

RICKY MARTIN
ME



A CELEBRA BOOK

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Dedicated to Matteo and Valentino Martin

*My light, my focus, my strength, my little masters, who, with just a simple gaze, know how to tell me
“Don’t worry, Daddy. Everything is okay.”*

INTRODUCTION

God, help me to tell the truth to the strong and to avoid telling lies to get the weak's applause. If you give me fortune, do not take away my reason. If you give me success, do not take away my humility. If you give me humility, do not take away my dignity. God, help me to see the other side of the medal. Don't let me blame others of treason just because they don't think like me. God, teach me to love people as I love myself and to judge me as I judge others. Please, don't let me be proud if I succeed, or fall in despair if I fail. Remind me that failure is the experience that precedes triumph. Teach me that forgiving is the most important in the strong and that revenge is the most primitive sign in the weak. If you take away my success, let me keep my strength to succeed from failure. If I fail people, give me courage to apologize and if people fail me, give me courage to forgive them. God, if I forget you, please do not forget me.

—MAHATMA GANDHI

GANDHI'S WORDS TOUCH MY HEART.

At some point in our lives, all of us ultimately arrive at a moment when we are somehow compelled to look back and consciously reflect on the life we have led. We feel the need to understand where we come from, because we want to see with more clarity where we are actually headed and where it is that we really want to go; we search for a way to balance that which we have lived and that which remains for us to experience, with the desire, perhaps, to find a more meaningful purpose to our existence. Some people decide to do this when they are older, closer to the end of their lives, but for me this moment is right now. Today I feel the need to look back and observe the path that has led me to where I am, so that the future that lies ahead can be as luminous and truthful as possible.

MY GIVEN NAME is Enrique Martin Morales, but most people know me as Ricky Martin: musician, singer, composer, philanthropist, and some might also know I'm an actor. And I am all of those things; but I am also a lot more. The people closest to me know me as "Kiki" (a nickname that comes from Enrique), and aside from being an artist I am also a son, a brother, a friend—and most recently, father. For so long I tried to keep those parts of my life completely separate: When I am onstage or in front of the cameras, I am "Ricky"; but in private I am "Kiki," a man who each day confronts the challenges of life, just like everybody else. While most people reading this book have a clear sense of who I am as an artist, there is a fundamental part of me that very few really know.

Today, after all that I have lived and the many experiences I have been through, I realize that it isn't fair to separate "Kiki" from "Ricky." They are one and the same. It has taken me some time to understand this, and although I used to believe that the best thing would be to hide my personal life and the essence of who I am, now I hold the full conviction that my true happiness lies in living my life freely, without any fears or false pretexts. It has been a gradual process. I can't say exactly when

the realization hit me, but I do know that I got to the point where I could no longer live without facing my truth. This is why I have chosen to finally end the secret that I have carefully guarded for so many years: I have decided to tell the world that I accept my homosexuality and celebrate this gift that life has given me.

Now I feel strong. Free. More free than ever.

Many people probably believe that my life can be broken down into two periods: before and after “Livin’ La Vida Loca.” Or maybe there are some who think my life is divided between the before and after of my revelation, and the truth is that this is completely understandable, because until now, that more or less all I have really shared about myself. And though I won’t deny the fact that “Livin’ La Vida Loca” was a critical moment in my life, I can guarantee that there were many others equally as important to me. There are also the before and after of Menudo, the before and after of my first trip to India, and the before and after of becoming a father. . . . They have all been unique experiences that have impacted me profoundly and altered the way I navigate life. And I hope—I know—that there are many more such moments still to come.

Just like everyone else, I have had to walk down my own spiritual path and live through my experiences—the good and the bad, the love and the lack of love, the sense of feeling lost and then finding myself—to arrive at where I am today. Before I could begin to answer the endless questions that were constantly asked of me, I needed to face myself. Of course, some might say I should have done this many years ago, but in the deepest part of my being, I am certain that the moment is now, because that is how it was always meant to be. It is only now that I am ready, and it is only now that I can do it—not one day earlier or one day later.

The process of writing this memoir has not been easy. It has demanded a lot from me—above and beyond what I expected. I’ve had to tie up loose ends that I’d never attempted to tie up before, to wade deeply into memories that were already erased from my mind, and to find answers to very difficult questions; but above all else . . . above everything, I have finally had to accept myself. I have had to bare myself utterly and completely to see myself exactly as I am. I discovered things that I liked—and others not as much. And it was precisely the things I didn’t like so much that I became intent on remedying from the moment I became conscious of them. I would have never imagined that writing this book would lead me to where it has; however, today I know that I am a better man—and a happier man—because of what I have learned about myself throughout the process.

