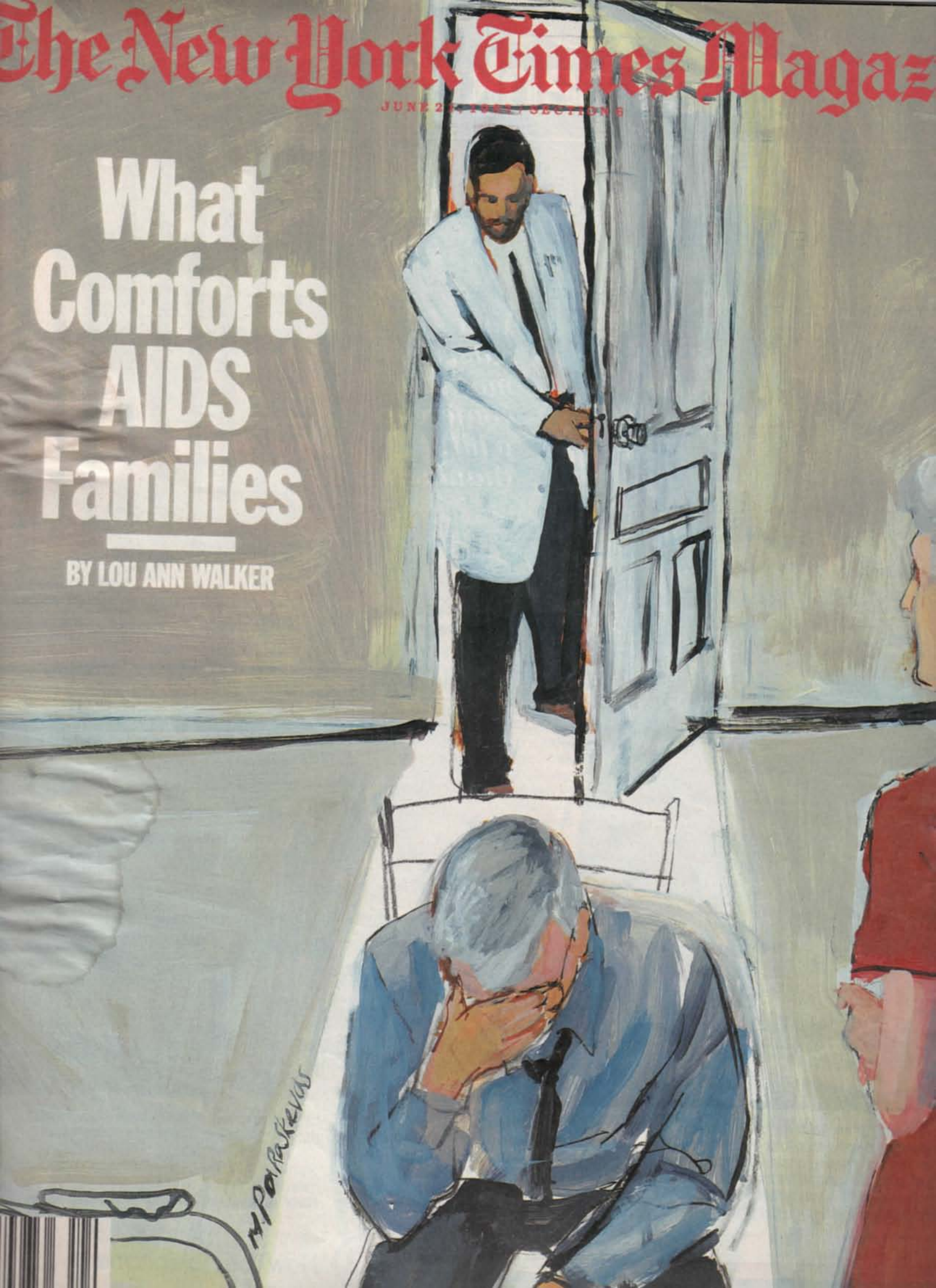


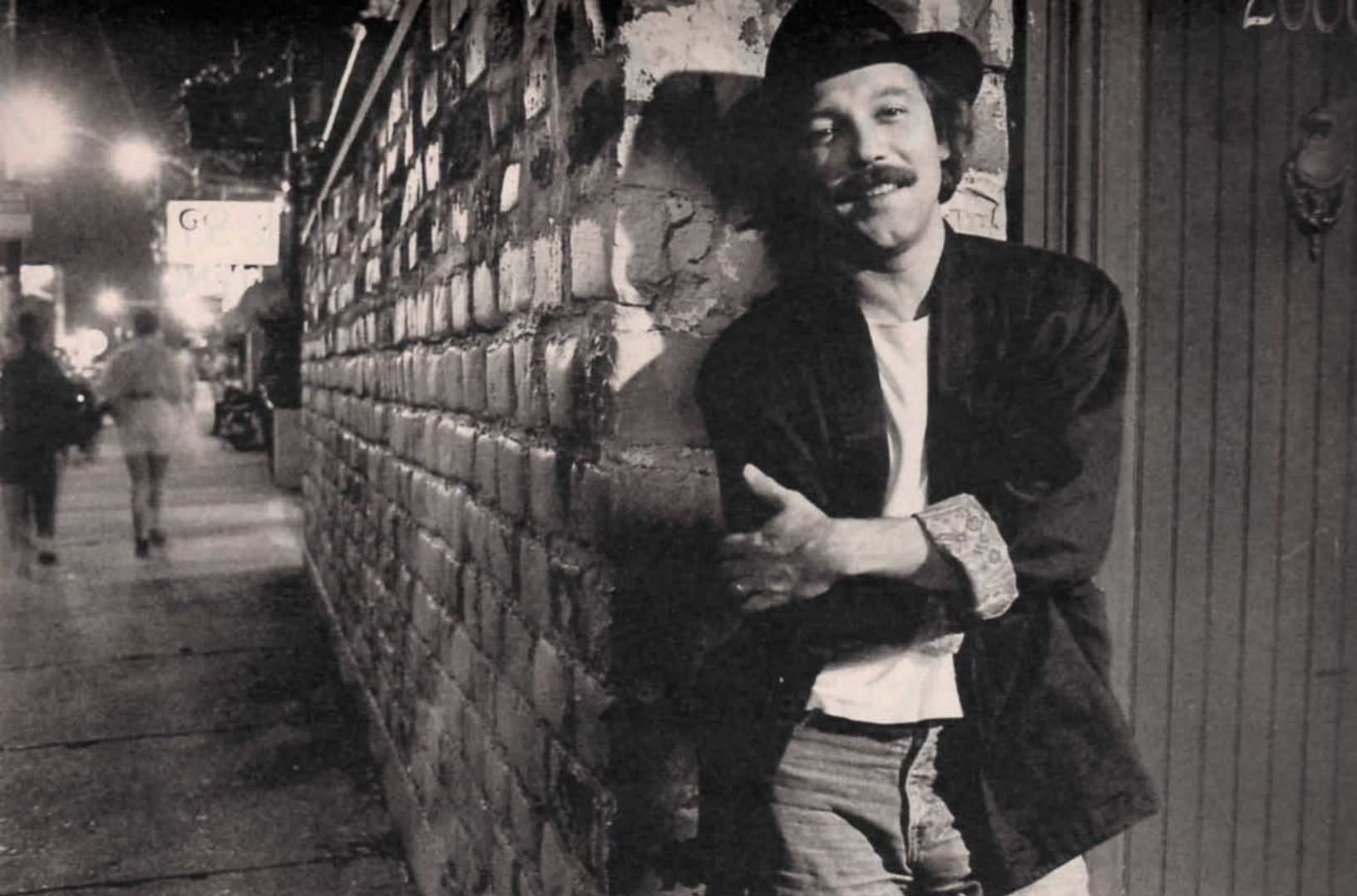
What Comforts AIDS Families

BY LOU ANN WALKER



M. P. RASKIN





KEVIN HORAN/PICTURE GROUP

Blades in Chicago, after a recent concert. He has transformed salsa into an "urban sound" that borrows from rock and jazz.

