

MARK MEHLER

# ALL COME TO LOOK FOR AMERICA

Ruben Blades in the land of the free, the home of the brave

Columbus Avenue is a street running through what is commonly referred to as Manhattan's "burgeoning" upper west side. It is "burgeoning" because swanky, high-tech clothing stores and restaurants are moving in, driving rents skyward and driving out long-established neighborhood shop owners who quietly provided vital services for the area until they could no longer compete for space with hipper-than-thou emporiums selling only *atmosphere*, not good food or clothing that might have some value beyond, say, next week.

One of the anachronisms on the Avenue is the Tap-A-Keg bar, a decidedly low-tech establishment (its sign proclaims it "A Hell of a Joint") with Latin music on the jukebox and no quiche on the menu. In a delicious irony, the Tap-A-Keg turns out to be the favorite watering hole of a 35-year-old man who may one day be the president of Panama but is right now a preeminent Latin singer-songwriter who's attempting to bring his socially-conscious music to an American audience. Suffice it to say that Ruben Blades' view of the world's precarious state is as concerned as Columbus Avenue's is frivolous.

But then, most of the carpetbagging shopkeepers here wouldn't know what it's like to scrounge on the street for bedding.

You might say the adult education of Ruben Blades began when he went to the mattress. Almost a decade ago Blades was a newly-arrived Panamanian immigrant, a 26-year-old attorney who had given up his legal practice and come to New York to play salsa music for the masses.

What he found was subsistence employment in the mailroom of Fania Records and a "horrible" little flat on the upper west side, where every night he slept on a cold wood floor and battled a crushing loneliness the likes of which he never imagined when he left his homeland.

Salvation came in the form of a weathered old mattress, discarded and left on the street for the next morning's round of garbage collection.

"What I really needed most at that time was a bed," Blades recalls. "I looked down from my second floor window and couldn't believe what I was thinking of doing. In Panama, there's *no way* I'm going

nation before going solo in 1983.

But success didn't dull Blades' fear for the fate of his troubled homeland, a great deal of which is recounted on his stunning new album, *Buscando America* (*Searching for America*). Released by Elektra, the LP might well become the first hard-core salsa record to find a sizeable U.S. audience, if the label can master the intricacies of Latin crossover. At least Blades has delivered on his end: *Buscando America* spans the spectrum of the Latin experience in the New World through a mix of charged Dylanesque poltipop, barrio soul and soaring poetry. Should this experiment succeed, the implications for pop music are enormous.

"Latin Americans have to have a form of communication that talks about being Latin-American and not American Latin; that doesn't view ultimate success in Las Vegas terms; that addresses the rage and hopes of a people completely deprived of a voice in the media," says Blades. "What is there now? 'Owner of a Lonely Heart' is a Latin riff, Latin Hustle, establishment bullshit. You know why I put a doo-wop intro on 'Decisiones' (the first track on *Buscando*)? It reminds me of what happened to us as a people. In



"You tell it like it is, you make trouble"

to go down there and have my neighbors see me carry off something that somebody else *threw out*. You don't do that. But this city was teaching me a new reality. It was telling me to cut out the bullshit I brought over here and go down to that street and *survive*. I was deeply humbled, but I was also growing up."

With the new bed commenced phase two of the professional and spiritual odyssey of Ruben Blades, who proceeded to leap from the Fania mail room job to a spot in esteemed Latin band leader Ray Barretto's group. In 1977, after two years with Barretto, Blades joined Willie Colon and the Fania All-Stars—the top Latin band, bar none—as a co-leader, and racked up four gold albums and a Grammy nomina-

Panama we looked to the U.S. as the sun that would lead us away from darkness. We thought America was the father, but it was really Hollywood, nothing. All that time, we never really looked at ourselves, and we stayed undeveloped and without respect, while we got ripped off. Once and for all, let's give Latins a chance to think about who they are."

Such talk is heretical in the present climate of Latin music, so it comes as no surprise that Blades is widely regarded in business circles as a troublemaker. He's presently bogged down in a quagmire of federal lawsuits relating to his previous nine-year association with Fania Records. "You tell it like it is, you make trouble," Blades says forcefully, his voice rising. "I

have years of legal training, so am I going to be a dumb shit? In Spain the writer's association tells me I've sold 268,000 records, and the record company says I sold none and they overpaid me thousands of dollars in royalties. What is going on?"

