

Ruben Blades: Singer, Actor, Lawyer

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Panamanian singer and actor Ruben Blades, LL.M. '85, is one of his country's most forceful voices. The thirty-eight-year-old superstar of salsa music—a zesty blend of Afro-Caribbean folk styles—won a 1987 Grammy award for *Escenas* (Scenes), one of his three albums with Elektra.

Blades has performed at Carnegie Hall and plays to sold-out audiences in Latin America, Europe, and South America. His lyrics address Latin American social, economic, and political issues.

"I try to express the feelings of the people," said Blades who recently began singing in English as well as Spanish. "My songs are about exile, brutality, and the loss of political innocence—they're about the struggle to be decent."

His films—five to date—chronicle the lives of ordinary people. Director Robert Redford chose Blades over two thousand actors to play a rural sheriff battling developers in *"The Milagro Beanfield War"* (1988). Blades "captured the feelings, the rhythms,

the tempo of the Latin personality, the New Mexican personality in the Southwest," Redford told the *New York Times*.

Blades says he accepts parts that "show the good side, the working side of Latin people." He believes that "artists must be role models and fill the void created by the failure of political institutions—I can reach as many as twenty-five million people a week. I try to use my celebrity to make my values visible, to show people who I am and how I live."

His attraction to the entertainment field has family roots. Blades' father was a percussionist and his mother a piano player and singer. But why law?

"My interest in law stems from being exposed to books at a very early age. Also, I was strongly influenced by an opinionated, liberal grandmother—one of the few Panamanian women to finish high school in the early 1900s. She instilled a sense of justice in me. It all began very romantically; I wanted to be the good guy."

Blades, who sang in local Latin groups while a law student at the University of Panama, earned his J.D. in 1974. After a stint as a Bank of Panama lawyer, he moved to New York City and launched his musical career.

A decade later, Blades' autobiographical lecture at Harvard University impressed Frederick Snyder, LL.M. '77, dean of the Graduate Program: "After hearing Blades, I asked him to consider applying to the School," says Snyder. Blades entered the program the next year.

When news of Blades' plan to earn a Harvard LL.M. in international law reached South America, "a major Colombian newspaper printed an open letter, saying that I was betraying everything I stood for by going to Harvard—the cradle of capitalism—the place that shaped the minds that have been used against Latin American interests," says Blades. "I decided to demonstrate to myself and my country that I could use a Harvard education to help Latin Americans."

According to Snyder, the internationally renowned singer was also a distinguished student: "He had a bright, questioning mind; an extraordinary sense of humor; and a good command of the material. He took a leading role in his classes."

Reflecting on his decision, Blades says, "I use the power I have acquired as an entertainer and my credibility as a professional lawyer to push for social change. I think Harvard Law School did a lot for me as a person and as a professional," he adds. "I learned how to read and think critically. Now I hope to make a difference."

