

STUDY GUIDE



RUBÉN BLADES IS NOT MY NAME (YO NO ME LLAMO RUBEN BLADES)

a Film by ABNER BENAÏM
ARGENTINA, COLOMBIA, PANAMA / 2018 / 85 MIN
English and Spanish with English subtitles



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BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

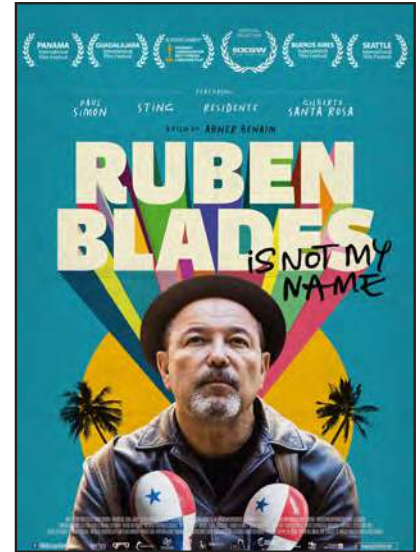
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a foreign film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country where that film comes from. Find two or three articles on Rubén Blades, listen to some of his songs, and research the history of Afro-Cuban Panamanian music. Read translations of “Pedro Navaja” lyrics and try to understand what he means to the history of Latin American music. Research how Rubén deals with social issues in his music, particularly in a Latin American sociopolitical context.

INTRODUCING THE FILM

A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film’s narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this official synopsis for *Rubén Blades Is Not My Name*:

Rubén Blades Is Not My Name takes us up close to one of Latin America’s most beloved singer-songwriters, his music, and the stories behind them. In the film -- which was shot in Blades’ native Panama City, his longtime home town New York, and in various locations on the road -- the famed salsa singer, actor and humanitarian narrates the story of his life and career. Blades takes the viewer on a tour of the neighborhood where he was born, the former Fania Records offices and his Manhattan home, among other locations.



- From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the documentary? From this same text, try to identify the main elements from the documentary and the socio-political background.
 - How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film? What can those materials tell you about Rubén’s impact?
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AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- Why do you think the filmmakers decide to open the film with the black-and-white footage of Rubén performing as a young man? Why is it overlaid with Rubén’s anecdote about discovering death? What effect does it have on the viewer, and why is it thematically relevant? Remember that the opening scene usually sets the tone for the entire movie.
- In the opening scene, how is Rubén’s grandmother portrayed as a larger-than-life figure? She’s quoted various times throughout the film. What could her lessons mean to Rubén?
- Why do you think the filmmakers juxtapose older footage from the 1970’s and 1980’s with present-day footage of Rubén Blades? What do you think the filmmaker is trying to get at? In what ways does he portray Rubén’s upbringing as an influence to his music?
- Is Rubén a larger-than-life figure or is he accessible, to a certain point? How is he different from an American contemporary music star?



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CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES *(continued)*

- Why do the filmmakers choose to shoot footage of the streets of Panama? Analyze those shots and examine how they are important to the narrative of the documentary. What do these shots tell us about Rubén's story?
- What does the juxtaposition of footage of Rubén's old shows and his present-day narration tell us? Do you think it's a good cinematographic technique for a documentary? Why or why not?
- What is the purpose of showing Rubén Blades walking through the streets of New York City and Panama? Why do you think the filmmakers chose to include so many shots of Rubén Blades strolling through the city? Consider how people react when they see him on the street and his response.
- Analyze the shot of Rubén's son at 48:50. What does the composition of this shot tell you about their relationship?



