

Maestra Vida, Vol. II

Ruben Blades

1980

A true work of art, **Maestra Vida** stands at the apex of **Ruben Blades'** creative output –a jewel of shining musical, lyrical and literal homage to lives of struggle. A salsa opera tracing the bitter/tragic lives of two generations, “Maestra Vida” is as much a musical masterpiece showcasing Blades' vocal power, lyrics and storytelling creativity as it is a showpiece for the orchestration and music produced by Willie Colon.

From the fertile flowers of influences of Bertolt Brecht's Three Penny Opera, *Chico Buarque's Opera Do Malandro*, *Tite Curet Alonso* and the pieces of magic realism from *Gabriel Garcia Marquez* all dancing around the beats of Africa that bump through Spanish conquered soil only to be captured on urban New York vinyl, Ruben Blades' “Maestra Vida” becomes the first Salsa Opera dealing with the circle of life, love, birth and death.

Labeled a *disco/drama*, “Maestra Vida” joins drama with prose, poetry and song in an operatic circle of life.

The same lush orchestration that introduces Vol. I drapes the instrumental introduction here. But this is a more relaxed pace. A held back bolero highlighted by strings, the harmonics sadder, darker in tone and deeper in instrumentation. No pop orchestrated *chacha bossa* here, until its very end, to introduce the narrator that takes us back to the *Bar of the Boring*.

The characters Manuela and Carmelo are elderly now. Their son Ramiro is estranged from them. Praying for strength, the opening song finds Manuela in church, sporting the nasally and popular Willie Colon coro of Cardona, Mangual, Colon and now Blades.

Enhanced by the masterful bass work of Sal Cuevas, this innovative salsa opus mixes mind over matter in a rhythmically danceable format in “Manuela Despues (La Doña),” ending in what sounds like Gregorian chants amid bells and a thumping bass.

Very much in the vocal style of *trova* merging into a slow *chacha* the story continues to unfold. A brokenhearted father laments the estrangement of his son underscored through the tones and colors of the orchestra where a bowed double bass captures the depths of Carmelo's dark depression.

The lyrics find Carmelo touching the memory of Manuela through the gold of his wedding band before he's found dead in a chair, between the dust and butterflies of memories of the past.

This musical drama then segues into another duo between Ruben and his mother to end the piece. Then, in a clear nod in style to his friend and mentor Cheo Feliciano, Ruben sings of Ramiro's remorse for not being closer to his parents, culminating in the chorus for the School of Life: *Maestra Vida, camara. Te da y te quita, te quita y te da.*

The tune becomes a bomba that morphs again into a *decima* with Ruben singing in character as the son who left home and didn't look back. Until it was too late.

A stark reality of life: to give, to take, to take and give again.

Writing to Paula C from the first Maestra Vida tour of South America, Ruben

Blades could not believe these two masterpieces were finally released. *“I feel very changed and different”* he wrote, *“as if an enormous weight has been lifted from my soul.”* He was excited but also saddened by the plight of the people. Maestra Vida portrayed Ruben Blades as a political rebel rather than as the creative storyteller and artist he is. *“I guess words are as powerful as bullets”* he told Paula C in those letters.

Fearing the concerts would attract “revolutionaries,” several Latin American governments stationed its military around the concert stadiums. In August of 1980, a riot occurred at the concert in Bogota, Colombia leaving four people dead, scores wounded and the stadium partially destroyed. This was not what Ruben intended.

Maestra Vida, camara. Te da y te quita, te quita y te da.

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