

IT'S TIME RUBÉN BLADES WAS ACCEPTED INTO THE AMERICAN CANON

A major figure of New York City's cultural life for more than half a century, Blades brought a New York-born musical style to the world at large.

By Graciela Mochkofsky

October 6, 2023



Save this story



On August 16th, fifty-three years after his musical début in New York City, Rubén Blades filled Manhattan's fourth-largest theatre, the United Palace, in Washington Heights, with a concert that offered a retrospective of his career. What drove him through those fifty-three years is also the matter of his forthcoming autobiography, to be published by Knopf. Its tentative title is "Life Is Full of Surprises," a line from his song "Pedro Navaja," which is arguably the most popular salsa song of all time. The title seems appropriate: his life and work are surprisingly eclectic. But the biggest surprise of his long, prolific career is that Blades, a major figure of New York City's cultural life for more than half a century, who brought a New York-born musical style to the world at large, has still not been accepted into the American canon.

A singer and songwriter, the winner of eleven Grammys and eleven Latin Grammys, Blades transformed salsa, the Afro-Caribbean dance music developed in New York City in the nineteen-sixties, by making it a vehicle for stories with a social-justice and anticolonial slant. Blades "is just as significant as Víctor Jara, Bob Dylan, Bob Marley in terms of writing about social-justice issues and where society needs to be better," Félix Contreras, the co-creator and host of "Alt.Latino," NPR's show on Latin music since 2010, told me. "In fact, he is probably even more powerful, because he is speaking for a whole continent." "His songs captured the everyday life of New York Latinos and all Latin Americans," Frances Aparicio, a former director of the Latina and Latino Studies program at Northwestern University and the author of "[Listening to Salsa](#)," told me. Blades is a major Latino cultural figure in New York City, where he has resided most of his life, and also a well-known political figure in his native country of Panama. And yet, Aparicio told me, "Anglo America doesn't see him." In that sense, she said, he embodies Latinos' "struggles to find success in this country."

The son of a Cuban mother, herself a singer and an actress, and a Colombian father (a detective who worked with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency in

Panama, according to his son), Blades was a student at Universidad Nacional de Panamá when a military coup shut down the school, in 1968. Blades has often told the story of how his mother, fearing that he'd join an opposition movement, sent him to New York as a birthday present. His family didn't have the money for a ticket, but his brother, who worked for Pan American, got him on a plane at a discounted rate. And a Cuban singer who was a friend of the family provided him with a letter to take to the Edison Hotel, on West Forty-seventh Street, to get a cheap room.

In Panama City, Blades had met Pancho Cristal, a major Latin-music producer from New York, during a recording session. Blades, who began singing with local bands when he was in high school, was filling in for another singer. Impressed, Cristal suggested that Blades should look for him if he was ever in New York to record an album. Blades did, which led to his first album, "From Panama to New York." Recorded in three weeks of 1969, when he was twenty-one, it was not a big hit. Still, it introduced the element that would make Blades one of the most influential figures in salsa. The first song, "Juan González," tells of a military patrol in an unnamed country that comes into a town bearing news that they killed a guerrilla fighter during an ambush in a ravine. Salsa typically deals with subjects such as masculinity, poverty, and street crime—sometimes with humor. Songs written as short stories about the political struggles of Latin Americans were unheard of.

Blades went back to Panama, getting a degree in law and political science when the university reopened, but he settled in New York City in 1974, when it seemed headed toward bankruptcy. "It smelled of trash, tobacco, and diesel. It was a dangerous city," Blades remembered. But it was also a vibrant center of "salsa and jazz, and the punk-rock movement was beginning to make its noise. It was a wonderful place to be. Also, it was cheap." A Panamanian law degree was of no use, so he got a job in the mailroom at Fania Records, the label at the center of Latin music at the time. He took his guitar to work every day, hoping for a chance to impress somebody. He eventually met Ray Barreto, a leading figure in the early salsa scene, who was looking for a singer. Blades

said that Barreto interrogated him “for an hour, trying to understand what a lawyer was doing in the mailroom.” Finally, he agreed to give him an audition, and Blades was hired as a singer. Not long afterward, Blades started a years-long collaboration with the trombonist and bandleader Willie Colón, another salsa pioneer, whose albums sold tens of thousands of copies. Colón’s stardom offered Blades a platform solid enough to boldly break with the conventional. (They fell out in 2007 when Colón sued Blades for breach of contract; a legal battle followed, resulting in decisions in Blades’s favor.)

