

# ROMÁNTICO

a film by **MARK BECKER**

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**trt: 80 minutes**

**Nominated for two Independent Spirit Awards**  
**Theatrical Release Fall 2006 from Kino International**

**November 1 • IFC Center • NY**  
**January 12 • Landmark Nuart • LA**  
**January 19 • Landmark Lumiere • San Francisco**  
**January 19 • Landmark Shattuck Cinemas • Berkeley**  
**January 19 • Landmark Century Centre Cinemas • Chicago**

**For photos, reviews, and trailer of ROMÁNTICO,**  
**please visit [www.meteorfilms.org](http://www.meteorfilms.org).**

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**NOMINATED • TWO INDEPENDENT SPIRIT AWARDS**  
**NOMINATED • SUNDANCE GRAND JURY PRIZE**  
**GRAN PRIX • BILAN DU FILM • PARIS**  
**SPECIAL JURY PRIZE • SILVERDOCS**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> PRIZE / AUDIENCE AWARD • LATIN AMERICAN FILM FESTIVAL**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> PRIZE • DIRK VANDERSYPEN AWARD FOR JOURNALISM**

## FILM FESTIVAL SELECTIONS

Sundance Film Festival • Los Angeles Film Festival • San Sebastian Film Festival • Visions du Réel (Nyon, Switzerland) Film Festival • Lincoln Center, New York: Independents Night • New Zealand International Documentary Film Festival • Silverdocs: AFI Discovery Channel Documentary Film Festival • Munich International Film Festival • Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic) Film Festival • Morelia (Mexico) Film Festival • Hawaii International Film Festival • Film Arts Festival • Detroit Docs Film Festival • Mill Valley Film Festival • Los Angeles Latino Film Festival • Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival • Vienna International Film Festival • Bilan du Film (Paris) • Thessaloniki Film Festival • Latin American Film Festival – Holland • Donostia / San Sebastian Human Rights Film Festival • Independent Film Festival of Boston • MASS MoCA • CineLatino Germany (on tour) • Le Cinema de la Musique • Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal • Martha's Vineyard International Film Festival • Muestra Internacional Documental (Bogota)

## SYNOPSIS

**ROMÁNTICO** is a feature-length documentary about Mexican musician Carmelo Muñoz Sánchez. The film follows the troubadour as he returns home to scratch out a living after years of trying to get ahead in San Francisco. An immigrant tale in reverse, this portrait vividly captures why a 60-year-old father chose to leave his beloved family and cross the desert to the U.S.

**ROMÁNTICO** finds Carmelo and his musical partner, Arturo Arias, as they roam the streets of San Francisco playing love songs for tips at hipster dives and taquerías. They are a duo, but they call themselves a trio for marketing purposes.

Carmelo's stay in San Francisco ends abruptly when he learns that his ailing mother has taken a turn for the worse. Upon his return to Mexico, Carmelo sees his beloved daughters for the first time in many years, but almost as soon as he arrives, he realizes that he can't adequately support them. Without Arturo by his side, Carmelo finds himself working the mariachi circuit – weddings, quinceañeras, funerals... And when he and Arturo reunite, they work the Salvatierra bars together, playing love songs to prostitutes and their clients. But the pesos just don't add up.

Carmelo finds himself plotting a return trip back to the U.S. But at the age of 60, another border crossing begins to seem absurd...

In **ROMÁNTICO**, Carmelo's songs bear witness to a tireless quest for happiness in the face of frustrated dreams.

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## THE BEGINNING

In the fall of 2000, I began a series of audio interviews with a bunch of musicians who roamed the streets of the Mission District in San Francisco. The neighborhood was also my own for the past five years, and these troubadours were fixtures in the cultural landscape. If you ever went to El Toro for a burrito or La Rondalla for margaritas, you were certain to be serenaded – whether you liked it or not.

The Mission is a diverse neighborhood – part working-class, part hipster artist, and part down-and-out type. The population circulates in a world of Mexican and Salvadoran dives, international phone bodegas, hipster coffee joints, currency exchanges, upscale restaurants, frilly dress shops, and produce stands. There are a bunch of bands that roam the circuit of taquerías and restaurants where Carmelo and Arturo play, and I was testing the waters for a short film idea about the bachelor culture among these mostly Mexican immigrant musicians.

