company. Elektra's
executives compared him favorably to such artists
as Bob Dylan and Bob Marley, the late reggae star.

Merely having a major recording contract did not
satisfy Blades. He insisted that English transla-
tions be included with his first album for Elektra, "Bus-

cando America" ("Searching for America"), a prac-
tice repeated on subsequent recordings. His pur-
pose, according to Howard H. Thompson, Elektra's
East Coast vice president of artists and repertory,
has been "to make sure he's understood."

"Buscando America" went on to sell more than
400,000 copies. Nominated for a Grammy, it made
several reviewers' lists of the 10 best pop albums of
1984, unprecedented for a salsa recording.

The album did not meet with universal acclaim.
New York's salsa crowds were not sure what to
make of it. There were no trombones; Blades had re-
placed them with a vibraphone, which softened the
pieces and gave his singing more impact. He also
had gone further into political protest than ever be-
fore, and some of the pieces dealt graphically with
everyday life.

In "Decisiones," for example, a young woman
awaits her monthly period, fearing she might be
pregnant. That caused an uproar, and Panamanian
officials prohibited him from playing it when he per-
formed in his native country two years ago.

The farther Blades got from Fania, the more his
music changed. While still respecting the basic 3/2
beat of salsa that Latinos call clave, Blades has
transformed it into what he terms an "urban sound," with instrumental trappings borrowed
from rock and jazz. But, he says, "the passion is
Latin."

His current album, "Agua de Luna," ("Moon
Water"), released last January, has proved the most
unconventional of all. Blades delves into the magic
realism of the novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez,
drawing enigmatic characters and settings from the
Nobel laureate's stories.

"No Te Duermas," ("Don't Fall Asleep") is taken
from the Garcia Marquez story "Bitterness for
Three Sleepwalkers." "In madness, all memory
dies," Blades sings. "There are no dates, there are no
hours, only the moment./ Don't fall asleep, old
child;/ Don't fall asleep, lying on the patio,/ Don't fall
asleep, wake up sister./ Don't fall asleep, I'm watch-
ing you."

Some critics charge that the album lacks compas-
sion and is devoid of vision. In a letter to the Village
Voice, Blades responded that it was "a call for Latin
America to reinvent itself."

Garcia Marquez, who has been a friend of
Blades's since 1981, has also had to defend the
album because those who expected it to be a direct
adaptation of his work. "I think people thought my
stories were going to be sung, and they weren't."
Blades as a sheriff in New Mexico in the film "The Milagro Beanfield War."

his home in Mexico. "But what Rubén did, to use a word that is a bit common but has a lot of worth, was to become inspired by my stories."

García Márquez, himself a symbol of an emerging and newly confident Latin America, said that Blades had become one of its most forceful voices: "I think the immense majority of Latin Americans are not aware of their problems. But many musicians, many writers, many artists in general are contributing to building that awareness. And Rubén is one of them."

"If I were a Panamanian, I would vote for him as president of the Republic."

A BOOKSHELF LINED WITH MOVIE SCRIPTS and audio cassettes and dog-eared paperbacks by Camus, S. J. Perelman and Jorge Luis Borges dominates the living room in Blades's one-bedroom West Hollywood apartment. But it is the two guitars, on stands in front of the windowless bay windows, that give the room its tone. "Ven, Milagro" — "Come here" — he says, calling the tan tray he picked up on the movie set of "The Milagro Beanfield War."

Blades has several voices. In English, he is capable of an actor's slick, deep, accentless tones. In Spanish, although he occasionally modulates up dramatically in pitch and speed, he usually sounds soft and measured. Tonight, the softness prevails. Blades, dressed in black jeans, a black T-shirt and slippers, looks at home.

The notion of home carries a strong pull for Blades, but it remains an elusive ideal. It is not merely that he has small apartments in New York and Los Angeles, a house in Santa Barbara and family in Panama. Panama itself is a grand mix of cultures, a hierarchy of characters one might expect to find in a García Márquez novel. Each exerts an influence on Blades.

His paternal grandfather was an accountant from St. Lucia, his grandmother a Rosicrucian who claimed she could move objects by telekinesis. His mother's father was a United States citizen from

veil and stayed there. Blades's mother was a cabaret singer who left Cuba to perform in Panama City's nightclubs in the 1940's. There she met Rubén Blades Sr., a bongo player.

Of all the countries in Latin America, Panama may be the most North Americanized. The United States dollar is a basic unit of currency; although Nov. 3 is observed as the nation's independence day, Blades recalls that when he was a child the big fireworks and celebrations were held on July 4, inside the Canal Zone, which was then United States territory.

For Blades, childhood adulation of the United States ended in 1964, when a small act of civil disobedience by Panamanian students in the Canal Zone turned into a full-scale riot that left 21 dead. "The Army that we all had wanted to be a part of as kids came with tanks," he says. "There was so much brutality, it was so unfair, that it created a reaction of outrage."

Much of that outrage resurfaces in his forthcoming album, his first in English, tentatively entitled "Hopes On Hold." (It will come with Spanish translations on the liner.) Perhaps because he chose to work with Elvis Costello and Lou Reed, Blades has written songs that, when he plays them on his acoustic guitar, sound like protest songs, albeit with a Latin pulse.

