

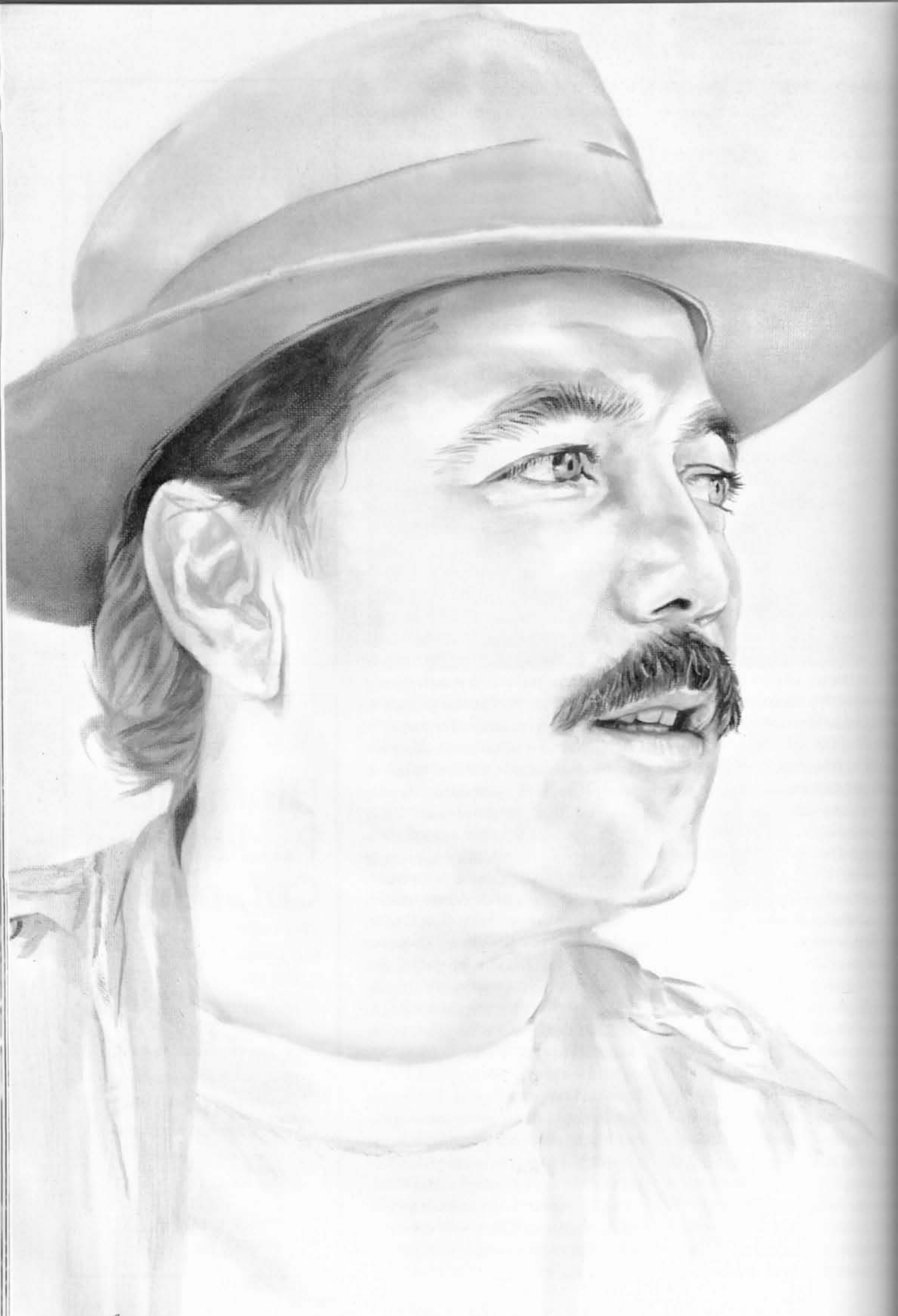
OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 1995

◆ S A L U D O S ◆

HISPANOS

RUBEN BLADES
Master of Salsa and
Jack-of-all-Trades

CAREERS
IN SOCIOLOGY
AND LINGUISTICS



ruben blades

RENAISSANCE
MAN OF
LATIN
AMERICA

Illustration by
Dan Lacey

Ruben Blades can be called by many names—poet, singer, movie actor, politician, a public figure who represents the end-of-the-century true man.... A true renaissance man who broke the boundaries of his country and his fame as the creator of “Pedro Navaja,” the planet’s best-known salsa song. “Rubencito,” as he is affectionately called by his closest friends and most fervent admirers, is a man who has reached success without compromising his ideals or sense of reality.

