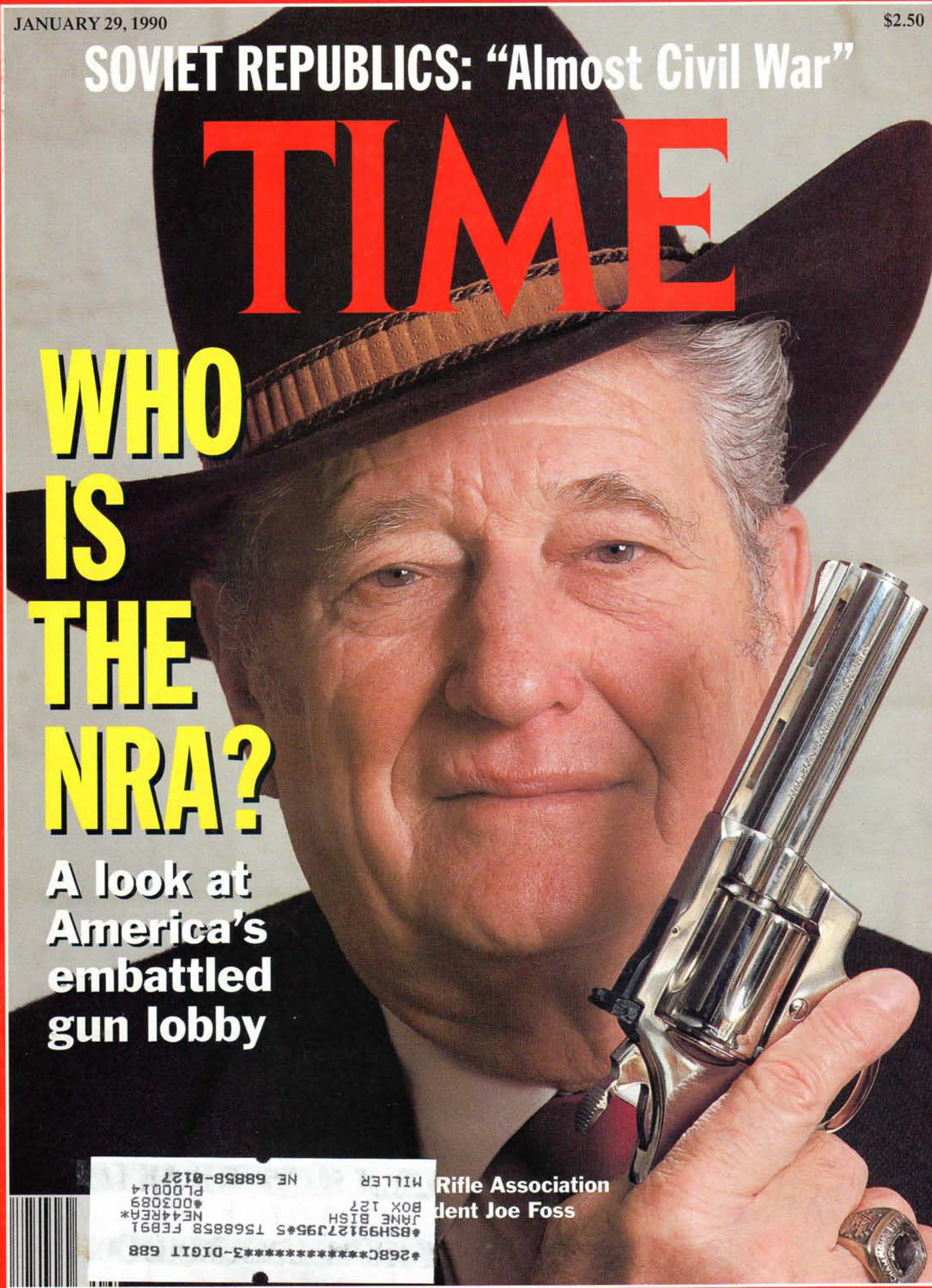


# SOVIET REPUBLICS: "Almost Civil War"

# TIME

# WHO IS THE NRA?

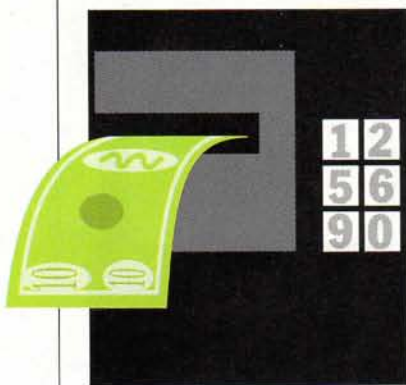
## A look at America's embattled gun lobby



