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BUSCANDO PANAMA

Salsa singer Ruben Blades returns to his native country to run for its highest office





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AP Special / Anita Boca

Ruben Blades and members of the Papa Egoro party march during his presidential campaign in Panama. Recent polls say he trails his chief rival in Sunday's election by a few percentage points.

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FREE PRINTING FOR 200 CUPS

APANAMA CITY, Panama
AFTER WORKING the crowds under a sweltering tropical sky like a Monday night gig at the Village Gate, Ruben Blades looks tired. It's after midnight now and he's chain-smoking Marlboro Lights near the bay windows of his airy, high-ceilinged apartment overlooking Panama Bay.

In November, the 45-year-old salsa singer, Hollywood actor and Harvard-trained lawyer, who's lived in New York and Los Angeles for the past 20 years, accepted the nomination of the newly formed *Papa Egoro* — or Mother Earth — party for the presidency of his native Panama.

With the election less than a week away, even he didn't think he'd get this far. Now his presidential popularity has jumped to 24 percent in recent polls, and he trails a candidate from the party of imprisoned strongman Manuel Antonio Noriega's by a few percentage points.

"People don't understand what's happening here," he says, jumping from his chair, making his way through a haze of cigarette smoke obscuring the view of the moonlit bay. "This is a movement that started from scratch. We were supposed to have died many times, many months ago. In the midst of all the surrealism that is Latin America, the scenario here is unique. The failure of the political institutions and the representatives, the trauma of a country invaded and looted, and the disillusionment with a democratic government that promised things would be different after 21 years created the conditions for me to run."

He steps up to a wall calendar and counts the days to the May 8 election. Time is running out, money is running low. At his party's dusty and sparsely furnished campaign headquarters earlier that day, the power company shut off the lights because of



HIS TOUGHEST AUDIENCE

'This is in God's hand,' says Blades the politician.

Blades is searching for Panama.

Months of pre-campaign polls last year showed Blades to be the runaway favorite to succeed

President Guillermo Endara, who cannot run for re-election. But veteran pol Ernesto Perez Balladares of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) has consistently held onto first place in polls this year. In recent weeks, Blades edged past former Comptroller Ruben Carles into second place.

Balladares, a millionaire whose bulk earned him the nickname "*El Toro*" (The Bull), enjoyed a four-month head start before six other candidates kicked off their campaigns. And, political observers say, he benefited from a wave of dissatisfaction with living conditions under Endara, despite the fact that his party was the political arm of former dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega, now serving 40 years in a Florida prison on drug and racketeering charges.

Carles, a crusty 66-year-old man known as "*Chinchorro*," was considered by political observers to be the real head of the U.S.-backed government before resigning as comptroller to run for president. A popular TV political advertisement shows Noriega defense forces beating women demonstrators during sweeps of downtown streets. The ad is sponsored by a committee supporting Carles and calling itself, *Nunca Jamas* (Never Again).

But Balladares and Carles are considered members of Panama's lily-white elite — a wealthy, race-conscious bunch known as the *rabil Blancos*, or white-tails.

For almost a century, this tiny country of 2.5 million people has been on a turbulent journey in search of a national identity. Eager to win control of the Panama Canal, the United States in 1903 wrenched the isthmus from Colombia. Then, it was one political catastrophe after an-

ago. In the midst of all the surreals that is Latin America, the scenario here is unique. The failure of the political institutions and the representatives, the trauma of a country invaded and looted, and the disillusionment with a democratic government that promised things would be different after 21 years created the conditions for me to run."

He steps up to a wall calendar and counts the days to the May 8 election. Time is running out, money is running low. At his party's dusty and sparsely furnished campaign headquarters earlier that day, the power company shut off the lights because of unpaid utility bills. He laughs.

"This is in God's hand," he says.

Blades says he hasn't performed in six months and has so far poured \$100,000 of his own money into the campaign. He paid for newspaper inserts of the party's 20-page political program with his American Express card. A New York group calling itself Friends of Ruben Blades, which includes former boxing champ Jose (Chegui) Torres and writer Pete Hamill, is making a last-ditch appeal for money as election day nears.

Deeper and deeper into what he calls "*la noble locura*," the noble madness, Blades is asking voters in the first free elections here in a quarter century for a shot at changing Panama's political realities — long dominated by unbridled corruption, well-heeled party machines and military power plays.

"Our movement is going to rewrite the books of politics in Latin America," he says. "We're not going to disappear. Already the rules of the game have changed forever."