I wanted to say a lot in these pages, but I wanted to do it with humility and dignity, focusing on the experiences that have helped shape me. More than an autobiography, this book is a testament of my spiritual beliefs, an account of the steps I have taken to arrive at the place of happiness and completeness where I now find myself. I’ll talk about many personal matters that I have never discussed publicly before, but it isn’t my intention to share every little thing, either. I believe that we’re all entitled to a certain degree of privacy; there are certain things I keep to myself because they are mine alone and I want them to stay that way. What I would like to do is explore the different paths and experiences that have led me to be the person I am today.

I know what it feels like to be loved and I know what it feels like to love someone—totally and absolutely, with intensity and without any prejudgments. I also know what it is like to be judged for what I am and for what I am not. If I hadn’t gone through all of this, maybe I wouldn’t have been able to arrive at the moment when I finally understood that my chosen path was the right one, since it has made me into the person I am today. And it doesn’t matter how I look at it; that person I am today, that person I have created with so much effort and dedication, is, second to my children, my most precious work. I am certain that there are many more steps left for me to take, many more things to

experience, and therefore many chapters left to write. But right now I just want to open my heart to you and share my story and this moment of my life with the world.

During this time I have learned that it is useless to label things as either good or bad. The key is to see everything as a lesson. Good and bad alike are both part of a whole, and we have to embrace that whole to reach the complete existence we long for. We advance on certain paths where opportunities come our way, and every step not only gets us closer to where we want to go but also has a reason for being. Life gives us experiences, and every decision we make determines where we will be later.

From the day we are born until the day we die, we progress on a path of learning, in which every decision we make or fail to make becomes a part of our personal growth. There is this karmic realm where you have to pass through the challenges that life gives you to liberate yourself from that which weighs you down, preventing you from reaching divinity. We all progress down a spiritual path that offers us opportunities to learn—and even tragedy has its meaning. When you're a student, you have to study the lesson until you know it by heart, and if you don't know it, you don't graduate. In the same way, life presents us with experience after experience, and with every deed, decision, and selection we are determining where we will end up. And just like in school, whoever pays the closest attention will most quickly move ahead.

Someone once asked me if I thought my accomplishments were always in my destiny. The answer was yes, and no. Granted, I do believe that a lot of what has happened to me has helped shape my destiny, but there is no doubt that I have come to where I am, and accomplished what I have, because I worked hard to get it. If anything is true in this world it is that destiny is something you have to help. If I had not done my own part, I would have never come to where I am now. At no point did I sit down and wait for destiny to show up on my doorstep. I went out and looked for it and knocked on its door instead. I think that the people who sit around and wait for their destiny to land in their laps will probably get old waiting.

I have worked intensely to arrive at this point, which is why I know it has not been a coincidence or a simple act of randomness. It is true that I have had a lot of luck—or a lot of what we call luck. But the truth is that everyone creates his own luck and his own destiny. When life presents you with a river, you cannot rely on luck to supply a boat; you have to dive into the water and swim. Stroke after stroke, you have to reach the other side. You have to create the course of your own destiny and not let chance determine your direction. I fully believe that luck comes to those who have worked hard to find it.

Life is a journey and every step we take moves us in some direction. When we are ready and willing, we learn, we advance, and we grow. But it's very easy—and very common—to not take that first step and to stay exactly where we are, because after all, that which is familiar is usually the most comfortable. I think that for a great part of my life I was so comfortable I did not feel the need to look inward, even for the sake of asking myself some basic questions—never mind finding the answers. I felt bad. I knew there was something fundamentally wrong inside, but instead of trying to heal these contradictory feelings that nagged at me, I simply buried them with the hope that they would disappear forever. I was afraid and I was much more concerned with being accepted and being liked than with the cultivation of my own personal growth.

The long road to finally come face-to-face with myself has not been easy. And though I've grown and learned a lot, it is a road I continue to tread upon every day of my life. I needed many years of silence and reflection to understand what it is I truly carry in my heart. Before I could tell my truth to the world, I had to come to a moment when I would find inner acceptance and tranquillity.

Life takes lots of twists and turns, but today I have the absolute certainty that everything happens

for a reason. Sometimes it is hard to see it when you are the one going through it, but based on my own life, I can say that everything happens because that is the way it has to be. Life's lessons are like a series of closed doors: Upon gaining the insight and learning the relevant lesson, one door closes and another one opens, and you continue your journey. Every phase of my life has brought along valuable and important things; it does not matter how much it has cost me or how difficult it's been. My experiences with Menudo, for example, gave me a work ethic and a sense of discipline that perhaps back then I did not realize would be so crucial in my future. Later, after the chaos of "Livin' La Vida Loca" subsided, I had finally learned about the importance of knowing when to say no. When I went to India, I learned about what it means to turn my gaze inward and know myself. As a new father (and like all fathers before me), I have only recently learned the true significance of unconditional love. And when I finally found the courage to reveal my truth to the world, I not only understood the meaning of living without fear, but I finally understood that fear is truly all in our heads.