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 filling 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 banters 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 on 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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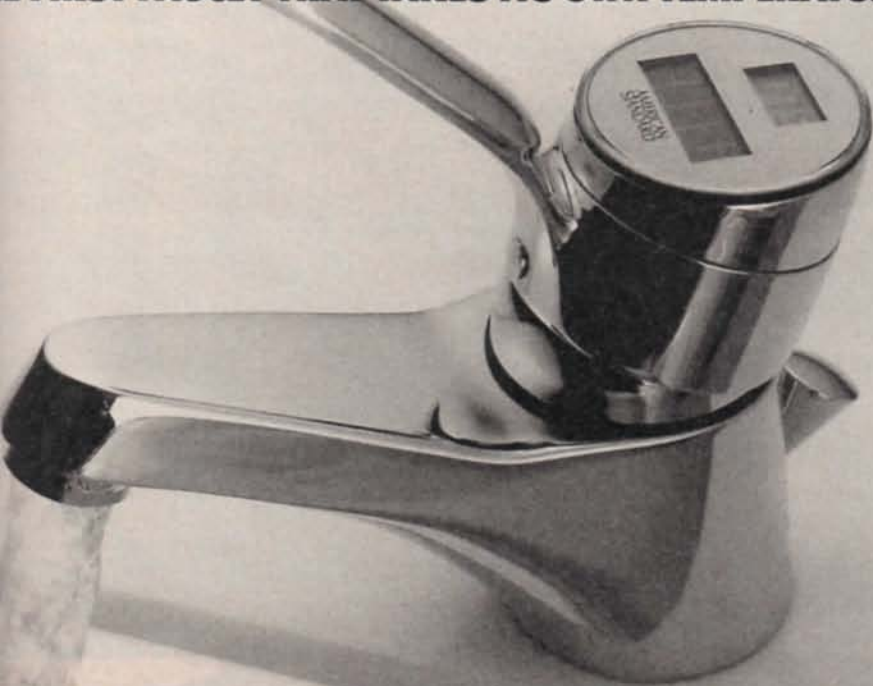