In the '70s, Blades virtually invented his own brand of salsa: singing about the struggles of everyday people, about brutality and injustice, and the loss of political innocence. A two-time Grammy winner (in 1987 for "*Escenas*," and 1989 for "*Antecedente*"), he recorded some 20 albums and was the first salsa artist to cross over, meaning that his music reached beyond the Spanish-language audience to mainstream American culture. Blades also became the first La-

TOUGHEST AUDIENCE

With five days to go on the presidential campaign trail, Ruben Blades is discovering that performing for a sold-out concert hall is a breeze compared with winning over Panamanians hungry for change

BY RAY SANCHEZ

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

tino ever signed by a major label, Elektra/Asylum, and the album, "*Buscando America*" (Searching for America), was nominated for a Grammy and made several reviewers' lists of the 10 best pop albums of 1984. Blades followed the album with his acting debut in the 1985 film "*Crossover Dreams*," which loosely follows the arc of his musical career. He earned a master's degree in international law from Harvard University that same year, and talk about Blades' eventual run for the presidency of Panama intensified.

Blades was in California the night of Dec. 20, 1989, when more than 22,000 U.S. troops invaded Panama in the largest American military intervention since Vietnam. From a balcony in Panama City, Blades' father

was on the phone with his son, describing the night sky exploding with tracer fire and bombs rocking the city. Chorillo, a warren of two-story wooded houses and the neighborhood where Blades played basketball in the early '70s, was set ablaze. An estimated 300 civilians died during the invasion.

"It was murder to me to bomb a place so filled with kids," Blades says. "I cried. I thought, it was nighttime, imagine the confusion. It's one of the most crowded areas in Panama. The structures are made of wood dating from the construction of the canal and they're just going to burn. I didn't hang up the phone with my father for a long, long time."

* * *

Now, after 20 years away from home,

streets. He is sponsored by a committee supporting Carles and calling itself, *Nunca Jamas* (Never Again).

But Balladares and Carles are considered members of Panama's lily-white elite — a wealthy, race-conscious bunch known as the *rabiblancos*, or white-tails.

For almost a century, this tiny country of 2.5 million people has been on a turbulent journey in search of a national identity. Eager to win control of the Panama Canal, the United States in 1903 wrenched the isthmus from Colombia. Then, it was one political catastrophe after another: four successful coups, numerous attempted coups, two military dictatorships, a series of fraudulent elections and an invasion by the United States.

Panamanians say social conditions have worsened since the 1989 U.S. invasion, which brought back to power the remnants of the ruling elite of the '60s. More than 55 percent of Panamanian families live below the poverty line; 30 percent of the country is under 14 years of age. One out of four elementary-school students suffers from malnutrition. Some towns are literally crumbling. (On a recent campaign stop, Carles climped atop a balcony with a dozen supporters in a poor neighborhood that was the site of several building collapses. Soon, the balcony gave way, sending the elderly politician tumbling down about 15 feet to the ground, his supporters piled on top of him.)

But while Noriega left the country in ruins, the overt oppression of his regime is gone. Most buses here are decorated with hand-painted portraits of famous Panamanian beauties or scenes from its lush countryside. Yet one of the more popular bus placards is a rather rude depiction of President Endara sitting on the toilet.

Says taxi driver Ernesto Torres, 26, a father of three, whose cab was stuck behind the bus in downtown traffic: "This is what we face come election day: vote for the PRD and Noriega's boys; vote for the *rabiblancos*, who don't care about us; or vote for Blades. I'll take a chance with Ru-



AP Special Photos / Anita Baca

ben Blades.”

Others, however,

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AP Special Photos / Anita Baca

ben Blades."

Others, however, are more comfortable with Blades on the musical stage than the political arena.

"He seems to be a false person to me," said Rolando Tullon, 25, who sells \$1 bottles of honey at a bustling shopping strip in downtown Panama. "I see him as a musician, not as someone who would be president. His roots are in music. We have to pray to God to guide us in this election."

Blades' supporters chant 'Ruben, presidente!'



BLADES' PARTY, *Papa Egoro* — its name derived from the indigenous Embera language of the Choco Indians

— is trying to break with tradition. For the first time, a political party has abandoned the practice of forging alliances with other groups. Needing only 18,000 signatures to register as a party, *Papa Egoro* gathered more than 25,000 — without paying supporters or promising them jobs to sign up. For the first time in the 20th Century, a political party in Panama was born without being delivered by the military or banking elite.

The party's political program was fashioned after hundreds of grassroots meetings throughout the country, and it calls for health and social welfare and reform of the justice and prison systems.

