SALSA'S RUBEN BLADES
WOMEN LOVE HIM, LATIN DICTATORS DON'T
Enrique Fernandez

REAGAN: THE SHOT HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD
Doug Ireland

FT. HUMP, THE BRONX: TALES POLICEMEN TELL
Ralph Gardner Jr.

THE SEXIEST MOVIE OF THE YEAR IS NOT 'POSTMAN'
Veronica Geng
NOT JUST SALSA'S

Ruben Blades is no exotic. He is a composer, musician, writer and politician. He’s got a vision, and it’s catching on.

Enrique Fernandez

In 1970 Pete Rodriguez made a special album that introduced a new singer who — a curious and strange phenomenon in the world of salsa — was the composer of his entire repertoire. The record was titled From Panama to New York. Pete Rodriguez introduces Ruben Blades, and on the cover, Rodriguez's hand, riding one of those convertibles so common to the album covers of that period, picked up on the road a blond adolescent whose accent was that of one of those middle-class boys who played the unbecoming rock of underdeveloped. The boy, however, did not do rock but salsa.

"Cuidado, que ahí viene Reagan!" "Watch out, Reagan's coming."

The club is jam-packed. Getting in wasn't easy. (In Rodriguez's words: "I made some arrangements with the woman in charge of the photograph here is already with the gay boys, with the members from other clubs and associations. Oh, yes, the gay upstarts."


Word was out that Ruben Blades was making one of his rare club appearances and everyone had turned out.

It is a few days before the Reagan inauguration — which explains why the singer is offering a warning in the middle of one of his more political songs. Between numbers, he patiently explains the meaning of what he has sung. And he makes soft-spoken pleas for Latin voter registration.

I recognize the gentle, careful phrasing, the pedagogical tone, the nonregional accent: it is the voice of the Latin American intellectual. Out of place in a salsa club. I'm thinking, when suddenly the voice changes to a funky funky, jazzy, lively tone, which I also recognize: it's the voice of the Latin American street.

It is the first time I have heard Ruben perform. Before meeting him a few months ago I knew him only from his records and from his reputation as a salsa rebel and nonconformist. Since then I had heard him sing in his home, in a bar, even in a college auditorium, as he sang alone, unselfconsciously, with the salsa soundtracks of a Brazilian movie festival. But never, until now, had I heard him perform maracas with Willie Colon's first-rate salsa band.

I had first gone to his apartment to interview him for a piece on the salsa scene because I knew he could be counted upon to be outspoken. Several hours later, I had been exposed to what one of his friends called: "a Ruben one man show."

To begin with, his background was unusual. This salsero was a Panamanian. His maternal grandfather was from New Orleans, his grandmother from Spain. They met in Cuba where their daughter would become a pianist and singer. On tour she married a Panamanian musician of West Indian and Colombian background.

Ruben's paternal grandmother, a Latin American suffragette, writer and artist, was an eccentric who practiced yoga, vegetarianism and spiritualism and who taught her favorite grandson the importance of art, education, social justice and personal independence.

It was clear to me from that first meeting that music was only one of Ruben's interests. He wrote fiction and journalism. He was working on the stage adaptation of his latest recording effort, Masina, Vida, a two-act musical saga on life in urban Latin America. He had film projects. He had political projects. He was debating whether to quit music and go back to Panama to practice law, in which he had been trained. Furthermore, he expressed that cultural presumption I admire in Latin America: the belief that the world's cultural patrimony is our hope.

And, of course he was a fine singer, a talented musician, charming, polite, handsome, friendly, down-to-earth. (Anything wrong with him? the reader asks: Why, yes, a surprisingly provincial taste in food.) Now, as I watch him perform for the first time, working the crowd through his music and through an unaffected, divinely nonjargony charm, I begin to see Ruben as the potential forger, in the amity of time, of the unforeseen consciousness of his race.

More than salsa's golden boy.

"Let's face it." says a Latin DJ, "Ruben's popularity, particularly with women, is due to the fact that he's a cute white boy." True. When Latin N.Y. magazine put Ruben on its cover a few months ago, the issue sold more copies than any other in the magazine's history. Quite the opposite result has been the case when major black salsa stars have graced the magazine's cover. White sells, black doesn't — a phenomenon that our DJ points out holds true for the entire magazine industry.

If white sells, black, according to the most deeply rooted musical myths, swings. In salsa, as in jazz and blues, the white musician must labor against the facile version of other words, society grants the black musician an intangible quality: soul. While it withholding the tangible reward of financial success, a reward reserved for the white musician, who, poor devil, will never have any soul.

Ironically, the "blond adolescent" who in 1970 climbed aboard the salsa conveyor was white only by disposition of that capricious god of the Caribbean, blind chance. Given his parents, a different roll of the genetic dice...
Ruben picks up the improvising again, ending with praise for those nonplastic people who work for a "unit-
ized America, the one Bolivar dreamt of." Here the
singer calls out for the band to take off, but not with
the usual calls, rather with the title of the album and the last
song, "Presente!" (Stir) exhortation to invest one's
energy in the future of all Latin America. And, while
the band drives the rhythm and the dancers to a frenzied
finale, Ruben begins a rollcall of Latin America countries,
answered by the crowd:

- "Puutaama!"
- "Presente!"
- "Puerto Rico!"
- "Presente!"
- "Mexico!"
- "Presente!"
- "Cuban!"
- "Presente!"

