Blades knows crossover dreams can become crossover nightmares.

RUBÉN BLADES'S LATIN REVOLUTION

By David Fricke

HERE WAS THIS GUY I KNEW, RAFAEL BLADES shouts as he strolls briskly in New York's Columbus Avenue, trying to make himself heard over the daily stampede of taxis and delivery trucks. "He worked as a male nurse, was a really good singer. He had talent. But he wanted to cross over to the other side and have a good life, you know?"

Well, he made it. He signed with a major label, the whole pop thing, and after a while, he moved to Los Angeles. The word was that he was doing real well. A couple of years later, someone asked me, 'Did you hear about Rafi?' I said, 'Yeah, I hear he's doing real well out in California.' The guy said, 'No, Rafi's dead.'"

Blades pauses briefly at a street corner, looking solemnly up at the bright midday sun through his black wraparound shades. "It turned out his manager had taken out a million-dollar insurance policy on him. That's the kind of thing that can happen when you cross over. That's what can be waiting for you on the other side."

Crossing over is a subject Rubén Blades knows all too well. As a mailroom clerk and a struggling songwriter at Fania Records in New York in the mid-Seventies, he saw some of Latin music's biggest names and greatest talents gaze hungrily at the distant glitter of mainstream pop success while they battled daily to defend their hard-won stardom on the highly competitive, financially exploitative salsa scene. A decade later, in the 1985 movie Crossover Dreams, Blades played an ambitious Hispanic musician named Rudy Veloz, who swallows the crossover bait and trades in his girlfriend, his manager and his Latin-music heritage for an illusory shot at the Billboard Hot 100.

Veloz, Blades explains, was a composite portrait of those real-life Latin musicians who had, for better but mostly worse, made that trip to the other side. "What we were saying was success and happiness are not achieved by crossing over. Your life is not going to be any easier. You just bring your problems with you."

Ironically, Blades himself is the most notable exception to that rule. At thirty-
eight, the Panamanian singer is one of salsa's reigning sultans, an international superstar whose audience extends from the asphalt barrio of New York's Spanish Harlem down through the villages and urban tenements of Miami and Central America and into the jungle heart of Colombia and Venezuela. Yet since the 1984 release of his critically acclaimed major-label debut, Buscando América ("Searching for America"), Rubén Blades has made the trip to the other side and back with increased frequency and impressive results.

Blades has recorded with Lou Reed and Linda Ronstadt, toured with Joe Jackson and protested apartheid with a million-dollar cast of rockers and rappers on "Sun City." Last summer Blades represented the Latin quarter with his riveting performance of the human-rights anthem "Muevete" ("Move On") at Amnesty International's all-star benefit concert at Giants Stadium, in New Jersey. And this year he hopes to record his first-ever English-language LP with assistance from such top-drawer lyricists as Elvis Costello, Paul Simon and Bob Dylan.

Blades has also established major beachheads in Hollywood and in Ivy League. As a fully qualified member of the bar in Panama, Blades recently took a year off from music to earn a master's degree in law from Harvard University. After his graduation, in 1985, he filmed Critical Condition with Richard Pryor. Robert Redford has since cast him in the pivotal role of a seedy Mexican American sheriff trapped between ruthless white real-estate developers and a Hispanic community in the forthcoming adaptation of John Nichols' novel The Misadventure of Beanfield War. A movie with Whoopi Goldberg is also in the works.

Blades's success in gringo showbiz is unprecedented in salsa circles, especially since he continues to record his own songs in his native tongue (he includes English translations on the LP sleeves). Traditionally the best a Latin musician could hope for was a novelty hit, like Ray Barretto's 1962 million-seller "El Wanussi." Joe Caba's 1966 smash "Bang Bang" or Santana's popular rock-up of Tito Puente's "Oye Como Va." But Blades has seduced Anglo audiences with his mellifluous singing, charismatic stage presence (imagine a hip-grinding Springsteen with a mustache and a Spanish accent), literate, politically outspoken songwriting and the jazz expertise of his crack electro-salsa ensemble, Seis del Solar ("Six from the Tenement"). In a white pop world overpopulated with cheap Latin stereotypes, Rubén Blades has crossed over with his sound and vision intact.