National Rifle Association  
President Joe Foss

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**BUSINESS: The glitch heard round the world**

AT&T's breakdown shows the vulnerability of computer systems everywhere. ▶ Blasts for a cigarette aimed at blacks. ▶ Andrew Tobias on saving energy.

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**ETHICS: "Outing" gays who stay in the closet**

Frustrated by the slow pace of civil rights and the relentless spread of AIDS, activists adopt a fierce tactic to expose closeted gay politicians and clergy who obstruct the movement.

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**PROFILE: Rubén Blades**

The singer, actor and politico has a knack for being different things to different people, and yet he's always true to himself.

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**MUSIC: A master at mixing old and new**

"Omnivore" William Bolcom likes ragtime and reggae just as much as classical music, so he writes symphonies and operas that can include just about anything.

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**VIDEO: A racy new sitcom from Cosby's creators**

TV's hottest producing team tries for another hit with *Grand*. But this small-town version of *Upstairs, Downstairs* proves that Carsey and Werner don't have a magic touch.

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**ART: Two centuries of black stereotypes**

An exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington demonstrates that the images of blacks in American painting and sculpture have been mostly servile and degrading, with a few notable exceptions ranging from John Singleton Copley to Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins. Bigotry had much to do with it, but so did history and artists' working conditions. The show offers too little aesthetic pleasure but plenty of social significance and maybe a bit too much prosecutorial zeal.

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**HEALTH: What to believe at the supermarket?**

In an effort to assess proliferating nutritional claims, the American Heart Association introduces a controversial seal of approval. ▶ Naysaying on oat bran.

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Cover:  
Photograph by  
Neil Leifer

# Singer, Actor, Politico

Multilingual and polycultural, **RUBEN BLADES** aims to shake up the world (and run for President of Panama along the way)

By GUY D. GARCIA

**R**ubén Blades is losing his patience. Dressed in a flashy magenta jacket and a black narrow-brimmed hat, he fidgets with his breakfast at Pluto's restaurant, a greasy spoon in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn. He is on his third cup of coffee when Spike Lee walks in and takes a seat at the counter. "Giant, see the paper?" Blades says, holding up a copy of the *New York Post*.

"I can read," Lee replies, as he sidles over to Blades' booth.

"Can you count?" Blades rejoins. "You owe me. What are we going to do?"

"Cut!" someone yells, and Petey the uptight bookie once again becomes Blades the affable actor. The Panamanian-born, Harvard-educated lawyer and international salsa star is filming a cameo for *Variations on the Mo' Better Blues*, Lee's follow-up to his controversial hit, *Do the Right Thing*. After the final take, the crew bursts into applause. "I look for people who are natural in front of the camera," says Lee of his decision to cast Blades. "Rubén is a very naturalistic actor and a really nice guy."

During the ride back to Manhattan, Blades returns the compliment. "It's always a pleasure to find someone whose work is authentic," he says. "Playing with my band is the same feeling. It's like dancing with the truth, and she likes it. The closer you get, the more you enjoy it; the more you dance, the better it feels."

Multilingual and multifaceted, Blades has a knack for being different things to different people. In his native Panama, he is a respected lawyer and national celebrity, a man of the people and potential presidential contender. To fans of Caribbean salsa, he is a musical pioneer and a charismatic leader of the *Nueva Canción* (New Song) movement, a steamy mix of poetry, politics and tropical rhythms that has left an imprint on Latin music. In the U.S., he is an up-and-coming actor who has worked with Richard Pryor, Whoopi Goldberg and Robert Redford in such films as *Fatal Beauty*, *Critical Condition* and *The Milagro Beanfield War*.