Hearing him sing it live, in front of a dancing, fist-
rising, present/ answering crowd, one can believe the
most Utopian slogan of the first years of the Cuban re-
volution, linking politics and music: Revolucion y
Pachangua! One of the last countries called, just as the

Where both Cuba's claim him as an ideologue. I prefer to see
him as a gifted man of letters, a master craftsman of
language, who succumbed to the great Latin American
temptation: the temptation of being a poet, chanters, that
told the poet who, having described that irresistible force of history in a poem as
statues of heroes sprung to life to seize him, became himself a hero cast in bronze.

The heroes have seized Ruben Blades. Clearly, his
songs are the most poetic in salsa. But music alone does
not make a great chapter in history, but also songs and performances. Ruben has used his privileged
standing and relative inveligibility in the salsa industry to
promote LIMA (Latin American Music Alliance), an or-
ganization that, although it is not precisely a union, does
perform some socialist functions. He has been looking
at how to extract some social profit from his
performances.

He attempted this at the Ochentera gig this winter: with
the help of Herman Badillo, Ruben planned to make voter
registration available at the club. The club owners were
too keen on the idea, but Badillo and Blades—
lawyers both, after the last fiasco have been the to allow
the registration next time. Fearing that club owners' reluctance
may still prevail, Ruben now plans to give a vote reg-
istration concert, planned to be at a stadium. Another
plan, yet to be tried, will call for the creation of
scholarship funds as part of his payment for foreign performances.

Ruben's politics is that of a nondescendiente progressive.
"If your ideas are progressive they'll accuse you of being a communist," he says, taking advice of the rhythmic
progressiva and communista. But in the narrow world of salsa, "socialism" is not deprecated, no matter how
moderate, can be seen as a dangerous radical.

No one, of course, will openly come out in opposition to
Ruben's politics. After all, who could be against vot-
ing, education, Latin unity? But the concerted
attacks are there. They will hurt him two ways, in that politics has no place in entertainment; three, that politics is not hip,
and, four, that Ruben is not sincere.

The power to the first is obvious: his politics has not hurt him within the politically claustrophobic world of salsa and it will not do so in the broader market,
where even leftist posturing has been tolerated, and, one
suspects, encouraged for publicity reasons. The second
option is irrelevant: it is as a society where an entertainer is now
President: the third one may have some validity in Ruben's case: his politics is not hip, he has no sympathy
for the devil, hasn't named an album after a Latin American
revolutionary group. But this will matter little because, to answer the last objection, he really is sincere.

The critic who saw the young Nrock in Ruben's open-
cover was right; the blend adolescent was a rockar, or at
least, it was one, who has had the advantage of a
career. Here was a musician who was bringing to salsa the
progressive, cosmopolitan, studied outlook of the rock
genres.

In Latin America, this spirit has too often led to the
bureaucratic rock of underdevelopment or to a forced esthetic
and political progressivism. It is a rare Latin artist who
can find the right formula for mixing the two and the
urge to moderate. Ruben has not done it yet, but if anyone can, he will.

In the world of salsa Ruben Blades is known as an
innovator, though, where his career, is perhaps not always
apparent. Take his biggest hit, "Pedro Navas,
also from the Ruben album, a narrative —in itself a
statement— about the exploitation of the man who
goes by that name ("Navas" means "blade") and
a storyteller. If the characters sound familiar, that's
because they're the same people who recorded by other artists in the Spanish-speaking world
in the 50's and 60's and who have been recorded
for a while there was plans to make it a film.

Ruben Blades is a one-man production machine,
refined, polished, comparable to a jazzman. His
mother had predicted

"The images, the verbal
explosions, the magical
realism, the liberated
power of the imagination.
Volume is consciousness.'
24  The New Yorker, April 1, 1983

maestra vida is flawed. the flaw lies in what one latin
and jazz aficionado calls the "overproduction syn-
drome," an excessive ambition to orchestration and
fullness. but at the heart of maestra vida are important
concepts: the vision of one latin american urban space
and one latin american song, the progressive stand on
social and sexual politics; the presentation of salsa as
total spectacle, not just dance music; the production of an
integrated piece, not just a collection of swinging tunes.
To be sure, ruben is not the first to try. these
have been salsa operas and salsa suites, but ruben
has politicized salsa, and the latin american new
current movement is politically committed and musically
experimental, but may be the first to succeed artistically
and commercially.
Sales have not been stupendous. but, as music critic
total success. maestra vida is a work whose success will only be apparent years from now.
in other words, maestra vida is not an instant hit, but
is slowly simmering classic. it is important to reserve
judgment until the stage version, now in preproduction, is
released. new york latin bands have been waiting to
make their mark on the new york musical stage. maestra vida
has more than a fighting chance to do it. ruben is determined
to do it right. nothing new, fresh.

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a few years ago, ruben blades attacked the notion of music
as entertainment, and said that they wanted to change the
scene of the world of music. but in the last few years,
as music critic robert oxman pointed out, the idea that a
singer can change the whole scene, has been questioned.
maestra vida shows that change can be done.

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manu chao's project for music in the arab world. it is a
political statement, and its success will depend on the
government's reaction. the album has been described
as "revolutionary," "progressive," "stirring." but the
success of the album has also been questioned. some
people have criticized the project as being too
cold, too intellectual, and not churning up the
dirt of the dirty politics of the arab world.

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