It has been, in some ways, a costly victory. Top salsa promoter Ralph Mercado claims that Latin attendance at recent Blades concerts in New York has been down. "The more professional people dig his music now more than the common salero guy," says Mercado, "because he's moved a little bit away from the rhythm and salsa and he's putting more electronics in his music."

Journalist and television reporter Pablo Guzman, a longtime friend of Blades's, admits there is "a strong element among Rubién's fans in the Latin community who are worrying, 'Boy, I hope we don't lose him.'"

One former associate, Crossover Dreams director León Icacho, bluntly accuses the singer of deserting his Latin brethren. "Rubén Blades has become a Rudy Veloz of sorts, but worse," he snaps, "because Rudy Veloz had to return to the barrio. Rubén doesn't. He's let everyone down. He's burnt every bridge he's crossed."

Blades accepts such criticism with the stoic calm of someone who's heard it all before. "Do you know how many times I was told I wouldn't work here?" he remarks with a sly smile, knocking back a lunch-time glass of Dry Sack in an Upper West Side bar after his Columbus Avenue constitutional. "I'd present a song and these guys would look at me and go, 'That song is too long. And what is this theme? Why are you writing about these things? People want to dance, they want to forget."

"I want to integrate the music," says Blades, "to end this nonsense, this racist fallback. Black music radio, white-music radio, Latin-music radio — it's another form of racism. When they try to get a certain audience, they are ultimately excluding people. Music is not exclusive. It's inclusive."

"The other thing is my own example. Because I make a movie with Redford, does that mean I can't go to El Corso [a Latin dance hall in Manhattan], that I'm dealing with my musicians differently? If I bump into a guy on the street and he says, 'Qué pasa, Rubén?' does that mean I don't say, 'Qué pasa?' back? Do I turn my back? I don't do that. So whatever criticisms come, come from people who don't have arguments."

The greatest argument for Blades's integrity is his songwriting. The techno-beat of Seis del Solar's twin synthesizers and the sensual propulsion of its percussion section are a radical departure from the grunting trombones and
Blades's latest LP, *Agua de Luna* ("Moon Water") — a musical adaptation of eight short stories by the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez — takes his lyrical animation of Latin American spirit and suffering a dramatic step further. Through the Nobel laureate's often comic surrealism and profound faith in the moral fiber and emotional resilience of his race, Blades addresses the essential need for Latin America to reinvent itself in the face of its own internal apathy and of the facto U.S. imperialism. "Isabel," based on Márquez's "Monologue of Isabel Watching It Rain in Macando," combines the cleansing image of falling rain with new hope for the future, as embodied in the pregnant Isabel's unborn child. In "No Te Duerma" ("Don't Fall Asleep"), adapted from the story "Bitterness for Three Sleepwalkers," he equates the mysterious illness of a young woman with "the unconscious state of Latin America." Where *Buscando América* and *Escenas* examined the Latin condition through contemporary headlines and real-life suffering, *Agua de Luna* is much like Márquez's own stories — a trip into Latin America's tortured soul.

"It's an inside look," says Blades, who counts Márquez among his closest friends. "Behind every military coup in Latin America, behind every civilian dictatorship, lies civilian responsibility. We allowed it to happen. We did not look inside, we did not act from within. We voted and then went home.

"In 'Bitterness for Three Sleepwalkers,'" he continues, "I don't know if Gabriel ever considered the possibility of that story being interpreted as a cry against insanity or a cry against the state of sleepwalking in Latin America today. In the context of his work, though, I don't think he will be angry about it. As a writer, you can only do so much. Sometimes, though, you hit on some kind of universal truth that spreads into so many different areas.