As I wrote this book I went through so many moments when I felt completely vulnerable. But at the same time there were other moments when I felt excited, free, and happy to at last let go of my past. There has been an intense process of catharsis that has helped me to heal many wounds and understand many things that perhaps back then did not seem to make sense. Now I see things more clearly, and for that I am grateful.

Now I am complete.

Now I am ready to give myself exactly as I am—to my public, to my family, to my friends and my relationships. I want my children to be able to read this book one day and understand the spiritual journey I had to experience to be able to accept the joy of being their father. I want to open my heart to them fully and absolutely so that in the future they will never be afraid to do the same.

I wrote this book with my heart on my sleeve. But before I continue, I want to clarify that just because I have chosen to talk about my own life does not mean I will talk about the lives of others. Everyone has a right to their privacy and discretion, which is why I have decided to protect the real names and characteristics of certain people. Even though there are some people who have formed part of my public life, and who are likely easily recognizable, I won't involve them in this history that is not theirs. Just as I have asked for my right to privacy on so many occasions, I must respect others' rights to theirs. This is my life, my personal trajectory, and I have decided to tell it because today I am ready to do it. But I don't plan to let my decision affect anyone else.

From the moment I clicked SEND to announce my truth to the world, the rain of love that I've received has been astounding, almost startling. It has shown me clearly that the fear I felt before existed only in my head—as does all fear. Life is so much more beautiful when you live it with open arms, your guard dropped, and without anxieties or secrets. Today, more than ever, I know that this is my moment, and that, just as the master Gandhi says it, I have the strength to live a life filled with love, peace, and truth.

ONE

BECOMING A MAN

IT IS FASCINATING FOR ME TO SIT AND LOOK BACK AT THE road I have traveled to get where I am now—not only in my career, but in my personal life as well. What has at times felt incomprehensible or excessively difficult, today I understand as something that had to happen. All my experiences have prepared me for what was—and still is—ahead of me. At first it was a difficult concept for me to grasp, but once I was able to internalize it, I got to a point where I could live a more complete and satisfactory life because I am willing to accept that the good, the bad, and the not so great are all part of a whole. This feeling has liberated me in so many ways and given me the strength to confront everything that comes my way. It is extraordinary to think that without knowing it, from very early on, I was already building my identity, my very own story.

GETTING STARTED

IT ALL BEGAN with a spoon.

Anybody in my family will tell you that music came into my life at a very young age. My mother's side of the family has always been musically inclined. On Sunday afternoons we would get together at my grandparents' house, and sooner or later someone would pull out a guitar and start singing. My grandfather, for example, was a poet, a good one. His rhymed improvisations were romantic and very stylized, in a way I have never heard again. My grandfather was a firm man, very conservative, and completely devoted to his family. Like most men of his generation he was very macho, but if there is one thing he taught all of us men who carry his name, it is the importance of showing respect to a woman, the beauty of admiring her, caring for her, and protecting her. He would always say to us: "A woman must be treated with the subtle delicacy that you would give to a rose petal." He was obviously a hopeless romantic, a quality that I have, without a doubt, inherited.

From the time I was six years old, I would grab a wooden kitchen spoon and use it as a microphone to sing. I would spend hours upon hours with the spoon in my hand, interpreting my favorite songs—Menudo songs, or songs from American rock bands, such as REO Speedwagon, Journey, and Led Zeppelin, which is what my older siblings were listening to at the time. I remember many times we were all at my grandparents' house, and while everyone was sitting on the balcony getting a breath of fresh air and telling stories, I would put some music on, take hold of my "microphone," and start to sing.

I have no doubt that back then no one ever imagined I'd end up becoming a professional artist (although I did have an uncle who always said, "When you get famous, call me and I'll come carry your luggage." To which I would very seriously reply, "Of course!" Needless to say, he hasn't come through with his end of the bargain...). I'm sure they enjoyed watching me sing and dance around the

house, but I know it never occurred to any of us that one day I would be doing just that before hundreds of thousands of people.

