IT'S NATAR
ORDINARY REVIEW
ERIA LUNCH

NEW ORDER
CHUCK NORRIS
GEORGE THOROGOOD
RUBEN BLADE
SCREAMIN' SIREN
AEROSMITH
UNDERGROUND
D.I.Y. TAPE MASTERING
BOB GELDON

Then: Boom! Crack! Beat. Stick, foot, cymbal. A rock beat raging through the adolescent rebellion of a million horny teenagers, trashing tradition and distilling sex, anger, and frustration into a cry. The beat that makes the dancers shake.

The dancers. Satin Latin couples, gliding fluidly across the floor, contradicting each other's body moves as they grind to the beat, flow with the rhythm. Funkaters and dreads slipping effortlessly into the pocket. Middle-class radicals, drawn to a message but getting loose. Salseros aching to hear some horns. Post-collegiate types casually improvising. All on the scene to hear the singer.

The singer. Six feet tall, Latin-ly handsome, surveying the festivities through piercing brown eyes. Salsa rebel. He twists and turns, shaking maracas and spurring on the dancers, taking a playful swing with a maraca at one. He's everybody's old friend, a gracious and accommodating host. His bowler hat is near vertical on the back of his head. As bass, guitar, and synthesizers fill the gaps in the drummers' syntax, he rolls one sleeve of his black T-shirt and beckons coyly to the fence-sitters by the door.

"Come on in," he says, flashing some skin. "You'll have a good time."

Mae West with a Panamanian accent. The groove settles, and he pulls a long, crumpled sheet of galleym paper from the pocket of his black jacket, which is hanging on the mike stand.

"I hope you're all as interested as we are," he says, breaking the rhythmic flow, "in establishing channels of communications by the people."

"What is this all about?" he asks. "Poetry, mal, I know, but pretend anyway."

Then Rubén Blades launches his strained tenor in Spanish into an impassioned denunciation of racism.

At 37, Rubén Blades is possibly the most popular singer in all of salsa. But he's more than just a cool Latin a couple dozen records. And yards of books. A dozen S. J. Perelman paperbacks, Fran Lebowitz, Woody Allen, Jimmy Breslin, Groucho Marx, Oscar Wilde. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Octavio Paz. Lots of formidable-looking Spanish texts. Complete collections of National Lampoon and Mad.

Blades is key up. Harvard graduation yesterday, Letterman today. In the past two months he'd recorded a duet with Linda Ronstadt, spoken with Gabriel Garcia Marquez about a future album based on the Nobel Prize-winning writer's short stories, and made tentative plans with Jenny Beenen for his first English 12-inch. The channels of communication are open, and Blades is establishing ties that have him jazzy. "I don't give a shit whether it is," he says, labeling a tempestuous adventure in English syntax, "how big the person may be, how good it may be for me, but I already have the things that are needed, that are basic, like eating and a roof over my head, and I've gone through all my things, I don't forget anything—if it's somebody that can help me and he's an asshole, I pass. So it's really refreshing to find people like Linda and Jenny Beenen, who really are nice people."

"People who can help him to bridge some gaps and desegregate his music—to reach Latins and North Americans with a new Latin American message. That is Blades' consuming passion. "Interrelationships," he instructs, "are the key to the future."

"They're also the key to why Blades does what he does. It all follows a pattern. His music, his film, his writing, his political goals are all geared toward resolving—bringing people together. And while he likes making people dance, he isn't out there to be an entertainer. He is quite serious when he jokes, "I became a singer because music is a vehicle through which the world can be made better." It is, needless to say, a more interesting way to improve the world than wading through the morass of lower Panamanian politics.

Thwack! On top of the rhythm: the word. Angry. Topical. Not the usual salsa fare of faithless women, invitations to dance.

Blades tapped the folk protest of the nueva cancion ("new song") popular among student radicals and took it to the street, bridging a gap and giving street music more power. "I always understood," he says, "that this music was not just music to dance to. This was part of the political thing in a song that came out of politics and factors after. And it becomes a part of where people do not see the media are governed by a way of communicating and anger and frustration."

The people. Not "slogans. He sings about people's last year, he released the Truth for America," a child about people whose visions in Latin America the pacifist priest who communion. Or Ern. Or the police piss, yelling at his wife, and he speaks to and voice, a group the message will be his constituents.

Back amid the primal sound of Blades lectures. "Here's the same formula that made 40s Cuban formula." In his band, Ses del Rock, Rubén Blades replaced the traditional synthesizers and added a gap between salsa and rock to beat out Afro-Caribbean he calls an "international" soul, and Latin rhythms that by Pan-American sounds.

Rock. Ruben Blades first band covered tunes like Byrds. The airwaves shook with a reckless sound. Rubén Blades grew up with el Norte. Busby Berkeley, the U.S.A. Simón before he could go to Zone what it meant.
Blades Running

Would you bet on a salsa rebel who wants to be president of Panama? Only if his name's Rubén.

