The HOT Issue
Starring Lisa Bonet
1988's Hottest People, Places & Things
"Out of Touch" is funky beatnik fun with an edge of doom: what at first seems to be simply a goofy fashion statement about "just a regular guy with a regular dress problem" ends up as a warning ("Your neighbors could be murderers/For all that you know"). Then it scoots away with a wailing sax and pounding drums, leaving you both hummed and provoked. In an age of musical headcheese, the Jazz Butcher has delivered a hefty serving you can chew on.

— David Handelman

Blades's real-life crossover dream. His first English-language album in a career that spans two decades, it features songs written with or by Elvis Costello, Lou Reed and Sting, mostly set to state-of-the-art synth-heavy arrangements. Such are the ingredients for your typical radio-ready Eighties pop album, but Blades — the Harvard-educated lawyer, actor and salsa star who preaches against injustice in the Americas — is more ambitious than that. He now wants to educate as well as entertain, a tricky task that makes earlier Blades efforts like his two-volume 1980 salsa "opera" Maestra Vida or last year's Agua de Leche (based on the stories of Gabriel García Márquez) seem like cakewalks.

Much of the album finds Blades exploring familiar territory — a graphically sketched barrio murder ("The Hit"), death squads ("In Salvador") and the general theme of loss of control over one's life that has pervaded his work. He's also tossed in up-to-the-minute topics like Oliver North (who's parodied in the sarcastic "Ollie's Doo-Wop") and AIDS ("The Letter," one of the regrettable few pop songs to deal with the disease). Throughout, Blades's singing is relentlessly earnest and sturdy, if at times overly enunciated.

Coproducers Tommy LiPuma and Carlos Rios too often resort to sleek cosmopolitan funk. (Blades's longtime band, Siel del Solar, appears on only one track.) "The Letter" resembles an innocuous TV theme song, and Sting's languorous "I Can't Say" is flattened by a banal guitar solo from Rios.

Not surprisingly, it is the work with Costello and Reed that is the heart and soul — if not the most commercially viable part — of Nothing but the Truth. "The Miranda Syndrome," Blades's collaboration with Costello, is a driven piece of salsa to which Costello supplies acoustic guitar and the usual jumbled metaphors and images ("He's holding up a bank, like Harpo Marx"). The Reed-Blades songs are even more arresting. Reed's fuzz-edged, grinding guitar adds an urban tension to "The Calm Before the Storm," a sort of contemporary "Bad Moon Rising," and "Hopes on Hold" manages to strike a balance between Blades's idealism and Reed's cynicism.

It is the third Reid collaboration, "Letters to the Vatican," that bears out the full promise of Nothing but the Truth. It tells the story of a disconsolate bar patron who relies on Sixties songs for hope and who "doesn't look a day over sixty-five, although she's really twenty-nine." The result is not only Blades's most impassioned singing on the record but also the true salsa-rock merger the album keeps promising. "We just hold her, until the shaking stops," Blades sings, "because her heart says what only the heart knows." Judging from the best moments on Nothing but the Truth, the same could be said of Rubén Blades himself.

— David Browne

Although the title suggests just a folk band (it's taken from a song by soul singer Johnnie Taylor), it combines smoky blues and a healthy dose of rock.

The instrumentals are a welcome change, there's no bass, prominent playing root third part, while Jimi Hendrix blows out spectacular harmonies. Bill Graves' "Shadows" is one of the few things called a "waltz" that sounds like an easy rhythm. This group's sound is a throwback to the '60s: group's sound is not what you'd expect to hear from a band that's been together for years. The lyrics are mostly about love, and thoroughly about fresh, when they address themes as low-tar as "Need Money," "An Honest Job," "Trail of Tears," "Necessity," "Everyday," and "I Can't Stop Loving You." Think of a born-again gospel singer dogging along in a bar. Mark Sessions' vocal takes center stage.