As surprising as it may seem, the truth is that ever since I was a young boy, I have always known I was meant to be onstage. I can't say it was a conscious decision or that I woke up one day and said, "I want to be an artist." But I can say that I gradually started to realize what I really enjoy doing, and simply tried to do it as often as possible. I know it takes some people many years to figure out what they want to do with their lives, to find something that genuinely moves them, and I know it can be a difficult process. But I was lucky. For me, it was very instinctive. Although at first all I did was grab the spoon and perform for my grandparents and aunts and uncles, I enjoyed it very much. In this case I believe it was more than a passing phase; it was something more powerful, because what started as a game ultimately turned into a passion. Slowly, I started to see that capturing other people's attention and having all those eyes on me was a rush. I loved feeling that I was entertaining them, that they were listening to me, and when I got big applause, I'd be thrilled to no end. To this very day that feeling of being onstage continues to be a source of energy and inspiration for me. Every time I find myself in front of an audience, be it twenty people or one hundred thousand, once again I feel the energy that consumed me back at the family gatherings of my youth.

I am not exactly sure where my passion for being onstage comes from, but it somehow feels like I have to be in the spotlight; I want to be seen. . . . At some point during my childhood one of my cousins would produce plays—written by her—and it is there where I had my first experiences as an actor. My cousin was no older than eight or nine, but she was incredibly brilliant for her age. Apparently I liked it, because later when I was in school, each time they put on a play I was the first one to sign up. I even became an altar boy, because to me, helping the priest was like being onstage, since he was very much "the star" of the show. When I was onstage I felt complete and alive, so naturally I wanted to find that sensation at every opportunity.

Every so often I think about what would have happened if I had not chosen this path. It's almost inevitable to ask yourself these questions, and it's interesting to think about what would have become of each of our lives if we hadn't turned into the people we are today. What would I be had I not become an artist? What other profession would I have chosen? Psychologist? Dentist? Lawyer? My grandmother had always hoped that I'd be a doctor, but unfortunately I could never fulfill that dream. Since the moment I realized what I wanted to do with myself, I've worked tirelessly to make that dream come true. But I always ask myself what would have become of me had I listened to my grandmother's advice, or had I taken some other path. For example, when I was eighteen, I auditioned for the Tisch School at New York University, one of the most renowned drama schools in the country. But just a few months before classes began, instead of enrolling I went to Mexico to meet some friends, and there I landed—there really is no other way of seeing it, as it was such a coincidence—in the theater.

What would have happened if I had stayed to go to New York University? What direction would my life have taken if I had found success in acting instead of music? My path would have, without a doubt, been different. But I like to think that whether I had chosen acting, music, or dance, I would have somehow or other always chosen a path that in the end would make me feel happy and fulfilled. The truth is that what you do doesn't matter so much; what matters is that you love it and that you do it to the best of your ability.

Passion is a vital aspect of my existence. I consider myself to be a realistic dreamer, and my life is full of intense emotions. I live and feel deeply. Some people may think it is wrong to live life so passionately, but the truth is that ever since I was a very little boy, it has been passion that has

propelled me on the extraordinary trajectory that has been my life, so I see no reason to stop it. Had I not embraced my instincts at a very young age, I think I would have never gotten to where I am today. To me, part of the beauty of childhood lies in the fact that it is a time of extremes: When we are happy, the happiness is absolute, and when we are sad, the pain is devastating. Life at that age is very intense, but at the same time it is also utterly pure and genuine. As we grow up, we learn how to soothe the emotions that are too overwhelming, and though to a certain degree I've also had to grow up, I have always made an effort to stay in touch with my inner child—that passionate, energetic, and happy child who was never afraid of anything.

ABUELA

MY PARENTS SEPARATED when I was two years old. Needless to say I remember nothing of what was going on in my life at the time that happened, but I do know that I started spending a great deal of time with my grandparents on both my mother's and my father's sides. My grandparents played a key role in my life. I don't know if it's cultural or simply spiritual, but my relationship with them was always—and continues to be—very important to me. I will never forget what they taught me, and I will strive to pass their teaching on to my sons.

My paternal grandmother was an intelligent woman, independent and confident, a woman who was well ahead of her time. She was into metaphysics long before it became fashionable. She was also an artist; she painted and made sculptures. I remember her as always being busy, doing one of the thousands of things that interested her. She didn't understand the concept of "staying still" and always had some kind of project going on. My great-grandmother—her mother—was a teacher, so my grandmother was practically raised in a classroom, listening to her mother's lectures. She graduated from high school at fourteen, and even wrote two books and became a senior professor at the University of Puerto Rico. Remember, we are talking about a time when society dictated that most women could only aspire to be mothers or housewives. She was a surprising woman, so brave and such a visionary, that one day she decided to pack her bags and move to Boston to study education. In those times! But she moved to Boston and lived there until she graduated with a degree.

I recently had the opportunity to dine with Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina judge of the United States Supreme Court, and when I told her about my grandmother's accomplishments, she was shocked. "A Latina woman studying in Boston in the forties? Your grandmother must have been a strong woman," she said. And I of course felt very proud, because she was right: My grandmother was definitely an incredible lady.