Article by John Leland

One day I pulled a mattress from the street to sleep on, which was really a traumatic thing to do since I come from a family where you don't pick things up from the floor.

the culture of the city. In a country where culture became only what was accessible to those who had money or were the elite, this type of music wasn't important. And I said, 'No, it is important.' I believed that what was written and poetry, and was interesting, and was valid.

Street poetry. Art rising out of ghetto culture. Gil Scott Heron, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Afrika Bambaataa, Bob Marley. Ultimately, popular political art. Bridging a gap.

"Being aware of the political realities of Latin America," Blades says, "I realized that through music you
could end the political polarization. You can say something in a song that can cut through all the bullshit and politics and factions and air thlede. And it becomes a voice of the people. In countries where people do not have access to the media, where the media are government-controlled, a song becomes a way of communicating popular beliefs and expectations and anger and hope.”

The people. Not “The People.” Blades doesn’t sing slogans. He sings about real lives affected by politics. Last year, he released Buscando América (“Searching for America”), a chilling collection of musical stories about people whose lives are torn by the political divisions in Latin America. People like Father Antonio, the pacifist priest who is murdered while administering communion. Or Ernesto X, who is missing without a trace. Or the police agent who wakes up, steps in cat piss, yells at his wife, and goes out to do his dirty work. Blades considers his lyrics “the chronicle of the city,” and he speaks to and for a subpopulation that has no voice, a group the media don’t address. Eventually, this will be his constituency.

Back amid the primal street blare of Columbus Avenue, Blades lectures. “Here we are, like dinosaurs, repeating the same formula that worked 45 years ago. I’m trying to create a sound that is not reminiscent of the early ’40s Cuban formula.”

In his band, Seis del Solar (“Six From the Tenement”), Blades replaced the traditional Latin horns with a pair of synthesizers and added a trap drummer, bridging the gap between salsa and rock. While the hand drums beat out Afro-Caribbean messages, Blades crafts what he calls an “international pop sound” of rock, funk, soul, and Latin rhythms. A sound for young Latinos alienated by music they associate with their grandparents, a Pan-American sound that puts Kid Creole to shame.

Rock. Rubén Blades knows it. He grew up on it. His first band covered tunes by the Beatles, Dylan, and the Byrds. The airwaves in Panama City in the early ’60s shook with a reckless mix of hot salsa and rock ’n roll. Blades grew up with the beat, in love with Big Daddy el Norte. Busby Berkeley musicals, mall shops and tailors, the U.S.A. Sinatra and Mathis. Ride Sally ride. But before he could go to the U.S., the U.S. came to him. In ’64, the Marines came to show the folks in the Canal Zone what it meant to be American: 21 Panamanian students were killed and hundreds more were wounded.

along with Puerto Rico, pumping out the Afro-Cuban groove.

Blades gave up his comfortable law practice in 1974 and moved to the home of the beat, where he got some more schooling—this time in the music business. An immigrant stripped of his middle-class status, he found himself shuffling crates of albums in the mailroom of Fania Records and sleeping on the bare floor in a flea-bag studio apartment.

“I managed one day to pull a mattress from the street,” he remembers with discomfort, “which was really a traumatic thing to do. I come from a family where you don’t pick things up from the floor. If you dropped him it couldn’t be done. Blades opens his own doors. He quickly got out of the Fania mailroom and landed a job with Ray Barretto’s band. By ’78, he formed an alliance with Bronx-born trombonist Willie Colon—a radical alliance that for the next five years produced the most socially powerful and best-selling records in salsa.

This June, Blades received his master’s degree in international law. Not a typical musician’s way to woodshed, but Blades isn’t in music for typical reasons. His year at Harvard wasn’t so much a year off as another part of a plan.

“I needed the degree,” he explains, “to reestablish my credentials as a professional. Harvard is one of the mightiest symbols in the world. It’s right up there with Coke and Alka-Seltzer. Eventually, I’m going to end up
Walkersschnappers.

Blades' music, which was inspired by the Afro-Caribbean rhythms of salsa and rock 'n' roll, became a powerful voice for social and political change. His songs often dealt with themes of inequality, resistance, and the struggle for freedom. Among the most well-known were his 1976 hit song, "Salsa," and "Mano a Mano," which addressed the struggle between Chicanos and the American government.

In addition to his music, Blades was also a prominent figure in the world of film and television. He produced and directed the 1986 film " woo," which starred Patrick Swayze and Morgan Freeman, and was later remade as a television series. Blades also served as a producer on the 1992 film "Colors," which starred Wesley Snipes and Samuel L. Jackson.

Blades' impact on the music industry and his commitment to social justice continue to be celebrated today. He remains an inspiration to many, and his music continues to resonate with audiences around the world. His work has earned him numerous awards, including a Grammy Award for Best Latin Pop Album in 1996 and a Grammy Award for Best Long Form Music Video in 2007.

As Blades himself has said, "I think artists become artists because they're seeking some kind of love or affection. I think I became a singer because there was something lacking in my emotional life."
on bass about a month later.

we were starting to get really
tired of the controlled chaos—not nearly
as intense as they had been—and we were

and, there was no such thing as

punk—it just happened.

