

## A Guiding Star

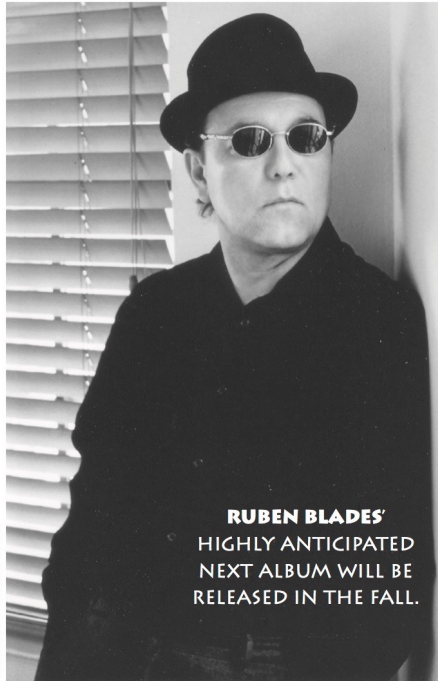
BY ROBERT LEAVER

**S**alsa superstar, successful actor, founder of a new political party in Panama, and graduate of Harvard law school, **Ruben Blades** has nothing more he needs to prove to anybody. But, as with all true artists, he has more that he wants to say. His song "Pedro Navaja," from the *Siembra* album he did with Willie Colon in 1978 is perhaps the single most famous salsa tune ever composed. In recent years he has tried to break out of the salsa mold and stretch into other Latin musical modes with a new group of talented young musicians. Well, on his new release, *Mundo* (Columbia), he goes one step further than he or anyone else has ever done integrating Afro-Cuban, Arabic and Celtic music into a totally new musical expression. This self-produced album is an unequivocal masterpiece. Employing a huge range of instruments to play complicated arrangements, he makes it all sound simple as he sings his deep, poetic lyrics. A truly risky project, this record could have easily been a disaster but his positive world vision and sheer talent have made his muse proud. At a time when xenophobia is rampant and the world seems to be breaking apart he presents us with a timely, joyful vision. Reconnecting the musical threads of Africa, Arabia, Europe and the Americas via the trek of the Moors and the Middle Passage, Blades shines like a wizened sage.

"Estampa" (Profile) starts with a beautiful tres guitar melody by Puerto Rican Nelson Gonzalez, whose excellent album *Pa los Treseros* was reviewed previously in this column [Vol. 21 #2], and evolves into an Afro-Cuban romp that pays homage to the seminal record by Grupo Folklórico y Experimental Nuevayorquino. Blades sets a serious tone with the Afro-Cuban roots of his musical path and as the full band kicks in with horns swinging his emotion begins to swell. The chorus refrain sings "no te olvidaremos" (we won't forget you), remembering the *rumberos* who kept on until they reached the heavens.

"The First Circle" introduces a celestial doo-wop-inflected chorus as an acoustic guitar and violin meander through sadly sweet melodies. "Primogenio" (Beginnings) starts with bagpipes, then the Arabic percussion kicks in as Blades reaches back to the ancient Moorish vein that flows through the Iberian peninsula and later invokes the Santería deity Elegua who opens the path.

"Bochinchas" (Gossip) finds its footing squarely in Arabo-Andalusian sand as Blades delivers a gravely-voiced *cante hondo* vocal performance that should make him an honorary mem-



RUBEN BLADES' HIGHLY ANTICIPATED NEXT ALBUM WILL BE RELEASED IN THE FALL.

ber of the flamenco singers guild; as the song builds saxophone slides in, a salsa piano riff takes off and timbales propel the rhythm. "Parao" is a more sparse tune that employs guitar, sax and violin while Blades sings that he wishes to remain always on his feet and how life's hard blows and those costly things are what temper us and make life worth living. Blades manages to be a realist and a romantic at the same time as he delivers his positive message, ending the tune with sublime spoken verse.

"Como Nosotros" (Like Us) floats along a wave of hand percussion, guitar and a gentle flute. Blades remembers the dreams of childhood, the difficulty of adolescence, reminding us that there are others throughout the world, children, like us, who also have hopes and troubles, and what's important is that we simply try. "El Capitan y la Sirena" fuses the accordion-driven *vallenato* of Colombia with an incessant Arabic rhythm as vocal scats enter from the right and left. Assuming the role of a cosmic storyteller, Blades is looking for that guiding star that shines over us all.

Blades uses his formidable skills as an accomplished storyteller to tell the story of a crazy man from the barrio named "Sebastian." Again, the instrumentation is non-conventional employing both strings and *batá* drums. Dramatic tension builds as bagpipes bring in Celtic melodies and Blades voice rises with excitement. "Jiri Son Bali"

starts an Afro-Cuban folkloric tune that sports a supple chorus of female vocals then shifts to Latin New York circa the '70s as the horns and rhythm section spark the salsa embers.

Blades dedicates "Danny Boy" to the firemen who died on 9/11 and gives us the most unique arrangement of this tune to date. A superb female vocalist sings the song in English while Afro-Cuban percussion slowly enters into the Celtic fold leading to Blades own Spanish vocals before the rousing instrumental Celto-Latin outro. "La Ruta" is a homage to the great flamenco singer Camarón de la Isla that proves Blades must have a *gitano* spirit guiding him. This amazing musical voyage ends with a joyous salsa tune to St. Patrick that showcases what must be the first (successful) musical pairing of bagpipes with sacred Cuban *batá* drums. While the listener is left wanting more he can take solace in the knowledge that *Mundo* only gets better with repeated listening.

Another salsa legend, pianist **Eddie Palmieri**, also has an excellent new release entitled *La Perfecta II* on the Concord Picante label. From the early '60s through the '80s Palmieri was one of most recognized and respected Latin musicians. In more recent years he has preferred to play Latin jazz in smaller ensembles for which he has garnered several Grammy awards. But his salsa fans have no doubt been pressuring him to return to his roots and give them something to dance to. With this record he should please both new and old fans alike.

Quite literally half jazz and half salsa, Palmieri alternates the styles in a way that flows quite naturally, the two styles being based on Afro-Cuban rhythms. For the salsa part he has decided to resurrect tunes played by his influential group *La Perfecta* 40 years ago, hence the album title, *La Perfecta II*. This heralded group from the early '60s is credited with paving the way for the New York salsa sound that developed later.

For this project he enlisted the help of a stellar brass section centered around three trombones and the flute of the legendary Eddie Zervigon, director of *Orquesta Broadway*, one of Palmieri's competitors 40 years back during the Palladium era. With rock steady Joe Santiago on bass, Joe Claussell on timbales, and the great vocalist Herman Olivera of *Conjunto Libre* fame, this band is dynamic and as tight as a ballroom dancer's cummerbund.

On the jazz cuts the band expands with the addition of veteran Mario Rivera on baritone sax and Cuban musicians Yosvany Terry on alto sax and Dafnis Prieto on trap drums. Prieto is an absolute monster on the drums and his presence