

A little-known musician makes a star impression

By Ken Tucker
Inquirer Popular Music Critic

In a pop-music universe in which the best-known Latin music stars are teenybopper idols Menudo (cookie-cutter Monkees) and slick crooner Julio Iglesias (Steve Lawrence with a good tailor), Ruben Blades is an odd man out. Although he lives in New York and is a highly esteemed salsa-music star, Blades is almost completely unknown to American audiences.

This Panama-born singer and songwriter has just released his first album for a major pop-music label, Elektra Records. "Buscando America" ("Looking for America") is one of the strongest albums of the year thus far. Unlike other ambitious salsa performers, whose idea of "crossing over" is to sing in English and to ape the blandest sort of American rock music, Blades sings in Spanish on "Buscando America" and is accompanied by his tempestuous, witty backup band, Seis del Solar (Six From the Tenement).

Blades' music is a constantly shifting mixture of rock, salsa, jazz, reggae and Afro-Cuban rhythms that is both exotic and dizzyingly pleasurable. Unlike many sophisticated lyricists, Blades understands that the beat in pop music is even more important than carefully wrought phrases. Thus the best songs by this very socially conscious composer are extraordinary examples of sharp, sassy dance music which, upon closer listening, reveals barbed lyrics about a wide range of subjects. (The album cover of "Buscando America" prints the lyrics in both Spanish and English.)

Blades' method is clearest on the album's opening cut, "Decisiones." The song begins with a brief bit of creamy doo-wop harmonizing that immediately dissolves into a jaunty pop melody. Then Blades, in his thin, pleasantly nasal voice, begins reciting verses with the vivid details of short stories — about the fears a couple experiences over an unwanted pregnancy; a comic romp about infidelity and revenge; the last, muddled thoughts of a drunk driver before he smashes into a truck.

These unpleasant little tales are told by Blades in a dry, arch tone. The bubbling beat and chipper music swirl around his pessimism, and the effect is exhilarating. It is as if he's saying, "Life is one darn thing after another — hooray!"

Macabre subject

When Blades isn't wickedly winsome, he's busy being chilling and scary. The very next song, "GDBD" (which stands for "Gente Desperando Bajo Dictaduras," translated as "People Awakening in a Dictatorship"), is a stark description of a man waking up and preparing to go to work. As the song proceeds, it becomes clear that he is an officer in a Central American death squad; suddenly the banal details of his life — his tepid shower, his paltry breakfast of bread and coffee — take on a malevolent irony as this sorry working stiff rouses himself to go out to kill people.

Blades doesn't let up on the pressure. He follows "GDBD" with "Desaparecidos" ("Disappearances"), a series of anguished cries from the relatives of people who have been kidnapped and murdered by the death squads. It is Blades' hymn to what he calls "the vanished ones," innocent victims of political power struggles.

Blades' profound cynicism is balanced by beautiful, stirring anthems such as "Caminos Verdes" ("Green Roads"), a dream of freedom that has been adopted by a number of religious groups in Blades' homeland. And the title song of the album is a musical tour de force, with Blades' simple, folk-music melody giving way to a steamy instrumental rave-up featuring tough, driving rhythms from pianist Oscar Hernandez and percussionists Eddie Montalvo, Louie Rivera and Ralph Irizarry.

At 35, Blades comes by his performing with solid, even startling, credentials. After receiving a law degree from the University of Panama, Blades came north to New York, the artistic and business center for salsa music. He recorded a few successful songs on his own, then teamed with veteran salsa bandleader and trombonist Willie Colon to create a more hard-edged style of music than salsa fans had ever



Ruben Blades: His music combines rock, salsa and jazz.

Pop topics

heard. With their rough rhythms and scathing lyrics, Blades and Colon held the same position in salsa music that the Rolling Stones hold in rock.

When Blades resumed his solo career a few years ago, he continued to extend the range of pop genres his music could accommodate. With his fondness for mixing realistic and dreamlike details into a surrealistic stew, the thinking behind much of Blades' work resembles that of the great Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It is not surprising at all, therefore, to hear that Blades is planning an album of songs based on eight of Marquez's early short stories. Before that, however, this prickly pop star is going to put his music career in limbo: Beginning in September, he will attend Harvard to study for a master's degree in law.

For his longtime fans, Ruben Blades is a pop idol whose fame rests on his musical experimentation and political commitment. For those of us who are novices to Blades' work, the release of "Buscando America" heralds the arrival of an important new voice.

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3-K