

**This interview with
RUBEN BLADES
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on May 10, 2024**



Library of Congress: When and where did you write “El Cantate”?

Ruben Blades: I wrote it in 1977. I lived in New York at the time, in Manhattan, upper west side.

LC: Do you know anything about how it came to be recorded by Hector?

RB: Originally, I wrote it for myself and planned to record it with Willie Colon, with whom I was singing at the time full time. But Willie told me Hector needed a strong song for his album, that he was going through problems that were affecting his sales and his well-being and a hit would help him deal with the situation. So I agreed to have Hector record the song instead of doing it myself.

LC: When you heard Hector’s rendition of it for the first time, what did you think of his interpretation? Did anything about it surprise you?

RB: I was there when he recorded it. I always tried to be present in case some changes were needed. I am glad I did not record the song first. Hector’s interpretation provided the song with an immediacy and honesty that I would never had been able to provide then.

“El Cantante” was meant by me to be a reflection of how audiences never, or very seldom, understand that the idols they built are mere mortals, ordinary people elevated to an extraordinary position who, nevertheless, have the same problems and types of pressures and difficulties as those who admire them. Hector Lavoe took it, from the abstract I depicted, to the difficult reality that he was living at the time and provided the words and the song with an authenticity that only he and his situation could have made possible.

He did a damn good job.

LC: What are your primary memories of Hector?

RB: I remember him as a singer with a very clear voice and the capacity to improvise in the best “salsa” tradition. He could be very funny and had a kind soul. He had his demons, as we all do, only his seemed to be more active. I have only good memories of him although we did not hang out much in our off time. I still rue the fact that he left us so soon.

LC: Why do you think that this song has been so enduring across so many cultures?

RB: Perhaps because people who knew him associate the lyrics with Hector's difficulties, which were public and he continues to have many, many fans. Perhaps because his singing, his voice, makes people remember what he went through as the lyrics depict. Or perhaps because lyrics can freeze a reality in time and if the event described is one that repeats generationally, the story the song tells never loses its meaning and impact and continues to live on.