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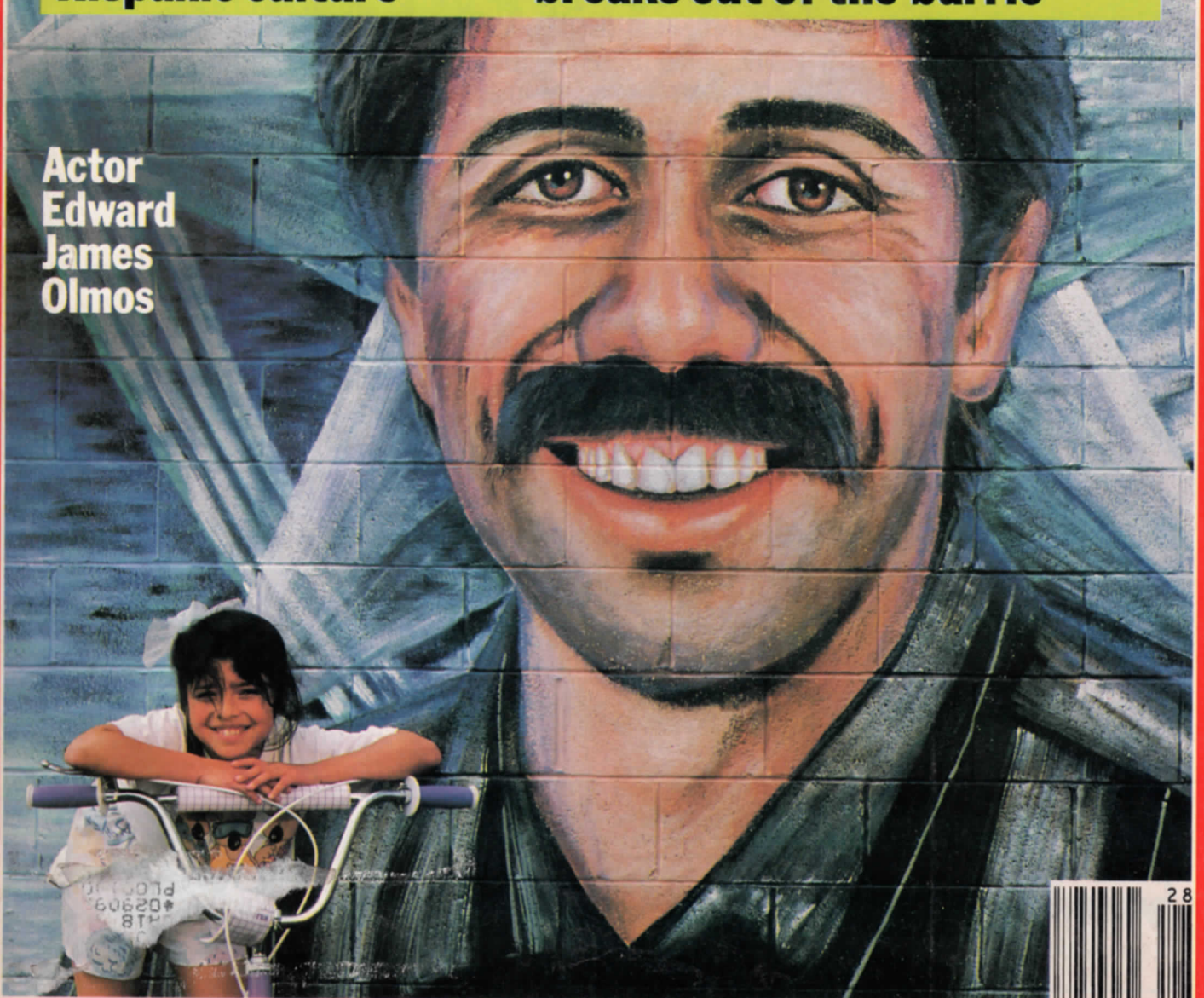
TIME

SPECIAL ISSUE

¡Magnífico!