Although she was born in Puerto Rico, my grandmother's family was originally from Corsica. We Corsicans are famous for being stubborn, and my grandmother was no exception: She was a very strong woman who was never afraid of anything. To me, she was always an example of what it means to be strong. For example, after fifty-some years of marriage, she realized she was no longer feeling fulfilled, so one day she got up and said to my grandfather: "You know what? I want a divorce." In those days people got married for life, "until death do us part." It wasn't like today, when people get divorced for almost any reason at all. But my grandmother didn't care what other people thought or said. For whatever reason, she wasn't happy and she decided to do something about it. So my grandparents got divorced. After that, my grandfather would visit her every day, but the new domesti-

agreement remained, with her living in her own home, and him separately in his.

My grandmother passed away more than ten years ago, after having lived a long, full life, well into her old age, and if there is anything I am grateful for, it is that she lived long enough to see and be a part of my success. Once, she even got on a plane and came to see me perform on Broadway when I was doing *Les Misérables* in New York. And let me tell you, she was definitely not a fan of airplanes. She once told me that she was terribly afraid of them since the day she flew back to Puerto Rico after finishing her studies in Boston. Apparently, there was some kind of electrical storm during the flight and the plane shook intensely. From that day on, she vowed she would never get on a plane again! And so it was. She only traveled by boat, that trip to New York being the one exception.

It makes me sad to think I wasn't able to see more of her during her last few years. I was working so much, always coming or going, always running, never having enough time to do the things that really matter. I did get to see her every now and then, in passing, but never again did I have the chance to spend days or weeks at a time with her, the way I did when I was a little boy. I remember one time I went to see her accompanied by a police escort. When I arrived at her house with the security unit, I yelled: "Grandma, I'm here to see you!"

"Oh, son!" she said. "How wonderful!"

But right away I had to clarify: "I've come to see you, Grandma, but I can't stay too long. I have to go soon." Like always, she didn't make me feel guilty about having to leave. She simply thanked me for the visit and gave me a great big hug.

"Okay," she said, "it was wonderful to see you. Eat, you're too skinny."

That was my grandmother.

Another time, when I was on a trip in Puerto Rico, I had a helicopter land in her neighborhood's baseball field just to see her. It was the only way I could do it because I had no time. While en route from one side of the island to the other on a business matter, I suddenly told the pilot: "I have to see my grandmother. Land in that baseball field!"

And just like that, I got to spend another moment with her.

There is nothing like grandmothers. To this day her teachings continue to serve me well. Some of the sweetest memories I have of my grandmother are of the two of us sitting there, me doing my homework and her painting or working on one of her projects. I often think of her wise words and her advice and feel as though I somehow carry her inside me. It's such a blessing to be able to feel her so close.

The only thing that does pain me when I think of her is that she never got to meet my children. There are so many things about her that I would have wanted them to know, and no matter how much I tell them about her, I feel that I will never be able to fully explain. For example, when I was younger she would sing this beautiful lullaby to my cousins and me. I often close my eyes and try to remember it, but I become frustrated because I can't. I can perfectly recall the tone of her voice and the expression on her face as she sang to us, but no matter how hard I try, I simply cannot remember the lyrics or the melody of that song. I just can't. So I pray that this song will one day come back to me in a dream. I ask: "Dear God, Grandma, wherever you may be, if this is true or not, if you exist or not, if you are there or not, please remind me of that song. I want to sing it to my children."

It has not come yet, but I have not lost hope. I know that the afterlife exists, and that she is watching me with a great big smile on her face, because she can see that her first grandson walks through life with the same determination that she possessed, being a strong and independent man, just as she raised me to be.

A TASTE OF FAME

MY FAMILY ALWAYS supported me when I began my artistic career. They came to recognize that music was more than just a game for me. Seeing that I was so passionate about it, they encouraged me to follow it, and that alone gave me a lot of strength: The simple fact that they believed in me gave me a lot of security and nourished my self-esteem. This is why it was no surprise to them when I started doing television commercials in Puerto Rico at the age of nine.

One day, an ad ran in the newspaper saying, “Agency seeking talent for TV commercials.” My father read it and asked me, “What do you think?” I thought it was a great idea, so I answered: “Let’s do it, Papi, let’s go!” That very Saturday we went to the audition. The audition was just to see if the head of the agency would even accept me, and from that moment on, I would start going out on auditions for the actual television commercials. They stood me in front of a camera, asked what my name was, my age, and which school I attended, and honestly, I don’t remember what else. I suppose they had me act or read something . . . Maybe they gave me a small scene, the typical things they have you do at an audition. What I do remember well is that I felt very confident. I was not nervous at all. When I finished I returned home, and just days later I was called up again for my first audition.

