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DAILY NEWS MAGAZINE
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COVER STORY
Ruben Blades has made a career out of walking a very fine line. A streetwise Panamanian who left an attorney job in his native country to sing salsa in New York, he is also an actor, writer and intellectual. And he does nothing but think ahead: to a career in movies, to eventually running for office back home, to playing prestigious Carnegie Hall this Saturday.

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Ways to get invited back for the weekend.

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CAN'T SIT STILL

Ruben Blades, man, he's got things to do.

By DAVID BROWNE

May be its his charisma; maybe it's just the open door, but no sooner has Ruben Blades settled into his bathroom-sized dressing room at the upper East Side studios of David Brentner's "Nightlife" that the parade begins. There's the "Nightlife" staff member, clipboard in hand, who exclaims, "Feathersails were fabulous! The whole building is buzzing!" She's followed by the technician who's worried with Blades on other talk shows, the affable record-company executive, and the old Hispanic friend who exclaims, "Damn, what a good year?" Members of Blades' band, Seis del Sol (Six from the Teneaments), who will be performing with him tonight, stroll in and out.

Most surprising of all, though, is nest-flying Brat Packer Judd Nelson, also here to tape a "Nightlife" segment. "Ruben?" he exclaims, hugging Blades, then congratulates the salsa singer on his December marriage.

As taping time grows near, Blades is left alone in his room. Dressed in pleated black trousers and a black shirt, and sporting an incoming beard, he cracks open a pack of Marlboro Lights and calmly awaits the taping of yet another talk show. That he's hip to this backstage schmoozing shouldn't come as a surprise, even to those who caught him on the salsa circuit in the mid-70s. Still, Judd Nelson?

"People would be surprised at how many people I know," he says in his sage manner. "Redford said I know more people than he does. He was only kidding, but I know what he meant."

***

Ruben Blades has made a career out of walking a very fine line. A streetwise Panamanian who left an attorney job in his native country to sing salsa in New York, he is also an actor, writer and intellectual. Last October, when he and his then-fiancée-blond, 25-year-old, California-bred actress Lisa Lebanon—built his longtime upper West Side apartment and moved to a small apartment in West Hollywood, many were surprised. They shouldn't have been, for Blades does nothing but think ahead: to a career in movies, to eventually running for government office in his native country, to playing prestigious Carnegie Hall this Saturday.

He is an expert at gathering disparate forces around him. In New York in the late 70s, Blades wrote songs that sounded like typical salsa, but with lyrics that were something else: "El Tiburón" (The Shark) criticized U.S. foreign policy, while "Pepe Navaja" told of a barrio murderer. By 1984, when he signed with the big-time Elektra Records and enrolled in Harvard Law School to earn a master's in international law, he had both hard-core salsa fans and effete academics on his side.

The advances continued. In the fall of '85, he released his second Elektra album, "Escenas" (featuring a duet with Linda Ronstadt), and captivated film critics with a charismatic leading role in "Crossover Dreams." Last year, he appeared at the "Crack-Down" concert at Madison Square Garden and at the Amnesty International benefit at Giants Stadium. His name popped up on hip albums by Lou Reed ("Ministral?) and Little River Band ("Freedom—No Compromise") and on the "Sun City" single and video. He landed a supporting role in Richard Pryor's recent "Critical Condition." and was signed to the part of a New Mexican sheriff in the Robert Redford-directed "The Milagro Beanfield War," set for release this fall.

No wonder, in light of all these projects, that the release of his latest album, "Agua De Luna," based on the short stories of Nobel Prize-winning writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, almost seems incidental, as does the Grammy which Blades won for Best Tropical Latin Performance.

"One of the things I've done in my life is to move in as many directions as I feel my talent can take me," he comments. "I'm not gonna become limited. This is what you're gonna do, this is it. I know that has created confusion for those who market talent, but I'd rather do that than become the flavor of the month, and then be dismissed for the next flavor."

Yet, by embracing Hollywood, Ruben Blades may be entering the ice-cream park. Naturally, this creates questions about crossing over, selling out. He emphatically dismisses such talk. "I've been hearing that for so long. When I went to Harvard it was, 'Now he's gonna, never coming back. He's gonna go to Wall Street.' Then it takes them two years to say, 'Oh, he hasn't done it yet, I don't think he's gonna do that.'"

Oh, as he says in his dressing room, "Nobody in Hollywood has called me 'Baby.' Nobody."

***

Then again, nobody in Hollywood is calling him—at least not on this sunny New York morning, when Blades, having returned briefly to the city, is rehearsing a new role: actor-stuntman in rundown Central Park West hotel room (the one with the..."
bathroom door that doesn’t close all the way, waiting for a phone call confirming whether or not he will be co-starring with Whoopi Goldberg in her next film, “Fatal Beauty.”

Close up, Blades’ 38-year-old face looks doughy and his hair is wavy but thinning, yet his eyes are oval-shaped and probing. He's dressed in baggy blue jeans and a navy-blue workshirt, under a Sundance Institute sweat shirt, the latter a reminder of the four months he spent in New Mexico filming “Milagro.” (Sundance is Redford’s company.) He is talking about the film as, on cue, the phone rings. It is not the call he has been waiting for. “One thing I really don’t like in life is indecision,” he snaps. “That really, really bothers me.”

While he waits, there is time to talk about his other concerns, chiefly whether his long-standing band will hold it together while he pursues his film career. “Agua De Llora” had to be recorded in two weeks, between “Milagro” breaks, an experience he calls “very uncomfortable.” And there is the English-language album he will soon record, for which he will co-write songs with Lou Reed, Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello and possibly Paul Simon. It’s his first clear stab at a market that has been even more stubborn than Hollywood—the rock

continued on next page
audience. The new album, a semi-concept work meant "to represent the feeling of a city musically," may finally cross that barrier. (But just to
make sure he doesn't wander too far, he says he'll follow that project with
"Antecedent," a homage to his roots, with horns replacing the synthesizers
used by Solis del Solar.)