I spent a couple months approaching these bands. I'd be driving home from work, and I'd spot a trio walking the pavement. There'd be a guy with an upright bass, another with an accordion. Next thing I know, I'm racing for a parking spot and running after them. Of course, some were reserved and skeptical. Who is this *gringo*? Others were more open and allowed me to interview them where they lived – in cramped apartments, in makeshift garage bedrooms. Carmelo and Arturo were the last two musicians whom I interviewed. Up to that point, I'd interviewed a bunch of guys who gave me a sense of the roaming musician subculture but none of who had struck me as perfect for my movie.

But when I met Carmelo, I had a good feeling about him. He seemed genuinely open to the film idea, despite the cultural barrier between us, and when I interviewed him, he was more than just present for the interview. He responded to my questions with that mix of humility, sincerity and self-possession that make him such a charming guy.

That very first interview, he told me that he had been hoping for some time that he would be able to tell his life story. It seemed like he had been waiting for this moment... which took me by surprise.

Three years after Carmelo arrived in the U.S., and only a few days into the first shooting week of my film, Carmelo decided that he had to return to Mexico to see his family. At that point, my short film idea evolved into the movie that it became: an immigrant tale in reverse – a story of returning home.

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## WHY THIS STORY?

**ROMÁNTICO** was quite simply inspired by Carmelo. I found the story through him. Certainly, at first I was interested in making a film about an undocumented immigrant, and about a guy who plays love songs for a living – thousands of miles away from home and family.

But ultimately, I fell in love with Carmelo's character, his grand manner of storytelling, his earnestness. And in the end, I tried as best I could to make a film about a man – not a Mexican immigrant, but a man caught up in an existential quest for happiness. Carmelo's struggle is both universal and singular enough to make for a cinematic tale about work, love, ambition, and aloneness. After that first shooting week with him, I realized that I had to serve Carmelo's story, and I followed that instinct until **ROMÁNTICO** was complete.

## FILMING

**ROMÁNTICO** was shot over a period of three and a half years, as Carmelo's circumstance evolved and (truth be told) as money was raised. Carmelo left San Francisco in the middle of the first week of shooting (to my surprise), and we filmed just a little over seven days there. In Mexico, there were five shooting weeks over the next three and a half years. These shoots were in Salvatierra, the small city where Carmelo lives, and in Mexico City where he lived in his youth.

When we would go to Salvatierra, Carmelo's family was beyond hospitable. Carmela (Carmelo's wife) would feed the crew often and without mercy. If at 9AM we claimed that we had eaten breakfast before we arrived at their house, Carmela would offer us lunch. We simply could not eat enough to satisfy her. In fact, I frequently felt – given my small appetite during a stressful production shoot – that I could only disappoint her in this regard.

But I believe that after our first trip to Salvatierra, the bond with Carmelo (if not Carmela) was truly cemented. I think it truly astonished him that the crew had come from San Francisco to film him and his family in their little town. He understood that we were serious about making this movie. And he opened himself up to the process without hesitation.

There was some confusion on Carmelo's part about what role he was serving in the film. At one point, during our second stint in Salvatierra (a couple of years into the project), Carmelo asked if an actor would be playing him in the movie. He had assumed that our work was merely research. One of us mentioned that we were considering replacing him with Antonio Banderas.

We also spent a few days shooting in the border region where Carmelo made his first crossing. (He crossed from Ciudad Juárez over the Rio Grande to a small town outside of El Paso.) At the border, we spent a day with a border patrol agent and a day with a representative from Grupo Beta (an organization that helps educate and protect crossing migrants). Based on detailed conversations with Carmelo about his crossing, I engaged the El Paso agent and the Grupo Beta representative to escort the crew to the various sites that Carmelo had passed through on his

way to the States. The goal of this shoot was to capture the sensory impressions that such a harrowing experience leaves with you.

There were approximately seven shooting weeks total.

## **THE DOCUMENTARY AESTHETIC**

**ROMÁNTICO** was shot in both 16-mm and super-16-mm film. I am both the filmmaker and cinematographer. To me, the decision to shoot film was fairly straightforward, but what informs that decision is more complicated.

Many of my favorite documentaries of all time are the vérité films from the 60's. *Salesman. Don't Look Back. Lonely Boy. Primary.* To me, these are movies, not just documentaries. They are visual storytelling. I love their look. The grain. I love the unbuttoned structures of these films.

I love that hard-to-define sense of "story" (in the best sense) that film brings to a documentary. This isn't the truth. This isn't the news. It's a story, a version of the truth.