But Blades has come under attack on several fronts. Some in the electorate see him as too much of an "ar-

rogant" outsider to be a serious candidate. Some former *Papa Egoro* members accuse Blades and his closest aides of wielding almost tyrannical control over party matters. And while Blades attacks Panama's traditional politicians as "elitist" and "out of touch," critics point to his Ivy League education and life abroad as an American show-business success story.

"Being at the center of political controversy is not the same as being a person applauded on stage," said Roberto Eisenmann, publisher of Panama's largest newspaper, *La Prensa*. "Blades is an international figure but the people who go to see him do so because they like him . . . It's not the same when you're running for political office."

Marco Gandasegui, executive secretary of the Center for Latin-American Studies, a Panamanian think tank, said Blades has attracted some intellectuals and national businessmen. But, added Gandasegui, he's failed to draw enough support from organized labor and small farmers in the nation's destitute interior, which is home to 60 percent of the electorate.

"He's very popular among city people but it's very difficult for him to communicate culturally with people in the countryside," Gandasegui says. "In the interior, for instance, people sing and dance a variant of the Co-

Elderly women leave their patios to kiss and hug Blades.

lombian *cumbia*. In Panama City, you sing and dance to salsa and that's where Ruben Blades finds his roots."

But Gandasegui says Blades has, in a sense, already won. "Win or lose, Ruben Blades has proven to the Panamanian political culture that these political parties — the oligarchies — can be challenged and can be defeated," he says. "That's maybe the most important lesson we can get out of the Ruben Blades experience."

Still, Blades admits encountering discouragement and self-doubt during his political baptism.

"People come up to you on the street and say, 'We're with you all the way, Ruben,'" he relates, taking a drag on another cigarette. "Then the other parties show up and start giving out food and cash. So then people say to me, 'We still love you, Ruben. We know the other guys stink to high heaven, but at least they're giving out food and money.'"

* * *

Ruben Blades was born in Panama City on July 16, 1948, the grandson of an accountant from St. Lucia, a British colony in the West Indies. He was the second of five children. His father, Ruben Sr., was a police detective, basketball star and bongo player here. His Cuban-born mother, Anoland, who recently died of cancer, played the piano and worked on a radio soap opera. The Blades family lived for 17 years in the working-class neighborhood of Carrasquilla, where Blades was turned on to rock and roll and imitated the tunes of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers and the Beatles.

Then, in January 1964, a footnote in

Please see **BLADES** on Page B8

BOOK REVIEW

How Pericles Stacked Up Against Dale Carnegie

CERTAIN TRUMPETS: The Call of Leaders, by Gary Wills. Simon & Schuster, 336 pp. \$23.

By Christopher Caldwell

IN "Certain Trumpets," the Pulitzer prize-winner Gary Wills, whose three decades of book-writing have been capped by five studies of presidents from Lincoln to Nixon, examines a question implicit in much of his work: What makes a good leader, and what separates leaders from followers?

Characteristically, Wills proceeds to reframe the question into an altogether more subtle one: To what extent do leaders even *lead*?

To illustrate, he makes the unlikely — but seriously meant — juxtaposition of Pericles and Dale Carnegie. The former was enabled, in Thucydides' words, "by the respect others had for him and his own wise policy, to hold the multitude in a voluntary restraint. He led them, not they him." The latter's leadership style was one of manipulation — pandering, truckling, salesmanship.

Wills views the Pericles that historians have given us as little more than a myth — albeit a useful one for his purposes. Inconveniently for those who bemoan the lack of great leaders today, pure leadership-by-example probably doesn't exist, Wills thinks — and never did in democracies. Still, a leader is more than a sounding board: Washington and



Photo by Joe Schuyler

Gary Wills

them less as failed leaders than as flawed humans. Adlai Stevenson (anti-type of "political leader" FDR) is "sybaritic," a "dilettante" whose wit was said to be "not as great as it was popularly assumed," a clinger to perks. Roger Smith of General Motors (anti-type of "business leader" Ross Perot) feels "a nerd's idolatry of the star footballer." And Wills' excoriation of Nancy Reagan (anti-type of Eleanor Roosevelt's "reform leader") is so savage that one is tempted to reassess her "Just Say No" campaign. Anyone who could mobilize so many people around an idea as misguided and harmful as Wills claims, despite such venality and cartoonish stupidity as Wills attributes to her, must have extraordinary leader-

Ruben Blades Faces His Toughest Audience

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U.S. history changed his life. Twenty-one Panamanians were killed and nearly 500 wounded in riots after Americans in the Canal Zone refused to fly the Panamanian flag next to theirs at a high school. The event had a profound effect on Blades: From that point on, he stopped singing in English.