Hispanic culture breaks out of the barrio

**Actor
Edward
James
Olmos**



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like Manhattan's newly revived 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 ques-

tionable. "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, mutating it and 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 Garcia/Miami, with other bureaus

Of Ghosts And Magic

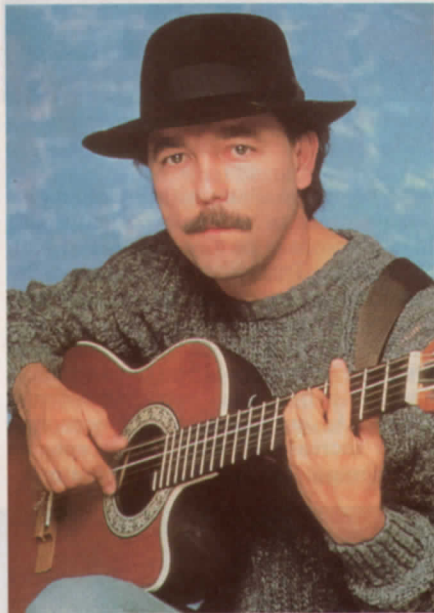
Rubén Blades sings for hearts that need no visa

He 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.

By making *Nothing But the Truth* in English, he has risked losing his core audience while still seeming perhaps too ethnic to a wider, whiter one. The record has not hatched a hit, and up till now has sold a modest 100,000 copies. It has also created a tactical problem: "How do we work it out so I can ad-



BLADES More "meet half-way" than crossover

dress both Anglo and Latin audiences?"

Such are the frustrations—indeed, perils—of panculturism. Blades is particularly articulate about them not only because of his fluent English and a rather startling academic background (he has a 1974 law degree from the University of Panama and a 1985 master's in international law from Harvard), but also because the problem weighs heavily on a heart that looks to a "society that will be more integrated and fair, where character will be the most important thing, where hearts don't require visas." He says his record wasn't an attempted crossover, but "more like a 'meet half-way.' People can relate to any music on earth provided they have a shot at listening to it."

Nothing But the Truth is as clear a shot as anyone could hope for. It is an album of governed passion about matters of conscience and matters of the heart, and although there are specific references to Central America, there are evocations too of New York City, where Blades (who also keeps modest residences in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara with his wife Lisa) has a small apartment. Whatever their locale, Blades' songs are full of casual magic. "Latins are not afraid of the absurd," he likes to say. "Europeans had to invent the absurd, but we live in it." He speaks almost offhandedly of moving from a boyhood home because his grandmother Emma believed it was rife with ghosts. That kind of everyday enchantment colors his music, as does the hard and tough rhythm of *la esquina*—"you know, the corner where people hang out. But when I was younger, I knew intuitively that the reason salsa or Afro-Cuban music had become stagnant was that the themes were limited. The ballad had never moved from the corner."

Blades has been instrumental in finding broader roots to nurture and change the music, even if he hasn't yet figured out how to take his show on the road. When he finishes his current movie role, he will probably take a Latin band on tour, and do a few of the "most accessible" English songs for audiences of . . . well, of those who do not require visas for their hearts. Meantime, keep in mind those jukeboxes down in Panama. Blades talks about them sometimes, great musical op-art extravaganzas all swathed in barbed wire. He says that's done to keep them intact during brawls. But in Panama or South Philly, jukeboxes have another kind of barbed wire around them, invisible and formidable, meant to keep the music unchanged. And if there is anyone around who can take that wire down, it's Rubén Blades.

Oh, yes. His last name, in Spanish, is two syllables; it would rhyme with *quo vadis*. In English, it can be said shorter, just like what comes out of the handle of a knife. Either way, it's fitting. And it sounds right in either language.

—By Jay Cocks. Reported by Denise Worrell/Hamilton