The first commercial I did was for a soft drink. It was four days of shooting, four intense days, because they would start at six a.m. and end late in the afternoon. Unfortunately, I never got to see the commercial because it was for the U.S. Latino audience and Mexico. But what I do recall is that at the end of it all, they paid me \$1,300. And that was not all; every six months I would receive another check for \$900 (residuals). It was an amazing job! I was doing something I genuinely enjoyed, and on top of it all I was getting paid well—I couldn’t have imagined anything better. A whole new world had opened itself to me.

Many more commercials would soon follow: one for a toothpaste, one for a fast-food restaurant. . . One commercial would lead to the next one, and the next one, and the next. Once I was in the game, the opportunities started cropping up, and in a year and a half I had done eleven commercials, which I know thanks to my father, who has them all written down! It was so long ago that if it were not for his meticulous record keeping, I would never be able to remember them all. I had a lot of success doing commercials, and after a while I started to become recognized in the field. Since I already had experience and I loved being in front of the cameras, the producers were always inclined to cast me, and that of course kept giving me even more confidence and experience.

Those commercials gave me my first brush with fame. When I’d walk down the street, sometimes I’d hear people say, “There’s the kid from such and such commercial!” or “Look! There’s the boy from that soft drink ad!” In those days, I got a kick out of being recognized. Since back in the day televisions had no remote controls, people had to sit through the commercials, unlike now, when we can simply switch the channel from the comfort of our sofa. This is why people started to recognize me—more and more with each commercial—and I have to admit that I liked it. Today there are moments when it is hard for me to find even a moment of peace and tranquillity to go sit in a park or play a game of pool with my friends. People recognize me, and this means I have to sacrifice certain things that for other people are normal: like eating at a restaurant, going for a walk, strolling on the beach. . . . Not because I don’t want to do them, but because in doing them I don’t find the peace and tranquillity I seek. And even so, I do them anyway, but I can never be anonymous. Anonymity is something I oftentimes miss, but the truth is that fame has brought me so many other blessings that I have no complaints; at the end of the day, it is a part of my work, and it is therefore something I enjoy.

Most people are kind and friendly, and most of them respect my right to privacy. It always feels good to hear someone tell me that I mean something to them, whether it's because one of my songs helped them find love or because they enjoyed one of my concerts. That is all very important to me because is the reason why I do what I do: I like giving people a little bit of joy and I enjoy myself in the process.

Fame is a curious phenomenon. When you have it, there is so much you can do with it. It is not just about people recognizing you in the street or about the photographers taking pictures of you. Fame is also a tool that, if you know how to handle it well, can serve to reach millions and millions of people to convey a message, by communicating and connecting with them. That is something I try not to forget. Of course, a lot of sacrifices must be made for the sake of fame, on both a personal and a professional level, but at the end of the day, what matters is knowing how to use it for what's truly important.

MENUDO

MY FATHER ONCE told me: "I curse the day you got into Menudo. That day I lost my son."

He was absolutely right. To a certain extent, he lost his son and I lost my father.

In those days it was hard to know what was coming. We could not even begin to imagine what lay ahead. I only saw the countless opportunities, the thousands of amazing things that still awaited me, and the great path that was opening up before me. No boy—not even when he is a grown man—can discern what will happen when his life's path is altered.

It was impossible to understand how much it was going to take for me to reach what I wanted. At that moment, all I knew was that I longed for it with all of my being—my heart and my soul. I had worked hard with great effort and determination and I knew how far I wanted to go. Being onstage was my dream and I was willing to do whatever it took to get there. In this sense, Menudo was an obsession—it was all I could think about. Between the ages of ten and twelve, I could barely sleep just thinking about how badly I wanted it.

When it finally came, it ceased to be a dream and became my everyday reality. It was a moment that would determine the course of my life.

What it gave me was magnificent—experiences and emotions that deeply marked me and made me a better person. What it cost me was my childhood. But I gained invaluable lessons through what I learned and what I lost. And just as I would never want to lose any of the beautiful memories I have from those years, I also don't want to forget some of the troubles I endured. Difficult times gave me the ability to appreciate joyful ones, and they also helped to strengthen me as a man. It's just like everything else in life: If it weren't for the bad things in life, we would never be able to appreciate the good ones.

When I was young, my mother always said: "My son, in this life everything is possible. But you have to know how to do it." She said it because she knows me well; she knew that back then I wanted everything, and in those days everything was Menudo.