Blades usually pinch a few nerves and steps on a couple of toes every time he hits on a universal truth. In Miami, out-
like Julio Iglesias and myself," he argues, "is that I'm not coming here to capitalize on what's hip. Nor do I have any illusions of turning myself into Wham! or Bami or whatever. Nor do I have to be coached. I have a musical background that is inclusive of pop and rock as well as Latin. I went through that process like anybody here in America."

The January 1964 Canal Zone riots, which left twenty-one civilians dead, temporarily chilled Panamanian enthusiasm for Yamují culture, and the fifteen-year-old Blades quickly developed a voracious appetite for Latin sounds, particularly the high-energy fusion of locomotive Cuban percussion and Dorssey-style big-band-bluster that in the early Seventies came to be known as salsa ("sauce" or "spice"). While studying law at the University of Panama, Blades performed with local Latin groups. He cut an album with one of those groups in 1968, and he was offered a singing job with Joe Cuba's band, which he turned down to finish school.

In 1969, a student riot caused authorities to close the school, and Blades took the year off, venturing to New York and recording De Panama a Nueva York with Pete Rodriguez (Blades wrote the lyrics to all but one of the songs). He seemed poised for a major musical career, but when the school reopened, he went back to Panama to complete his law studies. When Blades returned to New York in 1974 — lyrically charged by the political events at home, the influence of pop songwriters like Bob Dylan and Paul Simon and his own reading of Kafka, Faulkner and Hemingway — record companies repeatedly turned down his material. He relied on his shipping-room salary at Fania Records and temporary singing jobs to pay the rent until trombonist Willie Colón offered to take a chance on Blades and his songs.

"The melodic structures were more interesting to me. They were more Pan-American," Colón says. "In those days, there was this real Cuban fever. Everything had to be like reliving this frozen legend. If you deviated from that, you got a lot of flak. I was kind of lonely out there, and when I met Rubén, who was of like mind, it was really a great help to me."

Their collaboration was a fruitful one. Their late-Seventies album Siembra is considered to be the biggest-selling LP in salsa history. At one point in their six-year career together, Colón and Blades had five songs in the Venezuelan Top Ten. After they split up in 1982, Blades — brimming with self-confidence — formed his own group, determined to pursue his musical and political vision.

But the same progressive qualities in his music and songwriting that have attracted a new, young audience to his records and concerts have turned off some hard-core salsa fans. "There are people who like the fact that he is a songwriter who is charismatic and has a political message," observes journalist Enrique Fernández. "But the fans that he had when he was doing dance music with Willie Colón, those fans have gone by the wayside. Those are probably also the fans that didn't like the fact that he was doing political stuff, or cared little about it."

At the same time, salsa is, in a way, an aging music. Blades is one of its youngest stars. "The salsa business has been steadily losing its youth," says Izzy Sanabria. "You can't expect Latin youths, eighteen or nineteen years old, to be following the old-time Latin musicians."

Blades's dilemma then is twofold: how to reenergize salsa for young American-born Latinos already hip-hopping to the latest rap sounds without completely severing his strong roots in the music's Afro-Cuban traditions; and how to maintain his cross-over momentum without becoming, in his words, "the Ricardo Montalban of the Eighties." He hopes to accomplish the former with an album called Antecedent, featuring standard salsa trombones. The proposed English-language collaboration LP — which he plans to release under the name Panama Blades — could be a major score on both fronts. "I am not going to become the flavor of the hour," Blades insists. "But I want people to acknowledge the possibilities of a Latin artist fully — meaning we can do English, too. We were raised with rock & roll. We were raised with the U.S. culture banging in our heads. I think people in the States don't know that. In general, they think we don't have any understanding of the culture. And the only way you can bring that about is to sing in their own language."

"It's taken Rubén all the time I've known him to come to a point where he's finally going to wrestle with English in terms of his music," Pablo Guzman observes. "He was always adamant about doing it in Spanish as a part of his nationalism thing. I told him that was bullshit nationalism if you're going to work here. First of all, half the Puerto Ricans here don't speak Spanish. The younger generations are losing it. Thank God, there's a (Cont. on 158)
Pretty much insult everything and everybody,' says the Beasties.