I had the honor of meeting with Ruben Blades several times. This allowed me to conduct multiple interviews, sorting out the myth from the legend, turning off my tape-recorder and sharing, as we laughed, so many stories about life’s ironic surprises. I meet with Ruben standing, at his office. The phone rings every other minute. Ruben has no assistants. His sweet wife Lisa helps him run the office and asks him for a “besitou” (a kiss, in Spanish) every time they say good-bye. And when Ruben starts talking about music, he drops everything he’s doing and grabs a guitar.

The opportunity to meet several times with Ruben allowed me to throw away my questions, and instead, to carefully piece together the flesh and blood picture of who Ruben Blades is. After each one of our meetings I would go back to his records, and come back the next time with new questions. Once in a while, we would walk along some of Santa Monica’s streets talking about his future projects.

THE FIRST STEPS

METIENDO MANO! (1977)

Ruben’s first album, produced by Willie Colon, includes one of his classic character songs. “Pablo Pueblo” represents the common man, crushed by the system, robbed of hope, whose only joy is “spending what little money he has on a dominos game and a couple of drinks.” As Ruben puts it, “working with Willie Colon was the happiest time of the beginning of my career.” In *Metiendo Mano!* Ruben already shows a definite style, the use of words as social commentary, and a nostalgic and melancholic voice.

SIEMBRA (1978)

The album that made him famous and sold more copies than any other salsa recording. Here the collaboration between Ruben and Willie reached its creative peak. The songs are long and elaborate. “Pedro Navaja” tells a picturesque tale that reaches metaphysical levels: “Life has surprises and is unpredictable,” under the happy resignation of Willie’s trombone and Ruben’s cynical voice as the drunk. In a magnificent example of popular music with substance, Blades interrupts his story by singing: “Like in a Kafka novel, the drunk and turned in to the alley” a line full of suggestion. From beginning to end, a perfect album.

HELMERICH & PAYNE

1579 EAST 21ST STREET • TULSA, OK 74114

Helmerich & Payne pledges equal

access to employment, facilities

and programs, regardless of race,

color, creed, religion, sex, age,

disability, national origin, veteran

or marital status.

An Equal Opportunity Employer.

Thomason Ford

19405 SE McLoughlin Blvd.

Gladstone, OR 97027

Phone: (503) 655-3355

Thomason Ford pledges equal

access to employment, facilities

and programs, regardless of race,

color, creed, religion, sex, age,

disability, national origin, veteran

or marital status.

An Equal Opportunity Employer.

SONGS OF CONFRONTATION

"People who liked salsa were very conservative and somewhat limited. We wanted to expand salsa. Our songs became confrontational, solidarity songs." However, executives at Fania, the record company that controlled salsa in the 1970s, didn't believe in such creative licenses. "They would listen to 'Pedro Navaja' or 'Pablo Pueblo' and say they were no good. They said they were too long, that people only wanted to have fun. They never understood their success."

"But these songs touched the people. People would memorize the words at a time when reading poetry wasn't popular. We came from an environment where we were being force-fed culture, where we had to memorize poems at school against our will. I have no literary aspirations, but I was giving them six-verse poems, offering images they could identify with, and I think that's why they accepted my songs."

MAESTRA VIDA (I AND II, 1980)

One of the few double albums in salsa's history, *Maestra Vida* is unique in many ways. An elaborate musical that mixes rumba with a symphonic orchestra, its text salutes the joys of family life and the importance of tradition. Playing like one of the old men sitting at the cafe, telling stories of past generations, Ruben anticipates his acting career. "I put together the whole show, with a symphonic orchestra, actors and my band. It was the first time they saw something like this in Puerto Rico."

The wounds that Fania gave Ruben have not healed completely. As I mention *Doble Filo*, one of the albums from those times, he raises his voice. "Those were three albums they completely ruined. They took out the vibraphone and the saxes, added trombones. They took out the musicians' credits and changed the sequence of the songs and the titles of the albums. I owe nothing to those people." He later adds, "on the other hand I have to admit that Fania was responsible for making salsa famous."

After bringing up the subject, Ruben appears agitated and indignant. Feeling guilty, I offer my apologies. "Don't worry,"

he answers as he walks back and forth, "it's part of reality."

FROM "SALSERO" TO POLITICIAN

BUSCANDO AMERICA (1984)

In *Buscando America*, Ruben declares his independence. Under contract with an American record company, Elektra Records, he records an album far superior to *Siembra*, showing the same qualities as a performer and composer, now enlightened by maturity.

Buscando America searches for (and at times finds) itself and also its creator, Ruben Blades, no longer "rumbero," but now humanist and future politician. "Decisiones," continues to talk of the forces of destiny, but with sharper humor. "El padre Antonio y el Monaguillo Andres," perhaps the best song of his career, is a tribute to Monsignor Romero, the Salvadoran martyr. Avoiding the obvious political speech, the song delivers, instead, a musical "tour de force" from his new band, Seis del Solar (later, *Son del Solar*).