Small wonder Blades' detractors, perhaps a bit jealous-

ly, have accused him of spreading himself too thin. "It's not a problem because I'm doing things that I like," he says. "I know I can't be at two places at the same time."

But that has not stopped him from trying. In addition to writing the score for the upcoming Sidney Lumet film *Q and A*, Blades has completed acting parts in three movies: Spike Lee's film; *The Lemon Sisters*, starring Diane Keaton; and *The Two Jakes*, the sequel to *Chinatown* that features Jack Nicholson as star and director. Nicholson shot around Blades' music tour in order to nab him for the role of Mickey Nice, a Jewish gangster from Los Angeles' Boyle Heights section. "He brought a lot of energy and good acting instincts to the role," reports Nicholson. "I think the result is fabulous." Blades and his band Son del Solar (Sound of the Tenement) are in the midst of completing three new records for the Elektra label—a live recording plus two studio albums—to be released over the next three years. He will also try to squeeze in a drama workshop at Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum, based on *Dead Man Out*, the HBO movie in which he stirringly portrays a death-row prisoner.

Yet for all his show-biz appeal, Blades (he accepts both the English and Spanish pronunciations of his name since his grandfather, Reuben Blades, was born on the British island of St. Lucia) remains ambivalent toward the trappings of fame. One aspect of stardom that Blades finds particularly loathsome is the notion that celebrities are a privileged breed, an élite group that must insulate themselves from the rabble. Instead, the four-time Grammy nominee has tried to remain as accessible to his public as possible. Until just a few years ago, he had his home phone number printed on the back of his album covers. He abandoned the practice when his increasingly itinerant schedule made it impossible for him to answer calls from his fans.

Dressed in jeans, sneakers and a black T shirt, Blades looks younger than his 41 years as he comes to the door of the New York City apartment he owns with his wife of three years, American actress Lisa Blades. "I'm just cleaning up a little," he explains. Courteous and soft-spoken, Blades sweeps his living-room floor while he speaks, his lightly accented speech peppered with Spanish words and American slang. When a topic stirs him, Blades can become animated and emphatic, pacing, pointing, his brown eyes bright with conviction.

His eyes light up often. Like a latter-day Joshua, Blades is dedicated to breaking down the walls of ignorance and intolerance on both sides of the north-south border. He is a cross-cultural crusader, iconoclast and self-appointed conscience of the hemisphere who is determined to fight for truth, justice and the Pan-American way, even if it means sacrificing some of his own chances for commercial success. "I will never be a superstar," says Blades. "My role is to be different, to do what others won't do, and, as a result, my fortunes will always fluctuate. I will always be viewed with suspicion by some, though not by all, because I move against the current."

Blades made waves in 1984, when he put his career on hold and headed north to Harvard University, where he spent the year earning a master's degree in international law. "My music fans were stunned," says Blades. "One guy in Colombia even wrote a letter to a newspaper. He wanted to know why I was going to this school, the cradle



of capitalism, and why I just didn't stay with music. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but I don't see why I can't go there and learn and utilize what I've learned for something constructive."

To Blades, something constructive includes the possibility of someday running for President of Panama. The U.S. invasion of his country, which Blades denounces as a "flagrant transgression of international law," has only increased his determination to enter political life. Yet he is aware that his chances of electoral success hinge on cultivating a broad-based constituency. "I've always made it clear that I wasn't playing the Latin version of Jesus. I need local support for my position."

One way Blades hopes to foster that support is by founding an independent political party that he says will speak for Panamanians who are not represented by General Manuel Noriega or the current U.S.-backed government. "What I propose is to create what up to this point has been a mythical place: a Latin America that respects and loves itself, is incorruptible, romantic, nationalistic and has a human perception of the needs of the world at large." Blades is traveling to Panama next month to "see the situation for myself" but refuses to predict when he might return there permanently. Says Blades: "I can tell you this, I will go back to Panama, and it won't be when I'm 60 or even 50. I'll be there this decade."