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Later in the fall, he will appear in "The M Beanfield War," a film directed by Robert Redford. Around the same time, another film in which Blades stars, "Fatal Beauty," an adventure comedy starring Whoopi Goldberg, will hit the theaters. The performance in Kennedy Center was the opening show of a national tour that will see Blades and his band on the road. *del Solar* (Six From the Tenement), playing the Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall next Saturday.

Blades bears no little resemblance to the music he writes and sings. Salsa — which, in Spanish, means "hot sauce" — is a hybrid musical form, a blend of various Afro-Caribbean folk-musical styles. It was promoted by Manhattan's top Latin record producer in the 1970's. Blades himself is also a composer, lyricist and actor, he writes essays for Panamanian newspapers and boasts a law degree from the National University of Panama. In 1986, 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?"

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 author of "Crossover Dreams," the 1984 low-budget book that first brought Blades to the attention of American audiences. "A man who wants to be a singer, an actor, the president of Panama and the savior of Latin America has to definitely be confused."

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

Even his name reveals a certain ambiguity. Spanish-speaking fans pronounce it in two syllables — "Blades" — but English-speaking listeners use the single-syllable, knife-like "Blades." That as well as his light complexion has facilitated his crossover. He accepts either pronunciation, and answers his phone simply "Rubén Blades."

Blades insists that he is simply trying to please 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 is still lost in Los Angeles, dependent on his wife, Lisa Lebenzon, to ferry him around, and even to give directions to his apartment building, a stranger scheduled to visit. "Is it you?" he says anxiously, answering the door. "No, it's the ring, scarcely believing that anyone could negotiate the city's maze of highways."

Blades had no trouble with directions 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, and typically went: 'On the golden hill, the rooster wakes 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 (when he wants to use it) a Latin American sensibility, Blades could have had a successful career simply rerecording the old tunes. But he thought

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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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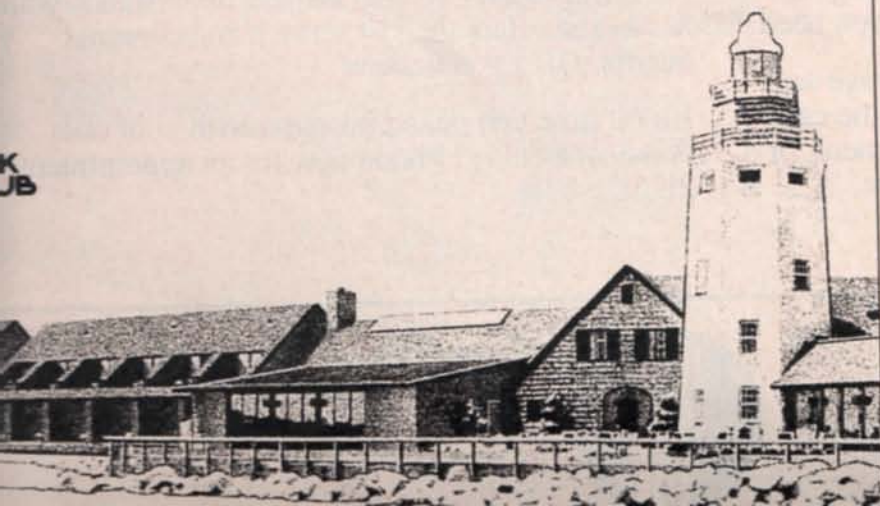
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salsa, this hot sauce of hip music, could join together Jersey City and Panama City, Hell's Kitchen and Tierra del Fuego. Although club owners and record-company executives repeatedly told him his own songs were too long and too depressing for the 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 Records, for \$73 a week. Fania was the Motown Records of salsa. The company cultivated careers, but Blades says he never saw a royalty statement. "Siembra," which Blades recorded with the trombonist Willie Colón, sold some 3 million copies worldwide, but to date he says he has received no more than \$15,000 in royalties.