"Politics came into my life more as a result of discrepancies with reality," says Blades. "I always wrote for the people. As time went by, a gap occurred between the subject of the songs and the man who wrote them. 'I was at my house, living like a king, and continuing to sing about 'Pedro Navaja.' This was a terrible contradiction. There had to be some consistency between what I was writing about and my personal life. That's why I returned to Panama and got into politics. I had to deal with the consequences of my success. Success alienates a society of losers where the key-word is 'losing.'"

THE BEGINNINGS

It wasn't an easy road to "Pedro Navaja." Growing up in Panama, an adolescent Ruben admired the Beatles and the trend of the late '60s that transformed English pop music into an international phenomenon. "One day I listened to a singer new to me, Cheo Feliciano. I realized that you could do the same things, but singing in Spanish."

When his family moved to the United States, Ruben went to law school at

Harvard, but never abandoned his dream of becoming a singer. He had already recorded in Panama, but when he visited the headquarters of Fania in New York City, couldn't get past the front desk. He struggled to make his way through, and thanks to some references, ended up signing on an album with Ray Barreto. By the time he recorded "El Cazangero" with Willie Colon, success was imminent.

But Ruben's ambitions didn't end there. "I went through the stage of parties, pretty girls, and limousines," he says. "That doesn't interest me anymore." Unlike many of his salsa colleagues, Ruben never did drugs, never got carried away by fame and success. On the contrary, he aggressively pursued a career as a movie actor that had already begun with *The Last Fight*, a failed film attempt from Fania. On his own, Ruben as an actor has met almost as much success as he has as a singer. He's acted in the movies *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Predator 2*, *The Two Jakes* and most recently *Color of Night*. This last one was trashed by the critics, who saw Ruben's performance as the only positive element of the movie.

Nonetheless, Ruben deplores the marginalization of Latinos in Hollywood. "I'm tired of playing the role of 'Detective Garcia' with a Cuban accent. It seems that in every movie there is a secondary role for a black or a Latino. And they are always clichés, cardboard characters." Maybe that's why Ruben has plans to produce and star in a TV show about the adventures of a genuinely Hispanic character, and would eventually like to direct a motion picture.

Of course, there is politics. Even though he lost the fight for Panama's presidency, Blades feels content having come in at third place (or second, as some suggest), and feels that the commitment of his party to the people is as alive as ever. "The only thing is that politics kept me away from my music, and I'm glad to be able to return to it."

NEW HORIZONS

From the speakers at Ruben's studio we can hear "Cambalache," a surrealistic tango made popular by Argentinian singer, Susana Rinaldi.

Ruben's version sounds fresh and mischievous. It's followed by a new song that could be titled "Song from the '90s," or "Latin-American pop." Ruben smiles proudly. "It's the band," he explains. We are listening to a new direction.

"We reached the goal we wanted to achieve with the band. Keeping a direction and momentum, I tried to point out different styles. But the genre's structure doesn't allow you to go too far. As much as we tried, with songs like "Cilindro" and "Amor y Control" (both in 1992), there is a definite margin established by the "clave," (the rhythmic pattern of salsa). Our next album will break those margins. Some people don't even imagine the versatility of the group."

Ruben is getting ready to launch five projects this year. The first is an album recorded entirely in Panama by Ruben and a new band with whom he's also planning a tour. The album is no longer salsa. "Lucho" is a sweet ballad about a young Latino who attempts suicide. Ruben is also talking about an album of ballads, a children's album, and another one which would include orchestral versions of his greatest hits.

THE LAST MEETING

In the middle of the afternoon in Santa Monica, I couldn't resist the urge to ask Ruben if he was aware of his place in the music world. He thought about it for a while, before telling me he didn't think he was all that popular. After trying to refute such an argument, I tried to make him see his contributions to the history of popular music, to the collective subconscious where fragments of his words and lyrics, and one or two Afro-Caribbean rhythms will forever live. Still, Ruben didn't take it seriously.

Searching for words, I was able to say what I really wanted to say; that our children, the children of all of us who fill our lives with his music, our children will sing "Ojos de Perro Azul."

And then Ruben looked at me, and understood, maybe, how important is what we are, and do, and its ramifications. "It's true," he said, like confirming it to himself, "It's true." ■

SIMMONS FOODS INCORPORATED

P.O. Box 430,
Siloam Springs, Arkansas 72761

Simmons Foods Inc. pledges equal access to employment, facilities and programs, regardless of race, color, creed, religion, sex, age, disability, national origin, veteran or marital status. An Equal Opportunity Employer.

COOPER COOPER POWER SYSTEMS

100 Industrial Park
Lumberton, MS 39455-8601

Cooper Power Systems pledges equal access to employment, facilities and programs, regardless of race, color, creed, religion, sex, age, disability, national origin, veteran or marital status.

An Equal Opportunity Employer.



SALUDOS 72 HISPANOS