Growing up in Panama City, Blades listened to a polyglot hit parade that included singer Frankie Lyman, as well as Elvis Presley, the Platters and the Beatles. Following in the footsteps of his conga-playing father, Blades started singing with local Afro-Cuban bands. He enrolled in law school at the University of Panama, "to please my parents," and passed the bar. But a short visit to New York City left the young attorney torn between the courtroom and the recording studio. The final verdict favored music, and by 1974 Blades was back in Manhattan for good. "This was the place to be," he says. "There was a strong Latin-music movement."

It wasn't long before Blades joined the roster of young Latin musicians at Fania records, the leading salsa label. In 1978 he and trombonist Willie Colón recorded the album *Siembra* (Seed), which went on to become one of the best-selling salsa albums of all time. Meanwhile Blades had begun to tinker with the salsa formula, replacing the horns with synthesizers and augmenting the basic Afro-Cuban beat with strains of jazz, '50s doo-wop and rock.

His lyrics were equally innovative. Instead of the familiar themes of love and loss, he wrote vividly poetic images, inspired by the free-flowing narratives found in the works of Latin writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes. "Most Latin songs are about the guy who betrayed his best friend, or the women who left him, or saying let's party," explains Blades, who opted instead to paint an expressionist canvas that included blessed sinners and murdered priests, the cry of political revolt and the stifled silence between lovers. In *Ojos de Perro Azul* (Eyes of a Blue Dog), from the album *Agua de Luna* (Moon Water), Blades drew inspiration for words and music from the stories of his friend García Márquez:

*Eyes of a blue dog, cynically staring at a city,  
cryptically smiling at humanity;  
elliptically judging society.  
Eyes of a blue dog, dementedly searching for reality,  
hoping to suddenly see the truth,  
shining, ominously, in the darkness.*

Blades' polemically charged tunes occasionally inspired more than just dancing. In 1980 *Tiburón* (Shark), an allegory for superpower interventionism, was banned by Miami radio stations, and Blades had to wear a bulletproof vest while performing there. *Decisiones* (Decisions), from his 1984 album *Buscando America* (Searching for America), was banned by Panama's censors for allegedly promoting abortion.

The following year Blades launched his film career with *Crossover Dreams*, in which he starred as Rudy Veloz, a Latin boxer and aspiring singer who makes it big in English-speaking America. The role proved uncannily prescient. The one-two punch of good reviews for *Crossover Dreams* and a growing chorus of critical acclaim for *Buscando America* attracted ever larger numbers of English-speaking fans. Blades acknowledges his bilingual audience

by making sure the lyrics to his songs are always printed on the jackets in Spanish and English.

With each succeeding album, Blades has continued to expand the established limits of Latin music. *Escenas* (Scenes) featured British rocker Joe Jackson and Linda Ronstadt singing in Spanish, in what might be called "reverse crossover." It was only a matter of time before Blades broke the language barrier, and in 1988 he released his first album in English, *Nothing but the Truth*. Featuring collaborations with Lou Reed, Elvis Costello and other non-Latin artists, the record made several Top Ten lists but was a commercial dud. "That album pissed a lot of people

off," Blades says. "Some people felt I should be the second coming of the Miami Sound Machine. Some people objected because I wrote a rock-'n'-roll song. On the other hand, you had Latino people saying, 'Why are you singing in English? Aren't we good enough for you?'"

Blades blames "ignorance and fear" for the gulf that persists between Latins and Anglos. "Paul Simon is doing an album in Spanish, and Ronstadt and Los Lobos just did albums in Spanish, so what's the big deal?" asks Blades, who eschews the term crossover to describe such projects. "It implies an acceptance of a barrier," Blades explains, "and I refuse to acknowledge a barrier. I think the barriers are in the mind and in the heart. People tell me, 'You close your eyes, and you're too idealistic,' and I have to say no. In all honesty, I never saw the barrier."

And even if Blades did, he wouldn't let it stop him. When not singing or acting, Blades unwinds by painting watercolors ("mostly faces") or reading (George Orwell and Hunter S. Thompson). His goals include writing and directing a film set in Panama, making a documentary feature and recording an all-instrumental album. Meanwhile Blades' fearless muse is once again pointing him toward uncharted musical waters. "I already know something is brewing," he says. "Some people will be surprised." And a few more walls will come tumbling down. ■

**Eager to remain accessible to his fans, he had his home phone number printed on the back of his album covers**