

PANAMA, PRIMED

Rubén Blades and his countrymen are dancing to a home-grown rhythm that is full of energy and promise.

By Agustin Gurza, L.A. Times Staff Writer
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PANAMA has always been a convenient shortcut for travelers on their way somewhere else. The Spaniards used it to haul treasures from Peru. Prospectors used it to race by rail to California for the Gold Rush. And the whole world still uses its canal, the fastest way to move cargo and cruise ships between oceans.

Poor Panama. Always a detour, never a destination.

But I didn't come here earlier this month to cross the canal or even to look at its locks. I came to explore something that has been as overlooked as the country itself: its music and culture.

My guide to this largely undiscovered world was Rubén Blades, Panama's most celebrated pop culture figure. The acclaimed salsa singer and songwriter, who ran unsuccessfully for president here in 1994, now serves as minister of tourism, a job that, like his songs, he has undertaken with creative spirit and a sense of social purpose.

Today, he may be the country's second most recognizable name — after Gen. Manuel Noriega. But Blades bristles when reporters ask him about the dictator whom U.S. forces ousted during a military invasion almost 17 years ago. Time to look at Panama in a different light, Blades says.

Noriega's exodus sparked a surge of creativity and a corresponding nationalism among Blades and some of his contemporaries, motivated by a new faith in their country and its promise for the future.

That artistic energy and sense of purpose were evident during a performance I attended on my first night in the now-booming Central American capital, part of a six-day stay.

The show featured Rómulo Castro, a stirring singer-songwriter who had gone into self-imposed exile in Cuba during the Noriega regime. It was a dark and depressing period for him and his young nation, both politically and creatively. Castro returned just in time to see his homeland invaded and occupied, another blow to the national psyche.

Yet it was shortly after the 1989 invasion that Castro wrote his most famous song, "La Rosa de los Vientos" (The Rose of the Winds). Blades recorded the poetic, uplifting number on a 1996 album of the same name, which went on to win a Grammy for best tropical performance.

The title song is an expression of hope, Castro told friends and fans during the recent show at Xoko (pronounced sho-ko), a Spanish restaurant in the central district of El Cangrejo, where he regularly performs with Taira, his rousing Afro-Panamanian group.

"Rubén was supposed to come tonight, but I guess Martín didn't let him," Castro cracked between songs.

He was referring to Panamanian President Martín Torrijos, who made Blades his tourism czar two years ago, elevating the singer and the post to his Cabinet. Blades hasn't performed publicly since he took the job, hoping to avoid criticism from political opponents.

By largely giving up his recording and acting careers, Blades is sending a signal that there's more to Panama than we may have thought.

And he's right.

A booming place

Today, Panama doesn't seem at all like a banana republic. Visitors to Panama City will be instantly struck by the multimillion-dollar building boom that is transforming the capital's skyline with new office towers, hotels, condominiums and casinos.

They include developer Donald Trump's 65-story Trump Ocean Club, with its stunning tower shaped like a yacht sail, planned for Punta Pacífica on the northwestern side of the Bay of Panama. And the planned Museum of Biodiversity to be built on the Amador Causeway at the opposite side, with its own fanciful design by architect Frank Gehry, whose wife is Panamanian. Civic boosters hope it will do for Panama what Gehry's Guggenheim Museum did for the Spanish city of Bilbao.

It takes a little more effort — and good local guides like Blades and his tourism staff — to find first-class Latin music here. But that concert on the first night convinced me that, given time, Panama's artistic profile could match its surging economic stature.

In interviews during my visit, El Ministro, as Blades' staff respectfully calls him, reminisced about growing up in Panama's poorer barrios, about leaving for New York as a young man in the early '70s to pursue his career in music and film, and about his reason for giving all that up to come home, another repatriated artist brimming with aspirations for his homeland.

Toward the end of the Noriega dictatorship, Blades tried to capture what it meant to be Panamanian in his song "Patria," from his rootsy 1988 album "Antecedente." It's considered a second national anthem here, but I didn't really appreciate the song until I heard Castro and his group perform it.

Young vocalist Luis Arteaga closed his eyes, tapped his heart in rhythm with the clave, the essential beat of Afro-Cuban music, and sang the lyric with a soaring spirituality. "Homeland is so many lovely things/ Don't commit to memory the lessons of dictatorship and detention/ Homeland is a sentiment like the gaze of an old man/ It is the sunshine of eternal spring / It is the smile of a newborn little sister."

Diversity on display

It's tough to make a nation out of a young republic with so many disparate ethnic elements, Blades would later explain. Until 1903, Panama was a provincial outpost of neighboring Colombia.