"You see the same army that licked the Nazis come and kick your ass because you want your flag flown in your own country," Blades recalls, hurling a book of matches across a table. "Those were unarmed people."

After studying law and working at the national bank in Panama, Blades came to New York in 1974 and got a \$125-a-week job in the mailroom at Fania Records, at the time the premier Spanish-language record label in the United States. A year later, he was singing with Tito Gomez in Ray Barretto's band and earning \$73 a week. He went on to work with Willie Colon, whom he credits with giving his consistently political music a "platform." Several years later, he formed his own band, *Seis del Solar* (Six From the Tenement).

Blades insisted that English translations be included with his first album for Elektra to make sure he was being understood. His message was not salsa's usual "Dance and have fun," but a rallying cry urging all Latin Americans to wake up.

"The lyrics demanded more attention," Blades says of his music. "They were talking about things that were not escapist or confrontational. All of a sudden you're talking about where you live and why you live like that . . . American Latins in New York did not realize that there was a whole world outside theirs. They were being victimized in a way by the environment. They were like foreigners in their own land." Blades the musician also woke up to the fact that his

stop me and ask how Ruben's presidential run is going," said Paula-Frances Campbell, a New Yorker and longtime friend who was the inspiration for Blades' love song "Paula C." "A bank teller in the neighborhood says she's praying for him."

A sense of wonderment descends on Blades as he sets out campaigning throughout Panama. In the town of Chitre, about 200 miles southwest of Panama City, girls muster the courage to approach him, hoping to catch his eye and perhaps an autograph. Elderly women leave their patios to kiss and hug him. Shirtless and barefoot, young boys reach out for his hand and tell him what instruments they like to play. With romantic good looks, trim build and a Latin American swagger, Blades has instant star recognition here and the affection of Panamanians who see him as the vicarious fulfillment of their dreams.

"The color of your skin reminds me of my father," he tells a dark-skinned man as the two embrace in a crowded plaza.

"I find a real parallel between the campaigning and what we do as musicians," he says. "We never went for organized shows with the lights and all that. We only showed up and played. Here, we just show up in places. We never bring people from other areas. We don't bus people in to show support."

In a *Papa Egoro* T-shirt and black slacks, Blades strides through the crowds in Chitre — shaking hands, signing autographs, posing for pictures to chants of "Ruben, presidente!" He climbs on a park bench and talks about the unemployed and the underemployed, about education and restoring the national self-esteem. He promises, "We're not here to get rich off the dreams of you and your children."

When the chants exhorting Blades the candidate die down, requests for a

cydides' words, "by the respect others had for him and his own wise policy, to hold the multitude in a voluntary restraint. He led them, not they him." The latter's leadership style was one of manipulation — pandering, truckling, salesmanship.

Wills views the Pericles that historians have given us as little more than a myth — albeit a useful one for his purposes. Inconveniently for those who bemoan the lack of great leaders today, pure leadership-by-example probably doesn't exist, Wills thinks — and never did in democracies. Still, a leader is more than a sounding board: Washington and Lincoln both kept an ear closely tuned to public opinion — but with the aim of eliciting a program of action. What distinguishes leaders is that it is they who decide how to move the mass of humanity toward a transcendent goal.

Wills chooses 16 leaders, 11 of them American, and pairs them with "antitypes" — those of similar attributes who somehow lacked the right stuff. These moralistic thumbnails have a familiar superficiality about them — it is clearly Wills' intent to bring the punchiness of the self-help genre to his project. Some pairings speak for themselves ("military leader" Napoleon vs. antitype McClellan); others become obvious if one grants Wills his premise that leadership is something wholly distinct from influence ("intellectual leader" Socrates vs. antitype Ludwig Wittgenstein).

But others are incomprehensible on Wills' own terms, like the "diplomatic leader" pairing of Andrew Young and antitype Clark Kerr, the University of California president who mismanaged the Berkeley protests of the 1960s. Young was indispensable as an honest broker in the civil-rights movement, but the goals of the movement were formulated by others — the leaders, if you will. Ditto Young's tenure as Jimmy Carter's UN ambassador: Carter led on the Panama Canal treaties and Camp David; Young *implemented*. To give Young the nod over Kerr is to confuse leadership with mere *success* — a blind spot Wills shows throughout.