"It's not a cynical move, like Julio Iglesias recording in English,"
comments Howard Thompson, the British A&R director of Elektra
Records. "It should be fantastically interesting, like Paul Simon's album is. We want to get people where they think."

"Robert's almost too good to be true," adds collaborator Lou Reed.
"He has very ambitious goals in terms of what the songs are going to
be about."

But what Ruben Blades is most eager to discuss today is not music
but movies—and politics. He sees "Mirage," based on a John Nichols
novel about rural New Mexicans who combat developers, as having a dual
role. "What I think Redford did was to present a story in a way where it
would become a showcase for Latin, for Latin actors and actresses, and
allow us to work on a project with Anglos that is big budget," Blades
says. "It's not gonna be an earth-shattering, barrier-breaking project,
but I got to work in a role where I don't have to be cutting heroin or
coke in some seedy apartment."

This, he says, is one of the principal reasons he moved to Hollywood.
"I had a lot of questions in terms of why it is that there's not more of a
Latino presence in film and why, when there is, it's the guy who breaks
through the second-floor window to steal your Sony. I really feel
it's my duty to push and see if we can get roles other than junkies or drug
dealers, and I've been very vocal about it. The Hollywood establish-
ment today would never dare put a black in a position where blacks were
being placed in the '60s, because they knew everybody would jump on
them. Yet, today, we have the Latinas. 'Oh, you need a low-life or a whore or
some Latin holl?'—there we are."

At the same time, he acknowledges that his temporary relocation
was not entirely altruistic. "In reality, to work with Robert Redford
would allow me another step in the ladder in terms of visibility. If I do a
good job, I'm gonna be noticed."

This is Ruben Blades the politician, the man urging to please all
sides while holding onto his integri-

ty, vision and pride. It is a role he
has been gearing up for all his life. One of five children born to a musi-
cian father and a radio-actress moth-
er, he learned English from Elvis
Presley records, began to sing
American rock with Panamanian
bands—and meanwhile decided that
eventually he would run for public
office.

Following the 1964 Canal Zone
riot, which left 21 Panamanians and
three American soldiers dead in a

li


'ROUND RUBEN

Counterclockwise, from
top left: Blades won
critical raves as Rudy
Veloza, the singer who
forsakes his Latin roots,
in the 1985 film
"Crossover Dreams"; his
second album, "Escenas,"
followed, featuring a duet
with Linda Ronstadt; last
year he was the orderly
who became Richard
Pryor's sidekick in
"Critical Condition"; this
year he's a rural New
Mexican sheriff battling
developers in the Robert
Redford-directed "The
Milagro Beanfield War";
he sings salsa for migrant
workers in New Jersey;
and in Hollywood he talks
rock with Elektra
president Bob Krassow as
wife Lisa takes it all in.

cannot sit around to see what's
gonna happen with a film. I got other
things to do.

"I'm telling you, man—I'm glad I
got something else to do, because the
waiting around is . . ." His thought is
interrupted by the ringing of the
phone. It's his office. No news yet.
Blades harrumphs and waits some
more.

***

Well, we got a guy on the show
tonight," begins David Brenner,
"he's like a Renaissance man." Follow-
ing that auspicious intro, pianist
Oscar Hernandez pounds into "Mue-
vete (Move On)," a cooking number
from Blades' "Escenas" album that
calls for nations of the world to "fin-
ish off evil." Blades, looking sharp
in his black suit, starts singing. Slowly,
the other instruments come in — syn-
thesizers, percussion, harmony sing-
ers — until the song kicks into third
gear. Blades' shoulders start moving
with the music, the feet start tapp-
ing; he is transformed from a studi-
ous sophisticate into a sexy Latin
singer, and all eyes are on him. In
the darkness to the left of the stage,
Brenner, seated at his desk, bobs his
head with the music.

"I gotta ask you something,"
Brenner begins the interview. "One
of the ambitions I have in life is to
hear a Spanish song without the
word 'corazon' in it." That tame
question aside, the interview goes
smoothly. The audience is clearly on
Blades' side; in fact, when the taping
ends, they swarm the set, and Blades
patiently signs every last autograph.

Back in the dressing room, as
Blades is wrapping his black jacket
back in a plastic bag, a "Nightlife"
staffer pulls the "Ruben Blades" sign
from the door. "Do you want this?"
she asks.

"Oh, yes, Ruben will want to
keep that," says his wife Lisa, stuff-
ing it into her bag.

One is reminded of something
the singer/actor said earlier. "We're
talking, I'm telling you these things,
you're like, 'Ooh, wow, what a guy.'
The bottom line is you follow my
background. You're gonna be moving
on, and in three years or one year
from now, we'll see each other again.
And I won't have a pointed shirt and
shades and I won't be saying to you,
'Hey, David, baby, how are you?'
Let's do lunch! You can tell when
somebody changes like that."

But with his suave, articulate
charm, will we be able to tell? Ulti-
mately, that remains the puzzle of
Ruben Blades. A few days after the
Brenner taping, he shoots back to
L.A. to begin work on "Fatal Beauty-
ty" (yes, the call came through).
More work in Hollywood, but still
the talk of healing a South American
nation via a union of students and
workers. Will he pull it off? Like Ra-
ben Blades in his hotel room, we'll
have to wait for the answer.

David Browne writes the Monday
Sounds column for The News

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