From 22] seders he’s had,”

Elvis’s flower-laden tombstone stands in silence. Finally, after all the hoopla, the boys can say it.

"What was it the guy sang that word 'Flap'?"

Graceland, the Beasties are and photographed by a fan Mail, Slatyon, 18, from Forest Innas. The Boys can tell Slay his shirt proclaims that is the most INSANE B-BOY.

Their seemingly RICH-BOY world, the Beastie Boys were fair-er it was only cleaning up. "Boy more money, I'm happy boy. I figured I’d spend it on drugs. I didn’t do the only way to make more. I made about $100 a week. I thought I was in the big leagues. But that’s what I said until recently he is the super of his current and Brooklyn. Of course, they do publication that Diamond had milk from the same truck that I didn’t have to mention that CBS had given a Ferrari and that they don’t want it. Such banter is a bit; they seem tired of being

Beastie twenty-four

just this quality that they are

to their surprising such people are ready for a can laugh at themselves, everything,' Diamond says. They with all this serious bullshit — you know, Live Aid, Egg Aid and Shade Aid. It’s all, it doesn’t have any sense of itself at all.”

have trouble with charges that exist or a bad influence. "We

insult everything and every-

such says. "Everything on the boys record is joking around.

gonna seem if we suddenly

ink a lot of beer, but don’t you

are going to drive, ‘cause you’re in an accident and die." The runs on the road made Yauch at the plot of Fourneau — about best parents forbid them to was not as ridiculous as he’d

"When we say, ‘Suck my brain, it’s a stupid thing it’s like nothing the kids are led to say in school or in front parents.

"The Beasties seem uncomfortable anyone’s heroes. "What I hope people like about us," says Diaz-

mond, "is that we’re three idiots onstage having a good time, drinking beer and saying rhymes. Hopefully everybody in the audience thinks, ‘That’s cool. I could do that. I don’t like the thought that they say, ’I saw the Beastie Boys last night, and they’re mega-stars. I’m a lot happier when the kids who come back to or the hotel try to give us tapes of what they’ve done, instead of just getting an autograph.

Still, they are celebrities; Horovitz’s relationship with Molly Ringwald — initiated when he gave her the phone number to the composer of her upcoming movie, The Pick-Up Artist — has even made the gossip columns. Yauch remains unpressed with the whole affair. "The guy hangs out with Molly a little less," Yauch says, "next thing you know he’s watching Pretty in Pink on TV all the time like there’s no tomorrow. The fucking dude: we went to New York for two days and he went to L.A. to party with her. Horovitz is checking out on the whole band! He’s a pussy, right? Tell her to come to New York!"

The spotlight makes them nervous. "We all feel we have so much weight on our shoulders," says Diamond, "because everything we do from now on has to be better than anything we’ve done, and it’s up to us. Most R&B artists probably just say, ‘Okay, now we’re really successful, we’re going to get the best writers and producers.’ Our next album is going to be us and Rick again.”

The Beastie Boys haven’t written any songs for the follow-up album yet, but they do have plans to buy a building and put in apartments for each one of them, along with a recording studio, a pool, a half pipe for skateboarding, a Wiffle Ball stadium and a disco.

They are also overseeing their much-heralded
tour, Sacred Stupid (formerly Sacred Shitless), which is set to film this summer, following a European and Japanese

The Boys hired a friend from New York, Tom Cushman, 21, to help write the film. "It’s a lot of people running around with no clothes on,” says Cushman. “They kept warning me not to make it too cerebral, so I watched a lot of Three Stooges.” Cushman, who has completed three years at Columbia University, is on the tour as an onstage beer tosse and sometime musician. In two cities, when Fishbone, the warm-up band, had to cancel, Cushman and the Beasties donned novelty-shop costumes

and went on as a heavy-metal band called Trip Hammer. They enjoyed it.

"Next tour," Diamond says, "we might actually play instruments.”