A voracious reader since an early age, and a poet in high school, Blades had always seen himself as a storyteller. A storyteller is born, he told me, “when you are young and your mother asks you who broke the glass, and you don’t tell the truth, you tell the story.” His characters “are just as vivid and powerful as those of any Latin American novelist,” Contreras told me. The song “Pablo Pueblo” (“Pablo the People”), for example, tells of a poor man who comes home feeling tired and defeated after a long day’s work. The politicians who promised change had proved to be disappointments. “Until when?” will he have to live this way, he asks himself, before falling asleep hungry. “Pedro Navaja” is about a criminal who attacks a sex worker in the street; he stabs her, but she has a gun, and shoots him. They both die, and a drunk passerby takes the gun, the knife, and the “two pesos” they were carrying. The chorus is: “Life is full of surprises.”

Blades has written songs about the materialism of society (“Plástico”), the murder of the Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero (“El Padre Antonio y Su Monaguillo Andrés”), a white upper-class woman who falls in love with a Black working-class musician (“Ligia Elena”), the disappeared people of Latin America (“Desapariciones”), and U.S. imperialism (“Tiburón,” or “Shark”). Some of his songs were banned by repressive regimes in Latin America (including in Panama) and by Cuban radio shows in Florida, where “Tiburón” was labelled as pro-Communist.

Blades said that he was aware that he was creating “something that did not exist at the time.” He saw the “incredible opportunity” of having two strangers

close to each other on the dance floor (salsa is a contact dance) suddenly “sharing common ground.” So he told them stories that mattered, about their mother or their country, about politics, race, and their daily lives. Several of his songs were too long for the usual commercial requirements of radio: “Pablo Pueblo” is more than six minutes long; “Pedro Navaja,” more than seven. Fania agreed to release “Siembra” (1978), the album that “Pedro Navaja” is on, only because Colón played on it. They feared a flop; they said that it would be “Willie Colón’s commercial death,” Blades said. Instead, it became one of the best-selling salsa albums of all time. For the past forty-five years, Blades has sung the songs from “Siembra” in stadiums and concert halls around the world; when he gets to the chorus of “Pedro Navaja,” the crowds sing, “Life is full of surprises.”

Earlier this year, Lin-Manuel Miranda talked to *Rolling Stone* about the impact of hearing Blades’s songs for the first time. He realized that “you can write a tasty hook, you can write incredibly complex rhythms, and you can be telling a story all at the same time. I really don’t know of any other Latin writers who staked out so much territory for what can be a song. It’s like if you listen to pop music on the radio your whole life, and then you hear Randy Newman and go, ‘Oh, my God, it can also be *that*.’ ”

Just as Blades didn’t feel constrained by the conventions of salsa, he never felt limited by genre or language. In 1988, he released an album, “Nothing But the Truth,” his only entirely in English, that included two songs with Lou Reed, two with Elvis Costello, and one with Sting. He also recorded a beautiful, up-tempo version of the Beatles’ “Baby’s in Black” (on the 1992 album “Amor y Control.”) He’s had a long and fruitful collaboration with jazz musicians, and has recorded songs popularized by Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett. “I wanted to do something that would make them smile and go, ‘Oh, that’s a nice switch,’ ” he told me. He rearranged a few of their songs, changing some of the lyrics, and recorded them with Roberto Delgado and his (salsa) Orchestra for an album released in 2021 called “Salswing!” It features, Blades said, “The best version of “Pennies from Heaven” that I’ve ever heard.”

And yet, in spite of all these efforts, Blades has never been entirely accepted by Anglo audiences in the United States. A main obstacle has been language. “Given the central role of his songs as sites for storytelling,” Aparicio told me, “monolingual Anglo listeners clearly miss the rich social content and references of his songs, with which Latinos and Latin Americans identify strongly. In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, Spanish was still considered a domestic language, to be used at home within the intimate spaces of family, friends, and community, but not appropriate for the larger public spaces in urban areas.”