Eventually, Blades's legal training enabled him to spot the flaws in his contract. He sued Fania, winning 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 Communications. 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 translations be included with his first album for Elektra, "Buscando America" ("Searching for America"), a practice repeated on subsequent recordings. His purpose, 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 replaced them with a vibraphone, which softened the pieces and gave his singing more impact. He also had gone further into political protest than ever before, 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 performed in his native country two years ago.

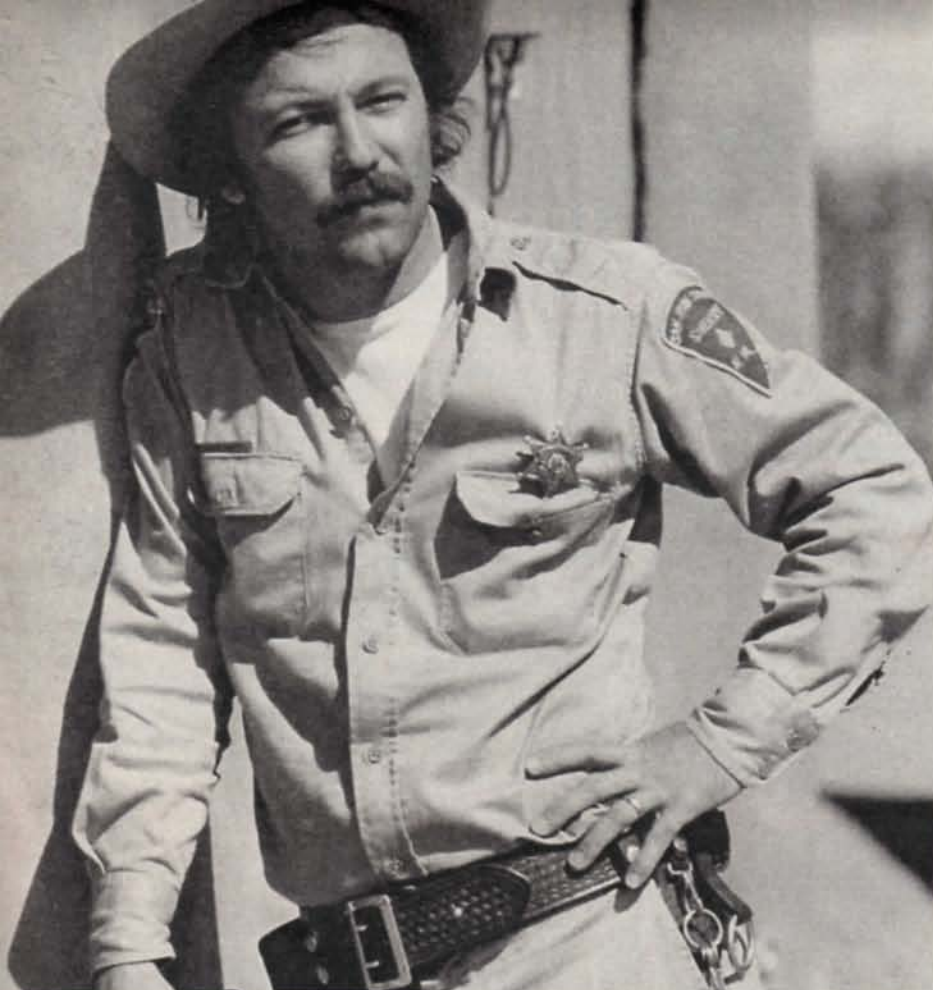
The farther Blades got from Fania, the more his music changed. While still respecting the basic 3/2 beat of salsa that Latinos call *clave*, Blades has transformed it into what he terms an "urban sound," with instrumental trappings borrowed from rock and jazz. But, he says, "the passion is Latin."

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 García Márquez, drawing enigmatic characters and settings from the Nobel laureate's stories.

"No Te Duermas," ("Don't Fall Asleep") is taken from the García Márquez 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 watching you."

Some critics charge that the album lacks compassion 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."

García Márquez, who has been a friend of Blades's since 1981, has also had to defend the album before 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,"



DOUG MENEZ/PICTURE GROUP

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 curtainless bay windows, that give the room its tone. "Ven, Milagro" — "Come here" — he says, calling the tan stray 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

vent 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.

THAT, TOO, IS HIS GOAL IN THE MOVIE industry. After the success of "Crossover Dreams," Blades was offered parts in several movies and television series. He 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 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 Moctesuma 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

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self-centered, though the preoccupation 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 right and left 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 *salsero* 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 next December. He intends to establish a nonpolitical group of professionals and volunteers who will work outside Panama City, to improve conditions in Curundú, a slum where the median income is \$152 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 Curundú 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 Curundú are vague, based more on optimism than study, and they tend at times to drift from hopeful to naïve. "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 Curundú 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