NARRATIVE

- The film opens with Rubén backstage, getting ready for an audience of 15,000 people. What is the purpose of opening with this moment? How is it thematically relevant and how does it speak to who Rubén Blades is as a person and performer?
- What was your favorite interview of someone talking about Rubén Blades? Why do you think so many celebrities and performers (Sting, Paul Simon, Junot Díaz) praise him? What does it say about Rubén Blades not only as a musician, but as a peer?
- Why do you think Rubén collects old comic books and other memorabilia? How do you think it connects to who he is as a singer, performer and songwriter?
- How is the documentary more about Rubén's present life than his legendary history? Think about the scenes where the camera follows him around his home in New York. What does that say about Rubén as a person?
- Think about how Rubén Blades says, across the documentary, that he has "more past than future." What does he mean by this? How is it relevant to the documentary? Would you say the documentary revolves around the passage of time?
- Gabriel García Márquez labeled Rubén as "the most unknown popular person." What do you think this means? Does the documentary present him in this way?
- Why do you think the film ends with Rubén singing "El Cantante" by himself? Think about the lyrics of that song: "I am a singer / very popular everywhere / but once the show is over / human being." How does that song resonate with the rest of the documentary? Why do the filmmakers end on this note? Do you think it's an appropriate ending for a portrayal of Rubén as a multi-faceted person?



THEMES

- ❑ What do you think was the political role that Rubén Blades played as a singer and songwriter for Panama and Latin America? How did his music fit a political and social role in the region? Pick one of his politically-charged songs and look up the time when it was released. Analyze its lyrics from a historical standpoint. What do you think Rubén was trying to say?
- ❑ Analyze the moment where Rubén is talking about “Hispania” -- his imagined, unified country of Latin Americans. What is the significance of this speech and of this montage? What do you think it means when he says he doesn't fully know all of Hispania's residents?
- ❑ How is music largely “visual” for Blades? How is music a matter of telling a story? Analyze some of his “Pedro Navaja” lyrics to support your answer, and how Rubén recounts the opening lyrics in the documentary.
- ❑ What role did the music label Fania play in the rise of Rubén Blades and other Latin American salsa musicians? Research the history of salsa in New York City and write a brief paragraph about Fania's start and musical influence.
- ❑ Why do you think New York was the epicenter for salsa and Latin jazz? In your answer, name at least one geopolitical reason as to why the location facilitated the proliferation of the genre.
- ❑ What is the social and political impact of Rubén's music? Think about his 1994 presidential campaign.
- ❑ How is Rubén a storyteller and writer as much as he is a musician? What is the connection between these two forms of artistry? Would you say writing is musical?
- ❑ How did Rubén Blades become a “narrator” of the Latin American experience? How do his lyrics talk about the collective experience of the Latin American majority i.e. not the small privileged class?
- ❑ What is your favorite song that you heard in the documentary? Why? Analyze its lyrics from a sociopolitical standpoint.
- ❑ One of Rubén's traditions in live shows is to call out the countries “present” in the audience. Why do you think he does this? Why is this so important to his performance? Listen and look up “Chica Plástica's” lyrics. Focus on how he calls out every country in the end. How is he conveying a message of unity and what could this mean politically?
- ❑ How is Rubén Blades the actor and filmmaker different from Rubén Blades the singer-songwriter? How is it different from Rubén Blades the humanitarian, the politician? Think about the multi-faceted aspect of Rubén and how it all feeds into his image
- ❑ Analyze the lyrics of Rubén's most popular, universal song -- “Pedro Navaja.” Why do you think it's this song that everybody in Latin America knows by heart? Find one street art mural of “Pedro Navaja” (there are many throughout Latinx neighborhoods and Latin American “barrios”) and describe what you see in the picture, keeping the lyrics in mind.
- ❑ Think about the moment where a woman on the street stops Rubén -- Alexis -- and says to Rubén, “You're the bridge between the opposito and the government.” What does she mean by this?
- ❑ Many other performers, singers, writers and political figures describe Rubén's music as totally “accessible” and “universal.” What do you think they mean by this? How is this related to his public image?
- ❑ Analyze the lyrics of “Tiburón.” How has it become an anti-imperialist anthem for Latin America? What does this say about the political impact of Rubén Blades and of music in general?
- ❑ Think about the moment where Rubén is re-living the “Corso Club” in his room (1:00:05). Why is this significant? What does it say about performers in their old age?