In search of different types of recognition, perhaps, Blades graduated from Harvard Law School in 1985, and he also began acting. He has appeared in about forty movies, including “The Milagro Beanfield War” (1988), “Mo’ Better Blues” (1990), “The Super” (1991), “Once Upon a Time in Mexico” (2003), “Safe House” (2012), “The Counselor” (2013), and “Hands of Stone” (2016), working with directors such as Robert Redford, Robert Rodríguez, and Spike Lee, and actors including Antonio Banderas, Denzel Washington, Sonia Braga, and Penélope Cruz.

His attempts to reach different audiences were not without tensions. “He really struggled with crossover,” Aparicio said. “His own individual figure did not always follow the expectation of working-class musicians in New York. He was Panamanian, white, Harvard-educated. He opened the doors of salsa to be more accepted by all kinds of classes in Latin America. And, at the same time, he connects with the working-class Latino New York.” Interestingly, one of Blades’s first movies, “Crossover Dreams” (1985), tells the story of Rudy Veloz, whom the *Times* described as “a popular singer from East Harlem who tries and fails to ‘cross over’ from the Latin music market into the mainstream of American pop.” Veloz abandons his barrio and his girlfriend to pursue his ambition, but fails, and returns to East Harlem and Latin music.

In between projects, Blades also spent years in Panama, where he ran for President in 1994. He told me he did it to send a message to young Panamanians, who didn’t get involved in politics because it was corrupt: “It’s corrupt because people like us don’t participate,” he said. (“Pablo Pueblo” was

one of his campaign songs.) He got seventeen per cent of the vote. Then, from 2004 to 2009, he served as the minister of tourism in the center-left administration of President Martín Torrijos. A few years later, wanting to come back into the spotlight—“people were asking, ‘Is he dead?’ ” Blades said, with a laugh—he took a role in “Fear the Walking Dead,” a post-apocalyptic zombie show that streams on AMC. He played Daniel Salazar, a Salvadoran killer trained by the C.I.A. The series has been broadcast worldwide, and has brought him another new audience. “All of a sudden, you have somebody in Nigeria who doesn’t know about ‘Pedro Navaja,’ who goes, ‘Daniel Salazar sings!’ ” Blades said.

At seventy-five, he’s still making music, and collaborating with younger artists. Following an earlier project with the Puerto Rican group Calle 13 (“La Perla”), in the past couple of years he has recorded with the Mexican singer-songwriter Natalia Lafourcade (“Tú Sí Sabes Quererme”), and the Uruguayan Jorge Drexler, whose eclectic music is rooted in Río de la Plata rhythms (“El Plan Maestro”). In 2021, Blades heard about three Spanish roommates who formed a trio during the first COVID lockdown in that country. They called themselves Stay Homas, and recorded songs on their terrace in Barcelona, sometimes improvising with a glass bottle and a plastic bucket, then uploaded them to social media. Blades proposed a collaboration, and joined them from New York, via cellphone, to record “Es por Tí” in June, 2021. (Stay Homas has since released two albums and toured across Europe.)

Blades says that he wants to make sure he spends his time “playing all kinds of music” and that he has “more and more time to be able to expand” on what he wants to play and to say. He wished concerts could be longer—the standard, he said, is ninety minutes. “I’m always hoping that I get at least two hours,” he told me. His book manuscript is on the long side, too: more than four hundred pages, that end “with a question mark, because my life is not over.”

But these times are different. To begin with, the Latinx population is now almost twenty per cent of the country, up from five per cent when Blades started his career, in the seventies. The crossover from Latin music to

mainstream seems much more likely—although Blades told me that he rejects that term, because “crossing over implies you have to leave something behind.” Aparicio noted that “today, the global popularity of Bad Bunny, Rosalía, J Balvin, and Maluma, among other reggaetoneros and pop singers who sing in Spanish, may be explained by the demographic growth of bilingual Latinx youth.” Contreras sees Blades as a pioneer. “I think time has caught up with him,” he told me. “Rosalía and Bad Bunny and everybody else have him to thank for making that stand and being popular.” ♦



Graciela Mochkofsky is a contributing writer for The New Yorker and the author of “The Prophet of the Andes: An Unlikely Journey to the Promised Land.” She is the dean at CUNY’s Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism.