Ruben Blades' political edge
NEWS: Canadian Jews and Palestinians make tentative steps toward sorting out their differences, and the sentencing in the Gayle Berzins abduction case is seen as a woman-shaped blow for justice.

COVER: Latin music kingpin Ruben Blades represents many things to many people, but his primary concern is remaining true to himself.

MUSIC: T.O. Music Notes talks to Patty Smyth, Maggi and Tanya Williams, celebrates with the Chiles and checks out some Cashew caps.

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Ruben Blades’ militant media

BY DARYL JUNG

Latin hero Ruben Blades is a man of many faces. Grammy-winning salsa rebel, international lawyer, Hollywood star, journalist and Latin American political activist. He claims he’s just a regular guy, don’t know what he can be called. But his activities show otherwise. In his own words, “war is about culture in the city.”

“We didn’t really round in the United States last year,” says a reserved Blades, from his home in New York. “Because we did an extensive tour in Europe — we went to eight countries. But it’s strange. We’ve been to Germany four times but Canada is the only country in this continent where we haven’t performed. So we’re very curious and look forward to meeting people there.”

Broken vow

Blades is touring to promote his third album on Elektra, Agua de Luna (Moons Water), his musical interpretation of short stories by Colombia-Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez. But he eagerly anticipates his next album, due out in the fall on, on which he will break his one of the early 60s — the LP will be his first in English.

“As an artist, I would like to say to audiences who don’t speak Spanish, ‘Get the hell out of here,’” says Blades. “Now the problem I have with that is unfortunately, today, whenever a Latin artist attempts to write an album in English, it is immediately considered an effort to abandon their audience and rush into this mad chase of the golden donuts on the other side.’

“The kind of pat off the back that I used to get from my contemporaries, this kind of working in Spanish while trying to find different avenues of music, I am not enough to write in English. And I’m very happy to say that the album is going to be a very good one.”

As it should be, with Elvis Costello’s Les Rita Rudie and Sting all contributing heavily to the writing process. Will this collaboration extend to appearances by these rock legends on the album?

“It will be hard to get Elvis over here to play on the record, but Lou’s always around here so he definitely is going to perform on it. I met Lou during the filming of the San City video. Since we are both New Yorkers, I see him and his sons are both characters with the same sense of humor, same kind of affinity there.”

Blades also shares a rebel image with Rock, musically and politically. But Blades does not consider himself a “political writer.”

“If I do not belong to any political party, I do not identify myself with any ideologies. This is not because I am afraid to be identified with anything — I’ve always been very outspoken. It is because there has been no political ideology that has been sufficiently clear or back or effective for me to embrace.”

“But as a Latin American, I am constantly aware of the consequences of politics in one’s land and culture. So I don’t see anyone from there who writes music cannot somehow be influenced by the political events that surround him.”

“I don’t use music as a way of forwarding some sort of prophylactic notion. I just have to reflect on the things that happen around me and present not only my own opinions but the view of the person in the street and whose life is being affected on all levels, not just the political — also their feelings and their need to love and their need for anger.”

“Life in the city. That’s what I like to write about.”

Clubs closing

The Latin music scene in New York, which launched Blades and has held back other would-be Latin Baretto and Willie Colon (pronounced co-men) could be a nightmare for a Blades composition. It is under severe economic pressure, musicians are working but dissatisfied, many Latin clubs are closing, and record labels are folding. It’s not such a good scenario here,” Blades adds. “But when I think about it, it’s so crazy. The music has so much to say, so many people depend on that release. I think it’s just a temporary phase, to be honest. There’s bound to be a resurgence.”

“There will be a new generation, from the young blood as always, it’s just a question of the younger generation. I’m not seeing something more than going through the motions. Something in brewing right now, and I’ll see the results in a short time.”

Blades regards his own popularity as a double-edged sword, but he agrees it could be a great boost to his fellow Latin musicians’ chances for success.

“One of the things that I have to be very careful about, is not to become the token Latino. I’m very aware of that possibility. Maybe some people would like to assume that role because of the increasing visibility, but I don’t want visibility at the expense of my character or my integrity. I try to keep the doors wide open so other people can go through them. I have to be careful not to become the only one doing it.”

“I’ve always just wanted to show that Latin music is so much more than just an escape form. There are so many nuances attached to it. So many people think of popular music as some form of lesser art manifestation.”

“Not only this, we managed to change that perspective somewhat, in the promotion the tours that have come out of necessity or success have been successfully faced by me. I have not changed my character because of the success, and I regard that as a personal triumph of which I am very proud. I look at all of the musical opportunities I have had with this band — to sort of look at our hearts as we play — and I regard it has been a wonderful experience.”

Legal learning

But Blades finds gratification in many other areas. He’s appeared in several films, including Critical Condition with Robert Perry, and this fall he’ll appear in two big productions, Richard Burton’s The Maggie Beavert Film, and Great Beauty with Whoopi Goldberg between shooting schedules, he decided to attend Harvard law school.

“I went there in 1974 and got a masters degree in international law. I’ve never practiced in the States, because I would have to go through the bar. But I never really planned to anyway. I just like the do things that interest me, and I felt that after so long without the discipline of academic teaching, I needed it to reinforce other areas of my life.”

“So I took two years off from music and went to school. I simply like to think in this manner. There is much more that I want to do.”

“It is the same, of course, with the movie roles. Not only is it part of my desire to try new things. It allows me the opportunity to express different forms of view and present new Latin American positions. That way I can dispel some of the misconceptions that exist there and abroad about Latin Americans. I simply like to tell the truth and do different things. I try to be true.”

Despite his continuing commitment to boosting the Hispanic image, Blades “alternate message” is a personal one.

“It is important for me to be known as someone who was not afraid to try. ‘In spite of the dark days of the times in which we live, there’s always the opportunity to create some light or work in that direction. I think it is a time to assume responsibility and to face life as opposed to escape from it.’

‘After all, things had probably been worse than somebody who wasn’t swallowed up by the trap of fame and nobody whom didn’t just get involved in music or movies as a way of satisfying their own fantasies. I think the morality and the visibility people get from music is a great vehicle.’

‘And despite what we do, especially in these times, can help at least to bring another perspective, or another opinion, or another col- se to a word that is in need of solu- tions.’

‘I think that I am there, I have time, I have more time to make the questions while I can.’

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