I drove my father crazy to take me to the auditions. I would plead with him: "Take me! Take me! Take me!" I would beg him in every possible way imaginable, and begged so much that I don't know how he didn't throw me off a cliff. Until finally one day he said: "All right, let's go."

I was so happy.

This was 1983. Today it is hard to understand what Menudo was at that time, but the truth is it was unlike anything else out there. I would even dare to say that to this day it remains a unique episode in the history of music. Before there were any bands like New Edition, the Back-street Boys, New Kids on the Block, 'N Sync, or Boyz II Men, there was Menudo. It was the first Latin American boy band that reached international fame. The band was so successful that there was talk of “Menudomania” and “Menuditis,” and it was often compared to the Beatles and Beatlemania.

Menudo began when the producer Edgardo Diaz formed a group of five young boys, all of them Puerto Rican. The uniqueness of Menudo, what I believe made Menudo completely distinctive—and allowed its fame to last for so long—is that the band members were always changing. The idea was that each member would only stay until he turned sixteen, and at that point he would have to retire and his place in the band would open up for a new member. This way, the boys were always young, preserving the joy and innocence of adolescence. The first Menudo was composed of two sets of brothers: the Melendezes (Carlos, Ricky, and Oscar), and the Sallaberrys (Fernando and Nefty). They released their first album in 1977, and from that moment on the group’s fame grew exponentially: In just a few short years they were filling stadiums the length and width of Latin America, and their photos were plastered across the press, even in Asia. They became a worldwide phenomenon, and when RCA, the music label, got wind of what was going on, they signed them to a multi-million-dollar deal. This made them even more famous, garnering millions of young fans throughout the United States and the rest of the world. In fact, one of the most important English-language TV networks in the United States used the group’s music to teach its viewers how to speak Spanish.

So when I was very little (in the late seventies, early eighties), Menudo was awesome. A worldwide phenomenon. A total hit. How could I not have wanted to be a part of that? Especially considering that the phenomenon had been born on my island? I knew all of their songs by heart—I had been singing them as long as I can remember. In fact, I loved singing so much that, with the innate confidence of youth, I felt that getting into the group was not an impossible dream. . . . So I dedicated myself to making it happen.

But like everything in life, my entrance into Menudo would not come without its fair share of contradictions. Despite the fact that the boys from Menudo were my idols and I yearned to be a part of the group, for the majority of kids my age Menudo was a girl thing. Culturally and socially, we were so conditioned—in part due to ignorance and in part to envy—to think that real men don’t like to sing and dance, that for a kid like me to want to do it was considered ridiculous. In fact, when my friends from school asked me why I wanted to get into Menudo, I would always say that it was “for the girls, the money, and the travel.” I should have told them the truth—that I wanted to sing and dance onstage—but I have no doubt that they would have made fun of me. Boys weren’t supposed to “like” Menudo. So instead of telling the truth, I simply went along with it and said what was expected of me, choosing the path of least resistance. At that time, it was in no way a traumatic experience, but now I realize how sad it is that I didn’t feel comfortable enough to tell the truth.

After pleading for months, I finally had the opportunity to audition. My father took me to the place where the auditions were being held, and I perfectly recall that on the way there I felt completely calm. Even though it would have been normal for me to be even just a little bit nervous, I was very relaxed because I knew I was going to do well and that the executives would have no option other than to choose me.

And that’s how it went . . . almost. I did very well at the audition. They loved how I sang and how I danced, but there was one problem: I was too short. The rest of the boys in the group were a head and

half taller than me, and the executives wanted all the boys in the group to be more or less the same height. But instead of discouraging me, that initial rejection only served to fuel my determination. I showed up again at an audition nine months later, but once again I failed because I was still too short. At one point they even suggested that I buy a basketball and play to see if it would help me grow! Kind of cynical, right?

But, of course, I did not allow myself to become discouraged. I persisted until finally, by the third audition, I made it. I had not really grown much since the last two auditions, but for some reason this time my stature did not seem to bother them. I think it was in part because they saw how badly I wanted to get in. “Looks like you’re just never going to grow!” they said.

The day of that third audition, they called me and said that they wanted to do another audition at the home of one of the band manager’s assistants. I of course went to her house, where I sang a couple of songs. When I finished, she said to me, “Now, let’s go to the office.” I thought it was a bit strange, but since I didn’t know any better, I followed her.

The surprise came when we arrived at the group’s offices, and my parents were there to meet me. At first I didn’t understand why they were there, until someone finally explained: “You passed the audition! You are a Menudo!” I was speechless. I was happy, of course, but at the same time I could not believe it. They congratulated me and we celebrated, but what was really unbelievable was that they told me at seven o’clock at night, and by eight o’clock the next morning I was on a plane to Orlando, where the band was based. As soon as I arrived I went straight to do interviews, meet the stylists, and get fitted for wardrobe. In less than twenty-four hours my life changed completely.