Blades says he wanted to collaborate with established artists because "I wasn't sure I could write in English. I wanted to test my writing against that of people whose work I admire." Such continual testing, he concedes, is a residue of "my Latin American inferiority complex."

He and the British rocker Costello spent a few days in Blades's Santa Barbara house and came up with several pieces, including "In Salvador." That country's troubles remain vivid in Blades's lyrics: "In Salvador/ Wolfmen come out/ To show the moon/ Our heads covered with blood." And four days with Reed produced four songs, including "Letters to the Vatican," about a woman who writes to the pope, asking for help.

"Rubén has a way of looking at things that is enormously compassionate and funny at the same time," says Reed. "Whereas someone like me might just get angry."

Blades says the imagery for the new songs came to him in Spanish, but the actual writing had to be in English. "I did not want to lose that feeling in translating," he says. Typical of his lawyerly approach to life, he typed his lyrics. But for lines that are questions, he begins the English sentences with the upside-down Spanish question mark, an unintentional hybrid that reflects his struggle to keep the emotion but change the language.

T H A T, TOO, IS HIS GOAL IN THE MOVIE industry. After the success of "Crossover Dreams," Blades was offered parts in several big movies and television series, but rejected an offer to be on "Miami Vice" because producers wanted him to play a drug dealer. "When are we going to stop playing the drug addict, the pimp and the whore?" he asks with contempt.

In "The Milagro Beanfield War," which is based on John Nichols's 1974 novel, he will play the sheriff, Bernabe Montoya, who tries to calm townspeople and land developers fighting over the future of a small town in New Mexico. Director Robert Redford picked him for the ensemble cast over 2,000 other actors, according to Mocesama Esparza, the movie's producer, because "Rubén captured the feelings, the rhythms, the tempo of the Latin personality, the New Mexican personality in the Southwest."

In Nichols's novel, the character of Montoya is described as "somewhat addlebrained but sympathetic." "I immediately identified with him," Blades says. "The man in the middle trying to avoid an explosion. In the end he takes a stand, as we all must."

By his own admission, Blades is bad-tempered and
self-centered, though the occupation seems to stem from his vision of the role he has to play. He is capable of talking animatedly about himself and that vision for 16 hours without stop. He has been known to be erratic, one moment friendly and cool, the next a raging "macho man" impersonation of a Latin American despot.

The changes of mood and mind can come suddenly, often without warning. Johnny Colon, a New York-born Puerto Rican who runs the East Harlem Music School, performed with his orchestra at an international music festival in Nicaragua in 1984 at which Blades was scheduled to appear. Blades canceled, saying he did not want to appear to be endorsing Nicaragua's Communist regime.

In his concerts, Blades tells the audience he is trying to forge "la tercera posición" — "the third position" — between left and right in Latin America. But his critics see that as no commitment at all. "He's turned his back on the people who had a tremendous love for him," Colon said. "He did it to people in the community who had respect for him. And he did it to Latin America."

Blades's temperament flared when he worked on "Crossover Dreams." After it was completed, the film was not immediately picked up for distribution. Blades went on to other projects while the director, Leon Ichaso, looked for ways to make it work. Finally he decided to make the ending more upbeat.

Ichaso says it was difficult to get Blades to refilm the last shots. When the saxophone melody finally appeared, he had shaved off the mustache he had worn through the rest of the film. Ichaso made him wear a fake mustache for the last scene, and their friendship cooled.

"Deep down," says Ichaso, "he knows he's forgotten his friends, his people, his country, his music and himself."

FOR ALL HIS BRAVADO, BLADES APPEARS SENSITIVE TO THE CHARGE. AS IF TO PROVE HIS CRITICS WRONG, HE WILL RETURN TO PANAMA BY DECEMBER. HE INTENDS TO ESTABLISH A NONPOLITICAL GROUP OF PROFESSIONALS AND VOLUNTEERS WHO WILL WORK OUTSIDE PANAMA CITY, TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS IN CURUNÚ, A SLUM WHERE THE MEDIAN INCOME IS $125 A MONTH AND WHERE, IT IS SAID, A PERSON NEVER LEAVES EXCEPT ON HIS BACK.

Here, Blades is as much a hero as a star. Aide Perez, a 24-year-old woman who takes in laundry at her wooden shack in Curunú to make a living, said that even though she and most of her neighbors are poor, they have radios and they listen to Rubén. "He deals with the needs of the people here," she said.

Blades's plans for Curunú are vague, based on optimism rather than study, and they tend at times to drift from hopeful to naif. "The first thing we have to do is make people aware that something can be done," he says, drinking peach soda and chain smoking cigarettes in the combination dining room-office of his apartment. But the idea's hazy edges in no way diminish his desire to try something, to use the unique position and unusual credentials he has attained to bring together people in his tiny country.

Although this fall, with his two movies and English-language album, could bring him his greatest success, Blades has told his manager not to book any more concerts this year. He has put the record companies and movie studios on hold until after he can get the Curunú project started.

"I made a foundation of talking and singing about people's lives," he says. "I'm proud of that and proud of my singing. But I can't sing forever with the world exploding around me."

Blades shakes his head, giving a smile that is engaging and disturbing at the same time because it conceals some truth others don't see.

"Please don't make me sound like I'm some kind of lofty man," he says. "I'm as scared as anybody else. I don't know what will come of it. But I've got to at least try. I've got to go to the background of my songs. I've