A little-known musician makes a star impression

By Ken Tucker

In a pop music universe in which the best-known music stars are teenage idols, Menudo (cookie-cutter Monkees) and slick crooner Julio Iglesias (Steve Lawrence with a good tailor), Ruben Blades is an odd man out. Although he lives in New York and is a highly esteemed salsa music star, Blades is almost completely unknown to American audiences.

This Panama-born singer and songwriter has just released his first album for a major pop music label, Elektra Records, "Buscando America" ("Looking for America") is one of the strongest albums of the year thus far. Unlike other ambitious salsa performers, whose idea of "crossing over" is to sing in English and to ape the blandest sort of American rock music, Blades sings in Spanish on "Buscando America" and is accompanied by his tempestuous, witty backup band, Sals del Sol (Six from the Tenements).

Blades' music is a constantly shifting mixture of rock, salsa, jazz, reggae and Afro-Cuban rhythms that is both exotic and dizzyingly pleasurable. Unlike many sophisticated lyricists, Blades understands that the best in pop music is even more important than carefully wrought phrases. Thus the best songs by this very socially conscious composer are extraordinary examples of sharp, snappy dance music which, upon closer listening, reveals barbed lyrics about a wide range of subjects. (The album cover of "Buscando America" prints the lyrics in both Spanish and English.)

Blades' method is clearest on the album's opening cut, "Decisiones." The song begins with a brief bit of creamy doo-wop harmonizing that immediately dissolves into a jaunty pop melody. Then Blades, in his thin, pleasantly nasal voice, begins reciting verses with the vivid details of short stories — about the fears of couple experiences over an unwanted pregnancy, a comic romp about infidelity and revenge; the last, muddled thoughts of a drunk driver before he smashes into a truck.

These unpleasant little tales are told by Blades in a dry, arch tone. The bubbling beat and chipper music swirl around his pessimism, and the effect is exhilarating. It is as if he's saying, "Life is one darn thing after another — joyous!"

"Blades' profound cynicism is balanced by beautiful, stirring anthems..."

"For his longtime fans, Ruben Blades is a pop idol whose fame rests on his musical experimentation and political commitment."

"Buscando America heralds the arrival of an important new voice."

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