I left my family behind, along with my neighborhood, my friends, and absolutely everything that was familiar to me. It was a very abrupt change that could have been traumatic had it not been for the fact that I was on cloud nine. I was so overjoyed that I had more than enough energy to do everything I had to do. I had to learn eighteen dance routines in just ten days, and I can say that it’s something I am genuinely proud of, because it took some people four days just to learn one. It was a very intense time that came with its share of challenges, but I was so happy I felt like I was on top of the world.

Just one month after I joined the group, I made my debut at the Luis A. Ferré Center for Fine Arts in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Ricky Melendez (the last standing member of the original group) was the one leaving, and as such was the one who introduced me that night, which was very special for me. It was planned that after his presentation I would sing alone in the middle of the stage, while the rest of the group remained seated on a staircase behind me. It was a spectacular moment. I was not nervous at all—in fact, quite the opposite! I grabbed the microphone and started to sing, walking from one side of the stage to the other, moving to the rhythm of the music. I was very pleased with my performance, especially when I finished and the audience gave me such a thunderous hand. It made me feel so good that I realized that this was definitely what I wanted to do from then on.

But that night I also had one of my first lessons on how things were done with Menudo. When I finished my song and left the stage, the band manager was waiting for me backstage. I was still flying high, euphoric from the applause, when he approached me, screaming: “*Did I not tell you to stand in the middle of the stage?!*”

He was right. He had said so because of the lighting, and I had completely forgotten to follow his instructions. I was going from one side of the stage to the other, when they wanted me to stay planted in one spot where they could shine the lights on me steadily. The poor guys in the lighting crew were probably losing their minds trying to follow me with the spotlights.

The mistake was such a big deal that from that moment on, never again did I move when I wasn’t supposed to move. I would learn that lesson, as I would many more in the years to come. That was the

discipline of Menudo: You either did things the way you were told or you were not part of the group. It was that simple.

THE GOOD LIFE

AFTER WORKING SO hard to get into the band, I was not going to do—or fail to do—anything that would cost me my place in the group. Menudo was more than a new world to me; it was another galaxy. When we traveled, we took a private jet—we're talking about a jumbo 737! In the cities where we performed, we would not just stay in a simple hotel suite, or even on a whole floor; the *entire hotel* would be reserved just for us! Sometimes there would be a whole floor just to entertain us, replete with pinball machines and video games. We lived in our very own Disney World, any child's wildest dream. It was so much fun! Every day was a new adventure, and I loved every second of it. We worked very hard, but when it was time to relax, we were treated like kings.

The other thing I always loved about Menudo was that it was like one big family. The free time we had was spent playing around and talking—and sometimes fighting—like five brothers. Since I was the youngest and the smallest in size, some of the other guys would play the role of the older brother. When we were among the masses, when the fans would trample us with excitement, they always looked after me in the midst of the madness. And that made me feel special.

We traveled all over the world. We had concerts in Japan, the Philippines, Europe, South America, and for the first time in the history of the group, we did a tour through the United States, which included twenty-four shows at Radio City Music Hall in New York. It was crazy and impressive to see thousands and thousands of people stopping traffic on Sixth Avenue in front of Radio City and around the entire block! When we looked down from our dressing room, it was like a sea of people. Hundreds of police officers had to form a human barrier on Sixty-third Street and the corner of Lexington Avenue, where our hotel was.

Our fans were passionate, and they would stop at nothing. I remember another time we were in Argentina and there was a throng of at least five thousand girls outside the hotel. They had pins, photographs, flags, and all the Menudo paraphernalia. The girls would scream and yell out each time we would appear at the windows. All you had to do was put an arm out the window to drive them crazy. They would sing our songs along with cheers, like you would hear at soccer stadiums, but adapting them to the group. Later, some guys showed up—I guess they were upset because of all the attention Menudo was getting from the girls—and they started to sing their own cheers, but insulting us and calling us names. Suddenly one of the boys went to where the girls were and tried to take down the Puerto Rican flag. . . . Well, the girls fought back hard! They beat him up so badly that I think he barely made it out alive.

Things like that happened to us all the time. It was truly crazy.

What a change! Before I became a part of the group, my life was completely different. From a simple life in Puerto Rico, where I lived surrounded by family and friends, and hardly ever wandered beyond the few square blocks of my neighborhood, I leaped into a world of fame, luxury, and worship. I went from being the beloved son of my parents and adored grandson of my grandparents to being an international star who traveled the world giving concerts on some of the most important stages on the planet. Naturally, there were moments when I felt lost and would have liked to have my mother or

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