With *Buscando* Blades violates yet another cardinal rule of the Latin scene by getting political. His songs deal with death squads, state-supported terrorism and bankrupt foreign policies, as conveyed in a series of wrenching personal vignettes, such as the story of a mother's search for her family (in "Desapariciones," or "Disappearances"), all of whom have vanished without a trace, leaving her to ask, "Where do people who disappear go to?"; the horrific recollection of the cold-blooded shooting of a priest and an altar boy ("El Padre Antonio y el monaguillo Andres," or "Father Antonio and the Altar Boy, Andres"); and most moving of all, the title song, a cry for the United States to live up to the vision of its founding fathers, even though "Those afraid of truth have made her disappear."

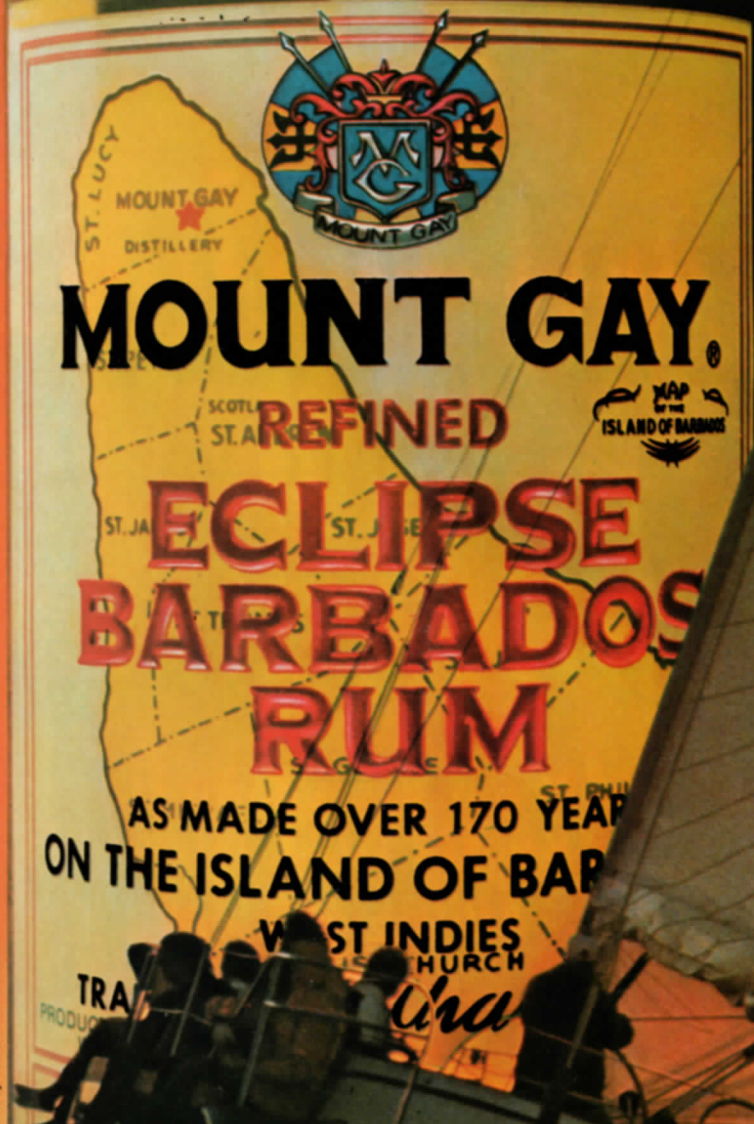
Blades' concern for social justice was cultivated by his paternal grandmother, who raised him while the parents worked to support a large family. "My grandmother was the most exceptional woman I've ever known. One of the first women to graduate high school in Panama; a free spirit, a yogi, a vegetarian, a spiritualist. Whatever I am or will be is due to her."

His eyes opened, Blades began questioning instead of accepting. Riots in 1964 left a couple of dozen Panamanians dead, and Blades found himself believing that "the same army that licked the Nazis was kicking our ass." He followed the civil rights movement here and wondered "whether the United States was like we saw it in Technicolor." As a form of protest, he stopped singing in English.

Prodding from his grandmother coupled to his own growing awareness of a world without order prompted Blades to enter law school; upon graduation he went into private practice. Two years later he decided "pop music is where I'm needed. In Panama I was just another lawyer."

Eventually Blades will return to Panama to reclaim his birthright in long lost love. Current Panamanian public opinion polls place him third in personal popularity among his countrymen, behind the late President Omar Torrijos and boxer Roberto Duran. But there is work to do in preparation for the trip home. This fall Blades will enter Harvard to study for a Master's degree in international law. "I need to re-establish my credentials as a professional before I go back," he explains. "Right now Panama is going through an election with no strong leadership. 50 percent of the people are 21 or younger. I want to be part of the political process someday. Because I have this education, I don't think I'll be denied a place in government if I can earn it." ○

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