SPECIAL ISSUE

¡Magnífico!
Hispanic culture breaks out of the barrio

Actor Edward James Olmos
like Manhattan's newly revivified Copacabana, or Los Angeles' ornate, chandeliered Caché, where the dressed-to-kill crowd is sometimes one-fifth Anglo. "Whenever I play, I see that it's not just a completely Latin crowd anymore," says Pete Escovedo, the Mexican-American jazz percussionist and father of Pop Star Sheila E. "It used to be that if you played Latin music, that's all you drew: Latinos." Whether Hispanic sounds will ever compete on the charts with pop is questionable. "I don't see Latin music ever being mainstream," says Frank Flores, general manager of the Latino station WJIT in New York City. "Our influence will seep into the mainstream, but it's still going to be Spanish music." Some Latin musicians are worried that every step toward Anglo society is a step away from their culture's roots; one player's progressivism is another's sellout. "The Latin market is our bread and butter, and we can't ignore them," says Raúl Alfonso of Hansel y Raul, a straight-ahead salsa band that is trying to broaden its appeal with an upcoming record in English. But pop music has always been an indiscriminate buccaneer, hijacking European, American and African treasure alike, muscling its way selling it around the world. Now it may be the Hispanics' turn. In the global village called the U.S., Latin pop's opportunity is as equal as anybody's. —By Michael Walsh.

reported by Cristina García/Miami, with other bureaus

Of Ghosts And Magic

Rubén Blades sings for hearts that need no visa

H e will not turn 40 until July 16, but Rubén Blades has already given himself the perfect birthday present. Anyone who wants is welcome to share it too. It was an early gift—showing up, as it did, some four months before the big day—but it casts a wider glow than a forest of candles planted on a piece of pastry. Blades went out and made himself a great record.

He has done this before, but always in Spanish. Nothing But the Truth is his first record in English, and, with collaboration from the likes of Elvis Costello, Sting and, most formidably, Lou Reed, he has fashioned eleven songs that range wide and pierce deep, all sharing a similar theme. "Violence is love gone crazy" is the way he puts it, with the same snazzy élan and offhand humor that make him such an affable and adept screen actor. He seems easy with it all: sweeping rock, laid-back jazz, Latin-inflected pop. Recently he reflected on the album on a film set in Hamilton, Mont., where he is starring in a caper comedy called Waiting for Salazar. (Acting, Blades insists, is merely a way of subsidizing his musical career.) "There are eleven different styles of songs on this record," he says. "I wanted to present a whole fabric of different colors and sounds and put them together on a record the way I remembered radio to be when radio played all different kinds of music.

A perfect record. And it creates the perfect, paradigmatic problem: Where's the audience? Radio, like music generally, is tightly stratified, and Blades has brought off a singular aesthetic victory. But who will hear it? Who will play it? Previously, albums by the Panama-born Blades were recorded in Spanish and aimed at a Spanish-speaking audience.