Panama's fabulous folkloric diversity went on display on the last full day of my visit, a sunny Sunday when the heavens suspended their daily tropical downpour. It was the Desfile de las Mil Polleras, a parade named for the "thousand" folkloric dancers dressed in Panama's typical gown of frilly lace and colorful embroidery.

This year, Blades invited other groups to join the *polleras* in their march along broad Avenida 50, propelled by musicians pumping out a furious pace with a tropical flair. The result was a surrealistic carnival of people of African and European descent, of Native Americans and mestizos on foot and on floats, streaming past bank buildings and luxury car showrooms, some in feathered headdresses and others dressed as devils, dragons and tigers in outlandish, big-headed costumes.

At the front of it all was Blades, pushing forward like a cultural pied piper in his crisp guayabera and straw hat.

As tourism minister, Blades is promoting the country's indigenous cultures as a national asset. He hopes to turn responsible tourism into an engine of controlled development in such areas as the pristine but impoverished Kuna Yala, along the Atlantic coast.

By far the most unusual group I discovered on this trip was the Congos, descendants of African slaves from the area around Colón, the busy port on the Atlantic side. They originally settled there after escaping from their white masters, who remained primarily on the Pacific side, where they were safer from pirate raids.

As a legacy of their defiance against slavery, the Congos do things backward, flipping words, wearing clothes inside out and playing rhythms that are called *atravesa'os*, or crisscrossed. I first saw them perform at Xoko, and I was entranced by the women chanting African choruses while men blew whistles and couples did an aggressive mating dance. Their steps, little jumps and shuffles, look easy until you're invited to join them on the dance floor, as I was to my utter embarrassment.

Every year on Oct. 21, the Congos join a massive pilgrimage to Portobelo, a beautiful little port 20 miles northeast of Colón. Once the site of important trade fairs in the colonial era, Portobelo is now best known for a simple rural church that houses the iconic figure of a black Christ. As a salsa fan, I often heard shout-outs to the "Cristo Negro de Portobelo" in recordings by the late Afro-Puerto Rican singer Ismael Rivera, a powerful influence on Blades and other artists from the big salsa boom of the 1970s.

I couldn't leave Panama without making my own pilgrimage there, as Rivera had often done. The transcontinental trip would take a little more than an hour each way by car, cutting through the rain forest on the highway that parallels the canal.

The Mass I attended was peaceful and uplifting, with hymns that echoed popular tropical melodies and African call-and-response choruses. Outside, people sold souvenirs and counterfeit CDs of Rivera's hits, including one of his best, "El Nazareno," inspired by the purple-cloaked Christ figure. A nearby museum houses robes given to the saintly statue by the faithful, including Rivera and Panamanian boxer Roberto Durán.

I had no idea that on the last night of my trip, the black Christ would take on a special meaning for me too.

The fun in funky

As a city, Panama's capital is also struggling to find an identity.

Its high-rise skyline on the waterfront is reminiscent of Miami. Its fortified historic center jutting into the sea, Old San Juan, Puerto Rico. Its crumbling colonial buildings, Havana. Its congested streets and touristy craft stores, downtown Tijuana.

Geographically, the serpentine metropolis hugs the crescent coastline of Panama Bay, spreading out its attractions from the modern Amador Causeway on the west to the ruins of the original old city, Panama Vieja, on the east.

This is not a city that invites you to walk. It's a little difficult to get your bearings here, because Panama is the place where the continent turns sideways, placing the oceans north and south.

To get around, I admit, it helps to be on a first-name basis with *El Ministro*.

Blades, whom I've known for almost 30 years, had his staff at the Panamanian Institute of Tourism lead me to the best spots for good local music. Many tour operators and taxi drivers can also direct you to hot local venues, which are listed in visitor guides and daily newspapers, if you know what you're looking for.

The most unexpected place was Bingo 90, a gaudy gambling casino in the middle-class district of Obarrio, near a fashionable new mall called Multiplaza Pacific. There, in a dark, hot and sweaty bingo hall, I saw two of the best local exponents of a native folk style called *típico*, accordionists Osvaldo Ayala and Ulpiano Vergara, with their bands.

Hearing these two paunchy middle-age men play their squeezeboxes with such improvisational gusto was like coming across a hot zydeco group in New Orleans. *Típico* is played with a rhythm unlike any other in the Caribbean.

It was great to see so many young couples, blacks and whites, dancing to the music. Their style was unusual, a slow dance to fast beats, done cheek-to-cheek in a full, headlock embrace. They shuffled side to side, twirled together, eyes closed romantically.

These increasingly competitive casinos, often attached to hotels, are now featuring live bands to attract customers. Outside the bingo hall in much brighter light, a small salsa combo had customers dancing in the aisles near the roulette table and the slot machines.

