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RUBEN BLADES



BY RODRIGO SALAZAR

THE STORY OF RUBEN BLADES IS THE TALE OF THREE CITIES, A MAILROOM, AND A POTENT MIX OF POLITICAL AND MUSICAL UNREST. IT COULD BEGIN AT PANIA RECORDS, WHERE RAY BARRETO FOUND HIM IN THE MAILROOM AND OFFERED HIM A SINGING GIG. OR IT COULD START WITH HIS FATHER BEING FORCED INTO EXILE BECAUSE OF POLITICAL UPHEAVAL IN PANAMA. FOR OUR PURPOSES, THE STORY OF RUBEN BLADES BEGINS IN PANAMA CITY IN THE EARLY FIFTIES. THERE, ONE OF THE PEOPLE WHO WOULD MOST INFLUENCE HIS LIFE TAUGHT HIM TO READ AND WRITE BY THE AGE OF FOUR. ACCORDING TO RUBEN, HIS GRANDMOTHER WAS "ONE OF THE MOST EDUCATED PEOPLE THAT I EVER MET. SHE WAS ONE OF THE FIRST WOMEN TO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL IN PANAMA, WHEN THERE WAS NO UNIVERSITY AVAILABLE. SHE WAS A BIT OF AN ECCENTRIC IN THAT SHE HAD BEEN A VEGETARIAN IN THE 1930S. SHE PRACTICED YOGA, WROTE POEMS AND FOUGHT FOR A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO VOTE."

If you look at Ruben's career in law, music and movies, it's his grandmother's great spirit that guides him. "She told me about all kinds of things [going on] in the world. It's such a tremendous perspective to gain when you are so young." Ruben's father was in the Detectives State Corps of Panama in 1973 when Manuel Noriega was in power. His father's relationship with a group of Panamanians, who Noriega accused of attempting to assassinate General Omar Torrijos, forced the Blades family to flee to Miami. The only one who stayed behind was Ruben, who was getting his law degree. But the man who wrote "Pedro Navaja," a political song as significant as Grandmaster Flash's "The Message," doesn't need me to tell his story for him. Let's let this great storyteller start flowing:

Ruben Blades: I didn't wait to go to my graduation because I really wanted to join my family. I went to Miami, and in Miami things were very difficult because my family had to start from scratch. I wanted to help, so I called Fania up. They wouldn't record me, but they said there was a job in the mailroom [so] I went to New York. I started in the mailroom, and one day there was a need for a singer in the Ray Barreto Orchestra. Ray heard that I had been singing in Panama when I was younger. He went into the mailroom and auditioned me right there. I passed. He gave me a job in his band and that is how I started.

Rodrigo Salazar: What performers influenced your style of singing?

RB: I liked Cheo Feliciano and Ismael Rivera. I really liked The Beatles very much, and anything that came from Brazil. It has to do with the chords. [Brazilian] chords are not conceived as limited as they are in the Afro-Cuban traditional structure.

RS: What was it like to replace Hector Lavoe in Willie Colon's band?

RB: These are things that happened in 1975-76 ... 23 years ago. It's never easy to start from scratch. It was tougher on Willie than it was on me. I really don't pay that much attention to what people say. I pay attention to what I think is the correct thing to do. For me, it was an opportunity to sing. The band at that time was loved. It was difficult to have anyone leave. The same thing happened in 1982 when I left the Willie Colon group.

RS: How do you pronounce your last name?

RB: I say it both ways. My grandfather was English, so the name is Blades in terms of the correct pronunciation, but I don't make too much emphasis on it ... people call me "Blad-es" also, and I don't have a problem with that.

RS: How did you come up with the idea for the Disco beginning for the song "Plastico"?

RB: The reason that I used that was that [Disco] was the thing that everyone was listening to and that seemed to be the point of departure for people in Latin America. I always thought that you can listen to things from other cultures ... but I hesitate to embrace things in replacement of other things ... Disco music became the music of choice and my position was to reject that. That's why I put it at the beginning of the song.

