



# RUBEN BLADES

From Amnesty concerts to acting roles, Rubén Blades is Panama's best-known musical export. **Chris Moss** surveys the extraordinary career of a salsa superstar

Only a few contemporary Latin American artists have succeeded in the US and Europe. Panamanian singer-songwriter, musician, actor and activist Rubén Blades is a special case of an artist who has made crossing over his *raison d'être*. Songs such as 'Paula C', 'Juan Pachanga', 'Pedro Navaja', 'Tiburón' and

'Plástico' are anthems in the Spanish-speaking world, but Blades' impact on salsa started in New York and spread out from there.

The stars were configured to make it so. Blades was born on July 16 1948 in Panama City, to a Colombian-born father who played the bongo and a Cuban-born mother who sang and played piano. As a child he learned

how to play the guitar, and honed his skills with rock songs from the US before he started writing his own protest songs.

In the 40s and 50s, the Panama Canal and a swathe of jungle and real estate alongside it were under the control of the US. For patriotic Panamanians this was an anachronism and an affront. On January 9

1964, 21 students were killed by Panama Canal Zone police officers for raising a Panamanian flag – their legal right. Blades has often alluded to this backdrop when highlighting the difference between Latino culture in the US and in Latin America itself.

In the late 60s, Blades made his first singles and a debut album, *Rubén Blades con los Salvajes del Ritmo*, before travelling to New York in 1970 to record *De Panama a New York* with the band of ex-boogaloo star Pete 'El Conde' Rodríguez. He was at the time still enrolled at the University of Panama, from which he graduated in 1972 with a law degree.

When Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega accused Blades' father of being in the CIA, the family went into exile in Miami. Blades visited them and then moved to New York City, where he got a job in the post room at salsa label Fania Records. A stint with Nuyorican conga player Ray Barretto's band led to several songwriting commissions and to his meeting Puerto Rican trombonist Willie Colón.

Blades and Colón made influential albums, including *Siembra* (1978), which went gold. A salsa-style opera, *Maestra Vida*, was released in 1980, with Colón overseeing the production of the album.

On these early discs, Blades' soft, lilting vocal style and radical lyrics showed a debt to the Cuban *nueva trova* movement. But other creative currents ran under the surface. As Sue Steward wrote in the book *Salsa: Musical Heartbeat of Latin America* (1999): 'The creative partnership between Blades and Colón redefined salsa. Their songs were threaded with influences from the Beatles, Latin folk, soul, and the Brazilian tropicália sound.'

Blades and Colón fell out with Fania over royalties issues, and went their separate ways. In 1982 Blades formed a new salsa sextet, Seis del Solar, incorporating rock, pop and jazz elements, and using synths in place of brass. Signed to the Elektra label, the band's 1984 debut, *Buscando América*, impressed for its musical and social values, and was hailed by some critics as the first crossover salsa album. One track, 'Desapariciones', explores the theme of Latin America's 'Disappeared.' Others recount stories of urban hardship, machismo, gang-related violence and women's rights. Mixing with West Coast liberals like Jackson Browne and Linda

Ronstadt, Blades said he was looking beyond from the street corner, "down the neighbouring street, then the city, then the world."

Blades took a break from music between 1984 and 1985 to study for a master's degree in international law at Harvard. "I want to be known as something besides a performer when I finally return to Panama," he said. In May 1994, he unsuccessfully ran for the presidency as a candidate of the centre-left Papa Egoró (Mother Earth) party. The campaign suffered many setbacks, from funding issues to allegations that Blades was a CIA agent, a communist and a Noriega sympathiser.

But he never stopped making music. In 1986 he won his first Grammy for *Escenas*, and appeared at the Amnesty International: A Conspiracy of Hope tour alongside Fela Kuti, Carlos Santana, Lou Reed and Sting. The following year he released his first English-language album, *Nothing but the Truth*, on which he worked with Elvis Costello, Lou

Reed and Sting. Songs about the Iran-Contra scandal and the AIDS crisis earned Blades the nickname 'the Latin Bruce Springsteen.'

He debuted as an actor in the film *The Last Fight* (1983), playing the role of gambler-turned-boxer and salsa singer Andy 'Kid' Clave. The salsa-themed *Crossover Dreams*

(1985) followed and – once again crossing over in some style – Blades went on to land roles in feature films such as *Cradle Will Rock* (1999) and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003).

Blades' later albums have won Grammy and Latin Grammy awards. *Mundo* (2002) brought in Afro-Argentinian, Brazilian and Irish influences, and *Across 110th Street* (2004) was a nostalgic outing with the Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

Some scholars and journalists have said Blades has been canonised in foreign media at the expense of others, pointing to *Crossover Dreams* and his English-language songs as evidence. But on the closing bars of 'Plástico' – the opening track of his 1978 album *Siembra* – Blades reads out a register of Latin American nations, his chorus responding 'presente.' If his Anglophone ambitions spring from commercial savvy, Rubén Blades' pan-continental embrace reflects an innate humanity allied to a basic belief that Latin America is as great as the US or Europe – and, sometimes, a whole lot cooler. ♦

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### BEST ALBUMS

**Siembra** (Fania, 1978)  
 Rubén Blades' first collaboration with singer and trombonist Willie Colón is one of the best-selling salsa albums of all time; the groundbreaking disco treatments, poetic lyrics and smooth arrangements still shimmer.

**Maestra Vida** (Fania, 1980)  
 The libretto of Blades' neglected salsa opera (with a few other genres woven in) deals with dark themes and the strings and horns soar without abandoning the *clave* rhythm. Willie Colón oversaw the production on this double album.

**Eba Say Ajá** (Ariel Rivas Music, 2012)  
 This is the Grammy-nominated collaboration with Blades covering songs written by his friend Cheo Feliciano and vice versa, to produce a rich mix of spiralling solos, cool vibes, tight choruses and Cuban-inflected arrangements.

**Tangos** (Sunnyside Records, 2014)  
 Blades' latest release is an intriguing one for a man who has built his reputation on salsa. On *Tangos* he revisits some of his classic hits together with Argentina's Leopoldo Federico Orchestra, delving into the world of tango. A Top of the World review in #102.

### BEST COMPILATION

**Anthology** (Fania, 2012)  
 This double compilation album features 27 tracks recorded from Rubén Blades' time with the New York City-based Fania label, including all the early-period singles and anthems. It's a must-own, must-dance salsa compilation.

### IF YOU LIKE RUBEN BLADES, THEN TRY:

**Cheo Feliciano**  
 **Cheo** (Fania, 1972)  
 This is the swinging solo debut of Rubén Blades' Fania label mate, the Puerto Rican *salsero* Cheo Feliciano, who tragically died in a car accident in April 2014. The track 'Anacaona' still packs dance floors from San Juan to Santiago de Chile.