

# Daily News Magazine

JUNE 21, 1987

## THE PANAM KID

Ruben Blades  
Seizes His  
Dream

Inside: 40 Years of UFOs  
Brooks in Space

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## 'LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT ALIENS . . .'

Mel Brooks takes the 2000-Year-Old Man into space.

By Peter Gethers

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## FAITH, HOPE AND PATERNITY

A cautionary note about America's latest fad — fatherhood.

By Mark Hallen

28

## COVER STORY

Ruben Blades has made a career out of walking a very fine line. A streetwise Panamanian who left an attorney job in his native country to sing salsa in New York, he is also an actor, writer and intellectual. And he does nothing but think ahead: to a career in movies, to eventually running for office back home, to playing prestigious Carnegie Hall this Saturday.

By David Browne

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## PLEASE DON'T EAT THE CHINA

Ways to get invited back for the weekend.

By Sally Cummings

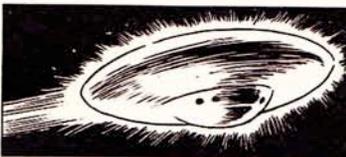
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## HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, FLYING SAUCERS

In the 40 years since a pilot reported spotting the first UFO, the emphasis has shifted from sightings to tales of abduction.

By Edward Edelson

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tra album, "Escenas" (featuring  
 et with Linda Ronstadt), and  
 ivate film critics with a charis-  
 e leading role in "Crossover  
 ms." Last year, he appeared at  
 "Crack-Down" concerts at Madi-  
 Square Garden and at the Am-  
 y International benefit at Giants  
 ium. His name popped up on hip  
 ms by Lou Reed ("Mistrial") and  
 le Steven ("Freedom—No Com-  
 mise") and on the "Sun City" sin-  
 and video. He landed a support-  
 role in Richard Pryor's recent  
 ical Condition" and was signed  
 he part of a New Mexican sheriff  
 he Robert Redford-directed "The  
 agro Beanfield War," set for re-  
 se this fall.

No wonder, in light of all these  
 ects, that the release of his latest  
 um, "Agua De Luna," based on  
 short stories of Nobel Prize-win-  
 ng writer Gabriel García Marquez,  
 most seems incidental, as does the  
 ammy which Blades won for Best  
 opical Latin Performance.

"One of the things I've done in  
 y life is to move in as many direc-  
 ns as I feel my talent can take  
 e," he comments. "I'm not gonna  
 come limited to 'this is what you're  
 nna do, this is it.' I know that has  
 eated confusion for those who mar-  
 t talent, but I'd rather do that than  
 ecome the flavor of the month, and  
 en be dismissed for the next fla-  
 or."

Yet, by embracing Hollywood,  
 uben Blades may be entering the

'My biggest  
 enjoyment is thinking  
 of the future and  
 what I am going to be  
 doing once I go back  
 to Panama. This is  
 fun — I'm having a lot  
 of fun breaking down  
 stereotypes.'

ice-cream parlor. Naturally, this cre-  
 ates questions about crossing over,  
 selling out. He emphatically dismiss-  
 es such talk. "I've been hearing that  
 for so long. When I went to Harvard  
 it was, 'Now he's gone, never coming  
 back. He's gonna go to Wall Street.'  
 Then it takes them two years to say,  
 'Oh, he hasn't done it yet, I don't  
 think he's gonna do that.'"

Or, as he says in his dressing  
 room, "Nobody in Hollywood has  
 called me 'Baby.' *Nobody.*"

\*\*\*

Then again, nobody in Hollywood  
 is calling him—at least not on this  
 sunny New York morning, when  
 Blades, having returned briefly to  
 the city, is rehearsing a new role: ac-  
 tor stuck in rundown Central Park  
 West hotel room (the one with the

bathroom door that doesn't close  
 all the way), waiting for a phone call  
 confirming whether or not he will be  
 co-starring with Whoopi Goldberg in  
 her next film, "Fatal Beauty."

Close up, Blades' 38-year-old  
 face looks doughy and his hair is  
 wavy but thinning, yet his eyes are  
 oval-shaped and probing. He's  
 dressed in baggy blue jeans and a  
 navy-blue workshirt under a Sun-  
 dance Institute sweat shirt, the lat-  
 ter a reminder of the four months  
 he spent in New Mexico filming  
 "Milagro." (Sundance is Red-  
 ford's company.) He is talking  
 about the film as, on cue, the  
 phone rings. It is not the call  
 he has been waiting for. "One  
 thing I really don't like in  
 life is indecision," he snaps.  
 "That really, really bothers  
 me."