RS: So it's a commentary on the artificial nature of Disco?

RB: The music was fun. The attitude of people was one of materialism, and I didn't like that at all.

RS: You ran for president of Panama in 1994. Any thoughts on the political situation of your country?

RB: I think things are gonna get better. I believe that we are in a process of revolution in terms of democratic institutions. I have tremendous faith in my country. We have less than 3 million people and we have a very high degree of literacy in Panama. We also have a very young population. I really think we are going to be able to create a great society there.

Of his run for the presidency, Ruben has said, "At no moment did I think I

was going to become president, but if I would have, it would not have been through a desire for power. What we attempted was to bring to the fore the existence of an important sector of the Panamanian population that disagrees and cannot identify with the policies applied to them. My political campaign fully achieved that purpose."

There hasn't been a wall erected that has been able to hold Ruben back. With his intelligence and good nature, he (pardon the pun) builds a canal to get to his destination. His mentality is, if he can't get a singing gig off the bat (as with Fania), he'll just find a way to be in the right place at the right time when the opportunity comes. If he can't be president of Panama, maybe he can play a president in a movie. Ever since 1980, Ruben has been acting in movies. His credits include *Mo Better Blues*, *The Super* and *The Devil's Own*.

RS: You were recently cast in the role of Mexican painter Diego Rivera...

RB: Tim Robbins wrote and directed a movie called *The Cradle Will Rock*, and I am part of the ensemble that includes Vanessa Redgrave, Susan Sarandon, amongst others. One of the stories that is being presented is of an incident which occurred between Diego Rivera and Nelson D. Rockefeller in the thirties. Rockefeller commissioned Rivera to do a mural,

but it was jackhammered out of the wall because Rockefeller did not approve of Rivera's vision for the mural. The movie is about the freedom of expression movement in the United States ... I also worked on another movie, *All the Pretty Horses*, with Matt Damon, Penelope Cruz and Miriam Colon. It was directed by Billy Bob Thornton.

Tiempos, Ruben's new album, is best served chilled with a fine Argentinean wine (I recommend Concha Y Toro, 1994). The mellowness of Classical music permeates the proceedings, but the ritmo is not lost; it's more like reinterpreted. His songwriting is still tight, and the song structures are exquisite. Ruben's definition of rhythm has always had as much to do with music as with the way people live their lives. From the Brazilian feel of "Sicarios," in which the berimbau drives the rhythm, to the Charanga-esque "Creencia" (where

Blades even samples himself!), *Tiempos* is as classic as the sound of a Stradivarius.

RS: Tell us about *Tiempos*.

RB: The thing with this record is that I am working with a group of young men from Costa Rica [Editus]. They have a musical training that is based on European Classical music, but they are also very aware of rhythms from Central and South America and the Caribbean. I am going into a different side of exploration musically, because for years I dedicated myself to utilizing rhythms that were pretty much Caribbean and Afro-Cuban with tinges of Rock and Jazz from New York City. But now we are going to bring the contributions of European music to America, especially Celtic music. In the next record, we will have more of an emphasis on Celtic music and Indian music. This album is totally different ... because of the participation of these guys [and] the kinds of instruments that we are using. The fact that they are instrumentalists just takes the visuals that are produced by the lyrics somewhere else in terms of your spirit.

RS: How did you hook up with Editus?

RB: I finally got to see them in Costa Rica, but I heard of them for the first time in Panama in 1994. Some friend of mine had a CD ... as soon as I heard them I knew that I could work with them.

The exchange of ideas that Ruben shared with his grandmother so many years ago in Panama City is something that he continues with us today. It's a dialogue based on love, but also based on the reality of the situations that we face daily as citizens of this world. I leave you with a line from his new song, "Vida": "Si en tu vida no hubo ritmo, en tu muerte no habra clave." 