In Panama, you find the fun in funky.

Like Latin youth anywhere, Panamanian kids are also keen on *reggaeton*, the hip-hop style that exploded out of Puerto Rico. Daddy Yankee, its biggest star, performed this month at the new Figali Convention Center on the causeway, site of the 2003 Miss Universe contest.

People don't give enough credit to one of *reggaeton*'s originators, Panamanian singer El General. Although the music didn't have a name back then, El General experimented with the style in the late '80s by borrowing reggae beats from the children of Jamaican immigrants who came to work on the canal.

El General (born Edgardo Franco) is now retired from music. When I finally tracked him down, he was on location outside the city making a movie about a boy and his grandfather. One of his costars is Blades, who plays a psychiatrist.

Small world, Panama. It turns out that Blades was a high school classmate of Ulpiano, the accordion ace.

No pop artist in Panama has survived as long as Blades. His music plays on the radio constantly. In nightclubs, people sing along to his lyrics, as they did when they heard "Buscando Guayaba" (Looking for the Guava) played by transplanted Cuban bandleader Fidel Morales at Platea, one of the chic new clubs spearheading a restoration of the shamefully dilapidated Casco Antiguo, the fortified historic quarter at the southern end of Panama Bay.

The area's revival is also being fostered by residents like Blades, who owns a stylish second-story flat overlooking the Teatro Nacional and the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, with a panoramic view of the modern skyline beyond. But this has been home to Blades since his boyhood. The characters he met here later inspired his classic narrative songs, parables of everyday life for everyday people.

I saw how those songs can touch hearts on my last night in Panama. I went to dinner at a restaurant along the Amador Causeway, which links a chain of small islands near the canal entrance where ships line up like ducks for the passage. From a cafe with an open-air patio, I heard someone singing "Amor y Control," a song Blades wrote after his mother died of cancer in 1991. It meant a lot to me after my mother died two years later.

The song is about the strength and love families need to overcome hard times. The man singing it was not an artist, but a customer with a karaoke mike. He was off-key but passionate, singing to a small boy he held tightly in his lap while his large family watched from a table nearby.

The man and his family were from the tough neighborhood of Río Abajo, I learned after I approached him. I softly suggested that he must have overcome his own problems to sing that song with so much feeling.

He just nodded, then handed me something he wanted me to keep.

It was a small religious card with a prayer and a picture of the Cristo Negro de Portobelo.

GETTING THERE:

From LAX, Copa offers nonstop service and Copa, American, Delta and Mexicana offer connecting service (change of planes). Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$530.

TELEPHONES:

To call the numbers below from the U.S., dial 011 (the international dialing code), 507 (country code for Panama) and the local number.

WHERE TO STAY:

Hotel El Panama, 111 Vía España, Panama City; 215-9000, fax 269-3309, <http://www.elpanama.com> . Historic, tropical-style hotel where salsa singer Rubén Blades gave his first professional performance, centrally located in the banking district. Doubles begin at \$125, including continental breakfast.

Gamboa Rainforest Resort, P.O. Box 7338, Zone 5, Panama City, 314-9000, <http://www.gamboaresort.com> . This full-service resort, just 30 minutes from downtown Panama City on the banks of the Chagres River within Soberania National Park, offers a spectacular natural getaway featuring an aerial tram over the jungle canopy. Doubles from \$175.

Hostal La Casa de Carmen, Calle 1ra No. 32 El Carmen, Panama City; 263-4366, <http://www.lacasadecarmen.com> . Billed as Panama's first bed-and-breakfast. The budget hostel is in a quiet neighborhood just one block from Vía España. Doubles begin at \$30, including continental breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT:

Manolo Caracol, Avenida Central y Calle Tercera, Casco Antiguo, Panama City; 228-4640. This trendy fusion restaurant in the historic quarter offers art exhibitions and a fixed-price menu with up to 11 courses, all for \$16.

Parrillada Jimmy, Via Cincuentenario, Panama City, 226-1323, <http://www.parrilladajimmy.com> . Across from the Atlapa Convention Center and the Tourism Ministry headquarters, this casual family restaurant is a favorite lunch spot for Blades. Known for its steaks. Entrees \$4.50-\$15.50.

Restaurante Miraflores, Miraflores Locks, Panama Canal. Food is passable. Dining on the outdoor patio watching huge ships pass through the locks only yards away: priceless. Most expensive item \$15.

TO LEARN MORE:

An extensive website, <http://www.panamainfo.com> , with information on travel, investment, retirement and more.

Official site of the Instituto Panameño de Turismo (the government's tourism ministry), <http://www.ipat.gob.pa> .

To see a gallery of photographs and hear samples of songs from Blades and others, go to latimes.com/panama.