While he waits, there is  
 time to talk about his other  
 concerns, chiefly whether his  
 long-standing band will hold it to-  
 gether while he pursues his film  
 career. "Agua De Luna" had to be  
 recorded in two weeks, between "Mi-  
 lagro" breaks, an experience he calls  
 "very uncomfortable." And there is  
 the English-lanugage album he will  
 soon record, for which he will co-  
 write songs with Lou Reed, Bob Dy-  
 lan, Elvis Costello and possibly Paul  
 Simon. It's his first clear stab at a  
 market that has been even more  
 stubborn than Hollywood—the  
 rock *continued on next page*



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audience. The new album, a semi-concept work meant "to represent the feeling of a city musically," may finally cross that barrier. (But just to make sure he doesn't wander too far, he says he'll follow that project with "Antecedent," a homage to his roots, with horns replacing the synthesizers used by Seis del Solar.)

"It's not a cynical move, like Julio Iglesias recording in English," comments Howard Thompson, the British A&R director of Elektra Records. "It should be *fantastically* interesting, like Paul Simon's album is. We want to get people where they *think*."

"Ruben's almost too good to be true," adds collaborator Lou Reed. "He has very ambitious goals in terms of what the songs are going to be about."

But what Ruben Blades is most eager to discuss today is not music but movies—and politics. He sees "Milagro," based on a John Nichols novel about rural New Mexicans who combat developers, as having a dual role. "What I think Redford did was to present a story in a way where it would become a showcase for Latinos, for Latin actors and actresses, and allow us to work on a project with Anglos that is big budget," Blades says. "It's not gonna be an earth-shattering, barrier-breaking project, but I got to work in a role where I don't have to be cutting heroin or coke in some seedy apartment."

This, he says, is one of the princi-

pal reasons he moved to Hollywood. "I had a lot of questions in terms of why it is that there's not more of a Latin presence in film and why, when there is, it's the guy who breaks through the second-floor window to steal your Sony. I really feel it's my duty to push and see if we can get roles other than junkies or drug dealers, and I've been very vocal about it. The Hollywood establishment today would never dare put a black in a position where blacks were being placed in the '40s, because they know everybody would jump on them. Yet, today, we have the Latinos. 'Oh, you need a low-life or a whore or some Latin fool?'—there we are."

At the same time, he acknowledges that his temporary relocation was not entirely altruistic. "In reality, to work with Robert Redford would allow me another step in the ladder in terms of visibility. If I do a good job, I'm gonna be noticed."

This is Ruben Blades the politician, the man angling to please all sides while holding onto his integrity, vision and pride. It is a role he has been gearing up for all his life. One of five children born to a musician father and a radio-actress mother, he learned English from Elvis Presley records, began to sing American rock with Panamanian bands—and meanwhile decided that eventually he would run for public office.

Following the 1964 Canal Zone riot, which left 21 Panamanians and

three American soldiers dead in a dispute over the 1903 canal treaty, Blades bitterly turned away from American pop, turned to Latin music and entered the University of Panama. When the school closed after a student rebellion in '69, he made his first trip to New York; the University reopened, he returned to earn a degree, and then landed a job as a Bank of Panama lawyer. Finally, in 1974, he came to Manhattan to stay, taking a job in the mail room of Fania Records and joining the bands of Ray Barretto and, later, Willie Colon.

It's not the least surprising that Blades eventually plans to run for office. The man can talk his way around anything, and charm your pants off in the process. He is unquestionably sincere, even when using the corniest lines to describe his political ambitions. "I can tell you that the biggest enjoyment I have is the enjoyment I feel, the widening smile I feel inside of me"—he puts his hands on his stomach—"whenever I think of the future and what I am going to be doing once I go back to Panama. This is fun—I'm having a lot of fun breaking down stereotypes. But the biggest smile is the one I'm gonna get once all of this is put into perspective."

But that is all in the future. Right now, Blades wants some immediate gratification via a phone call from Hollywood, and it's not forthcoming. "Actors, all they do is wait," he says. "I have other things to do. I





# 'ROUND RUBEN

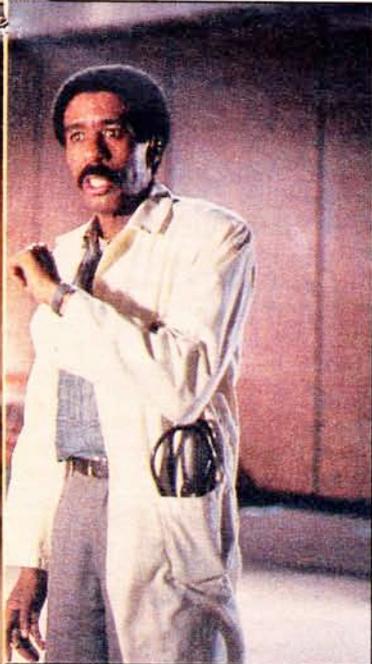
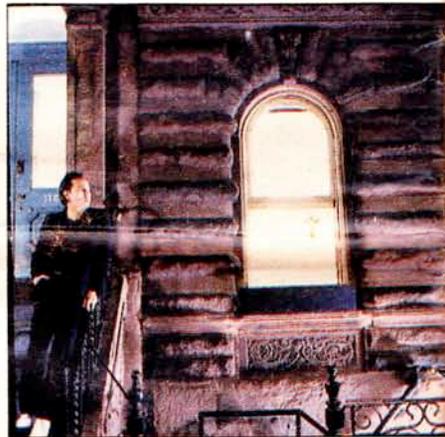
Counterclockwise, from top left: Blades won critical raves as Rudy Veloz, the singer who forsakes his Latin roots, in the 1985 film "Crossover Dreams"; his second album, "Escenas," followed, featuring a duet with Linda Ronstadt; last year he was the orderly who became Richard Pryor's sidekick in "Critical Condition"; this year he's a rural New Mexican sheriff battling developers in the Robert Redford-directed "The Milagro Beanfield War"; he sings salsa for migrant workers in New Jersey; and in Hollywood he talks rock with Elektra president Bob Krasnow as wife Lisa takes it all in.



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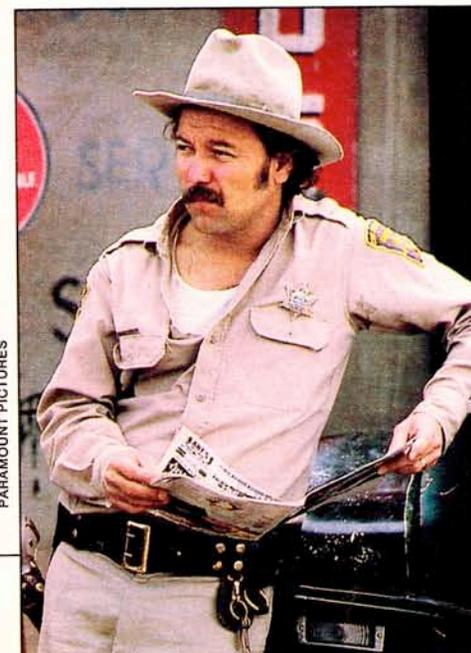
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cannot sit around to see what's gonna happen with a film. I got other things to do.

"I'm telling you, man—I'm glad I got something else to do, because the waiting around is..." His thought is interrupted by the ringing of the phone. It's his office. No news yet. Blades harumphs and waits some more.

\*\*\*

"Well, we got a guy on the show tonight," begins David Brenner, "he's like a Renaissance man." Following that auspicious intro, pianist Oscar Hernandez pounds into "Muevete (Move On)," a cooking number from Blades' "Escenas" album that calls for nations of the world to "finish off evil." Blades, looking sharp in his black suit, starts singing. Slowly, the other instruments come in—synthesizers, percussion, harmony singers—until the song kicks into third gear. Blades' shoulders start moving with the music, the feet start tapping; he is transformed from a studious sophisticate into a sexy Latin singer, and all eyes are on him. In the darkness to the left of the stage, Brenner, seated at his desk, bobs his head with the music.

"I gotta ask you something," Brenner begins the interview. "One of the ambitions I have in life is to hear a Spanish song without the word 'corazon' in it." That inane question aside, the interview goes smoothly. The audience is clearly on Blades' side; in fact, when the taping

ends, they swarm the set, and Blades patiently signs every last autograph.

Back in the dressing room, as Blades is wrapping his black jacket back in a plastic bag, a "Nightlife" staffer pulls the "Ruben Blades" sign from the door. "Do you want this?" she asks.

"Oh, yes, Ruben will want to keep that," says his wife Lisa, stuffing it into her bag.

One is reminded of something the singer/actor said earlier. "We're talking, I'm telling you these things, you're like, 'Ooh, wow, what a guy.' The bottom line is you follow my background. You're gonna be moving on, and in three years or one year from now, we'll see each other again. And I won't have a pointed shirt and shades and I won't be saying to you, 'Hey, David, baby, how are you? Let's do lunch.' You can tell when somebody changes like that."

But with his suave, articulate charm, will we be able to tell? Ultimately, that remains the puzzle of Ruben Blades. A few days after the Brenner taping, he shoots back to L.A. to begin work on "Fatal Beauty" (yes, the call came through). More work in Hollywood, but still the talk of heading a South American nation via a union of students and workers. Will he pull it off? Like Ruben Blades in his hotel room, we'll have to wait for the answer. ■

David Browne writes the Monday Sounds column for *The News*.