Not being a leader "does not consign one to second-class humanity," Wills stresses, without believing it for an instant. Cruel digs at his antitypes cast

"sybaritic," a "dilettante" whose wit was said to be "not as great as it was popularly assumed," a clinger to perks. Roger Smith of General Motors (antitype of "business leader" Ross Perot) feels "a nerd's idolatry of the star footballer." And Wills' excoriation of Nancy Reagan (antitype of Eleanor Roosevelt's "reform leader") is so savage that one is tempted to reassess her "Just Say No" campaign. Anyone who could mobilize so many people around an idea as misguided and harmful as Wills claims, despite such venality and cartoonish stupidity as Wills attributes to her, must have extraordinary leadership capabilities indeed.

Most puzzling of all is Wills' pairing of Martha Graham and Madonna as "artistic leader" and antitype. The world of dance is sufficiently hermetic that Graham, like Wittgenstein in the world of academic philosophy, should fall on the wrong side of Wills' leadership / influence divide; she is better thought of as an artist who combined, like Yeats or Cocteau or Goethe, the vocations of artist and impresario. But it is misguided to dismiss as an antitype the woman who brought the noun "wannabe" to Webster's. Madonna succeeded in becoming — and not willy-nilly — the leading defender of the sexual revolution at a time when it was under siege by the very knee-jerk invocations of hygiene, willpower and self-denial that Wills finds so threatening in Nancy Reagan. She also became, again consciously, the most visible ambassador between "mainstream" culture and a gay cultural world hemmed in by an increasingly hostile populace.

One is left to conclude that it is only because Wills loves ballet and hates rock music that Martha Graham is leadership material and Madonna is not, just as Eleanor Roosevelt trumps Nancy Reagan only because Wills likes the New Deal and dislikes the war on drugs. For all its range, "Certain Trumpets" collapses into incoherence on its stated theme, and winds up using leadership less as a subject for inquiry than as a stalking horse for Wills' esthetic and political prejudices. ■

Christopher Caldwell is assistant managing editor of *The American Spec-*

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"They helped destroy what we had," he said of Fania Records. "The best musicians, the best arrangers, the best singers, the best producers, the best writers. And they killed not just a money-making machine but they destroyed a Latin American popular movement that was instrumental in creating other people's music and directions."

In 1986, Blades married actress Lisa Lebenzon, whom he met through a mutual friend while he was studying at Harvard and she at Sarah Lawrence College. When Blades returned to Panama to begin campaigning, Lebenzon stayed behind at the couple's California home after it was damaged in the January earthquake. It wasn't until two weeks ago that she joined him in Panama, and many here wondered whether she supports Blades' presidential bid.

"This was a hardship for us," said Lebenzon, who's been raising money for *Papa Egoro* from the couple's damaged home in Santa Monica. "It has absolutely nothing to do with believing in him or not supporting him."

In New York, where Blades still owns an apartment, his close friends raised about \$50,000 for *Papa Egoro* by appealing to his friends and supporters since the end of March. In addition to Hamill and Torres, the list of supporters includes PR man Gerson Borrero, and sports agent Jose Masso. "Some doormen on the Upper West Side still

to show support."

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When the chants exhorting Blades the candidate die down, requests for a song pick up. "*Una canción! Una canción!*"

In the 90-degree heat, he breaks into "Pablo Pueblo," a well-known number from his 1977 album with Willie Colon, "*Mentiendo Mano*":

"Regresa un hombre en silencio / De su trabajo, cansado / Su paso no lleva prisa / Su sombra nunca lo alcanza . . . Pablo Pueblo . . . hijo del grito y la calle / de la miseria y del hambre . . ."

"A man returns in silence / tired from his work / his step is unhurried / his shadow never gains on him . . . Pablo Pueblo . . . son of rage and the street / of misery and hunger . . ."

Pablo Pueblo was everywhere in the crowd that day — from the farmer barely eking out a living to the young mother struggling to raise three children alone to the small boy clinging to a *Papa Egoro* T-shirt (perhaps the first piece of new clothing he's ever seen). "Pablo Pueblo talks about the everyday man who is consumed by rage and abandonment and betrayal. You know the misery that we have here," he says.

Back at his apartment in the Casco Viejo district, a stone's throw from the presidential Palace of the Herons, Blades peers out into the darkness on the colonial waterfront.

"There is something bigger out there than my personal doubts," he says. "I owe to the people. So I have to sacrifice going through with this campaign. But, man, if things don't change, the people will have to sacrifice for the rest of their lives. The only risk I take is the risk of winning." ■