Cuba, Williams, the Ronettes, Rick

and the Rolling Stones by

another, went through the

"Out Musicians" syn-

com: our jobs for missing too many
gigs, I got into personal relationships

that I didn't want to understand what

was going on. I stopped to buy a box of Kraft maca-
pods reading about ourselves ever-
songs played on the radio. I

hated the usual discrimination

seriously because we are girls;

singing our way into desired gigs;

one calls from girlfriends of the

band with—but all that just helped

and commitment to the band.

in the end, I started crying to some

I was living out some affair with, Rosie comforted me

worry, you got three great songs

Michael Reid, Brian Ahern (who

Harris and Johnny Cash), and

recorded /Fiesta/ during late 1984.

permanently changed his musical

from recording straight country

and, we trundled into the studio.

started, there was no

"cowpunk," which

into a genre. We

to mix country and

happened that way.

studded gang jackets while I

at the parking lot.

head, Marsky did a slobbery tribute

while Brian tore out his hair and

said, "ain't no way!" Another time, Rosie

time around on the floor of the

at her while she recorded a par-

"Gee, I'll have to try that tech-

Brothers," Brian commented, "I'm

recording was a breeze.

as recorded, Miko amicably left

bass player is Laura Lee, formerly

as Dirts. Since then we've been

on video projects, writing new songs,

ing a legion of Screamin' Sirens

own and improved since our early

cept remains the same: we're wild,

fun. Our record sounds pretty

we've had as much fun writing and

we could ever have listening to it.

I've shown you, you'll probably have as

maybe even more. I didn't include

beginning of this story because it's

No. 1 priority. And if you all don't

then, you'd better head for what

what the Screamin' Sirens are all

BLADES from p. 69

Crossover Dreams, which he stars in and cowrote. (The

film cost $600,000 to make.)

Crossover Dreams is Ruben Blades' worst nightmare.

It's the story of Rudy Veloza, a New York salsa musican

who wants to cross over to a rock group. When he

signs with a record company in hopes that it will

magically transport him over the chasm between the salsa

and rock markets, the contrived scheme fails and Veloza

is left disillusioned and alone. The story could be Blades'.

He says it isn't.

"I never believed in crossover." His tone is dry, pe-

dagogic. He could easily be talking about tax reform.

"I believe in convergence. Instead of crossing over to

the other side, at the risk of abandoning what you al-

ready have and finding no one's there waiting for you,

what I propose is 'Let's meet in the middle.' For in-

stance, on Buscando America I translated the lyrics into

English. That makes it possible for whoever doesn't

speak Spanish to meet us halfway—as opposed to my

trying to do it in English, which would have alienated

all my Spanish supporters."

Blades hopes to sign an independent distribution deal

and get Crossover Dreams into theaters by early Sep-

ember, to coincide with the release of his new album,

which features his duet with Linda Ronstadt (a door-

perhaps best left unopened) and a cover version of a

Cuban song Blades calls "the song that Lionel Richie

wanted to write when he wrote 'All Night Long.'" It

bridges a lot of gaps. But will Blades be able to bust

out Latin music in this country?

"When does the influence of Latin music stop in this

country? When Fidel Castro declares himself commu-

nist and the blockade begins. Right now there is no

interest from radio stations in Latin in this country be-

cause we're considered second-string citizens. We're

not dealt with. We're the biggest minority in this coun-

try. There are about 20 million Latins here. More Latins

than blacks, more Latins than Jews, more Latins than

any other group. And every group has more political

clout than we do. The music is seen as an extension of

vulgarity. When a political change occurs that is more

sympathetic to Latin America, then you're going to see

a change in films, then you're going to hear Latin songs

on the radio. If that doesn't happen, forget about it.

His other scenario is chilling: "I think there will be

one or two political situations—for instance, an inva-

sion of Nicaragua—that will act as galvanizers to create

solidarity among Latin Americans. And the media will

attempt to compensate for a deranged leader by pre-

senting more of the Latin presence in this country."

"But Blades isn't going to wait. Since '64 he's had a

message for this country, and his reasons for wanting

to deliver it have nothing to do with selling records.

He's revolutionized salsa, one of international music's

most conservative genres, to the point where they can't

be compared with anyone else. Any impact he has on

North America he will create alone. But that impact,

like everything else Blades strives for, is part of his plan.

"I am not doing this to get to Las Vegas," he says heat-

edly. "I am in no wild chase, at the risk of surrendering

my integrity, to jump on the bandwagon and become an

E.T. But I'm going to do everything I can to become

accessible to the people through the media, because I

am pissed as hell about the present state of stereotyping

of the Latin community.

"Because of my professional background, and be-

cause I am someone who is not involved with drugs,

who reads, and who has an opinion about things. I

think I am the person who's going to end up doing it."

The rhythm dances, the beat rocks. The couples re-

volve, mesmerized by the fusion. The Latins feel the

rock beat, the young professionals absorb the unfamiliar

Caribbean rhythms. The celebration whirs into high

gear. And Ruben Blades moves one step closer to the

Panamanian presidency.