After the Memphis gig, the Boys are particularly wiped out, partly from having spent the previous night in the bus bunk on the road from Louisville. In the dressing room, Tom Cushman strums an acoustic guitar, and he and the three Beasties sing a somber version of — would you believe? — "Ramblin’ Man," though, since they don’t know

all the words, they have to mumble most of the verses. Then there’s a brief, almost poignant silence; you can see in their tired faces the three kids behind the strutting façade. Then Horovitz flips on the boom box, playing reggae full blast.

Success hasn’t changed the Beastie Boys. Just ask Dave Seiken. “They’ve never been really nice guys," he says.

"So it’s not like they’re famous, now all of a sudden they’re dicks. They’ve always been dicks.”

Ruben Blades

[Cont. from p.40] fight to keep it alive, but if you want to communicate with the greater society, this is the lingua franca.

The Panama Blades record will also be important in Hispanic terms because, Blades feels, “It will allow me to be dealt with, not like an oddity but an equal. That is very important in terms of Latin America, to be able to go back and say, ‘In their field, we did well and we are back here again — by choice!’

When Ruben Blades returns to live in Panama permanently with his new wife, the actress Lisa Lebenson — something he hopes to do by the end of this year, schedule permitting — he will not be returning as Mr. Entertainment. Awarded with his Harvard degree, Blades plans to apply his previous legal experience in Panama and his years of intense civic self-education to a pragmatic social and political program. "My life is a cycle that began in Panama," Blades says proudly, "and it will close there.

His personal political ambitions, he is quick to add, have been blown out of proportion by the Latin and American media. Several years ago he was asked about his hopes for public office in Panama, whether he actually aspired to be president. Blades replied, "Why couldn’t I? Because I’m a musician, I can’t be president.”

Today, Blades admits he isn’t sure exactly what function he can serve at home. "I don’t know my role is going to be, but I know I have one."

That combination of personal uncertainty and emerging future vision was evident in his master’s thesis at Harvard, according to Frederick E. Snyder, the assistant dean for international and comparative legal studies at the university’s law school.

"It was full of very abstract general political theory — the relationship between law and politics, tracing it from Aristotelian times through eighteenth-century Latin American writers," says Snyder. "But toward the end of the paper, he tried to flush out the implications of his ideas, incorporating an enlightened legal philosophy in a country like Panama for its future development culturally, economically and socially. The paper did have a spin on it at the end.”

The spin Blades wants to put on Panama’s destiny is based on his own refusal to align himself with any of the country’s existing political parties. He intends to create a nonpartisan network of students and workers to address local problems and needs, to recruit young university and professional talent frustrated by the muck and mire of the Panamanian bureaucracy. The next step, he says, would be "to go for mayor or governor and work with that infrastructure.”

"It’s a confident, street-level coalition can work," he said after he visited his family in Panama City shortly after he graduated from Harvard, Blades went to a hotel bar with a friend for a celebratory drink. In the man’s room, Blades noticed out of the corner of his eye a young man in a hotel uniform sweeping the floor. Without even looking up at him, the young man asked, "Did you graduate?"

"Blades says yes and the young man turned around and offered his hand in congratulations.

"I was so hungry," Blades laughs, "because I was peeping and holding my dick. But he said, ‘No, estoy bien, we’re men, it’s okay. ’We shook, and he said to me, ‘That diploma is our diploma. You got the diploma for all of us, man, and I’m really proud of that.’”

When Blades went back out to the bar, he ran into three lawyers that he knew in his old college days. "They asked me, ‘When is the next album coming out? Play for us,’ I was just the salsa singer. When they heard about Harvard, they didn’t have the character to deal with it. They ran away.

"That’s where I can make a difference. Because we don’t need those executives. They are dead weight, the minority. The people like that kid, they are the majority. That’s why I have to go back.”

Will he continue to make records and movies after his return? Blades is not sure. But he is certain that "if I don’t go back, the only alternative is those assholes. I couldn’t live with that, knowing that I could have changed things but I didn’t.”

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