With **ROMÁNTICO**, I tried to bring to life the visual rhythm of Carmelo's life. The man works constantly, and much of his work is physical. He and his musical partner Arturo roam the streets from bar to bar late into the night. He plays funeral processions in daytime Mexican heat. He pedals the streets on his *nieve* (snow) cart. All of these scenes are conspicuous opportunities to capture the melodic visual rhythm of an arduous life. And shooting on film helps capture these moments in an evocative way that transcends the moment.

Shooting on film is expensive. And it's cumbersome. You have to change magazines after shooting 10 minutes of footage. And when you don't work with a camera assistant (I like a small crew), shooting film is even more unwieldy for the filmmaker. But shooting film forces me to focus on the storytelling during production. I simply can't afford to shoot endlessly. I must edit the movie as the film rolls. Certainly this focus on story during production is intense, but it also pays off in the editing room.

I am certain that I will work on other projects that lend themselves to shooting on DV, but for **ROMÁNTICO**, there was no other option. When I met Carmelo, I sensed that I had to project the image of this man in a movie theater. So much of Carmelo's life is etched in his face. And his manner is quite expressive. I met this passionate, chubby musician in the streets of the Mission District of San Francisco, and I thought, "This guy is cinematic."

### **Film Details:**

- The entire film was shot on Kodak 500T stock.
- Both Aaton and Arriflex cameras were used
- The shooting ratio was quite low for a documentary, at about 8:1.

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## CARMELO MUÑIZ SÁNCHEZ

### BIOGRAPHY:

Carmelo was born in Salvatierra, a small town in the south of Guanajuato, Mexico. He is the oldest of numerous siblings. His first job was at the age of 8, when his father taught him baking. He worked nights helping to support his younger brothers and sisters. He was forced to quit school after first grade.

In his late twenties, he began to play trio music on the side with his coworkers at the panadería where he worked. Carmelo started off both singing and playing the maracas. Later on, he learned the guitar. Fifteen years ago, his career hit a high point when he played with the group *Sonora Clave de Oro*. They toured all over central Mexico.

### CHRONOLOGY OF CARMELO'S JOURNEY TO AND FROM THE STATES:

Carmelo left Salvatierra in 1997 for the U.S. He was 54 years old at the time. His daughter Lupe was 8-years-old and Juanita was 11-years-old when he left.

When his daughters reached that age, Carmelo's sense that he wasn't providing enough for them had begun to burden him greatly. They needed schoolbooks. They needed shoes. As he will tell you, he "didn't want them to suffer" like he did.

Salvatierra is over a thousand miles south of the border, but the town has a long tradition of sending its workers *allá* (over there). Traditionally an agricultural economy, whenever times are tough, its laborers head north. There is a sense that crossing over the border is just another option to make money, nothing extraordinary – just a way to get by. A good percentage of the money flowing into the town is from remittances from relatives in the States. In my many weeks in Salvatierra, every single person that I met had a father, an aunt, a nephew that had made the journey. Without fail. *Por supuesto*. How else can you get by?

At the time that he left, Carmelo had been working a combination of jobs – both as an itinerant musician and at a Salvatierra *maquiladora* that sells denim to the U.S. At the *maquiladora*, Carmelo averaged no more than \$6 per day. One day he was talking to his niece, whose husband had crossed over to the U.S. She told Carmelo that whenever he was ready, she and her husband could help him pay off the *coyote* (the people smuggler). Soon thereafter he began to plan the voyage.

Carmelo arranged for his border crossing from Salvatierra with a local contact for such endeavors. It cost him about \$1200. He borrowed the money from relatives already in the States. One of these relatives worked in the fields of a winery in Napa. Another did odd jobs in Long Beach.

From Salvatierra, he went to Ciudad Juárez, where Carmelo met with the *coyote*. From Juárez he crossed the border. The distance of the crossing was not great, but he waded through the Rio Grande and hid in a retched canal for hours waiting his moment to emerge unnoticed. As instructed by the *coyote*, Carmelo tried as best he could to immediately assimilate himself into the street life of the small *barrio* where he emerged in Texas. He was then picked up by another smuggler and taken to a *clavo* (a safe house) where he was housed for several days with several other tired and hungry migrants. He was fed toast, eggs and milk (as he remembers). At the *clavo*, Carmelo remained until the stateside *coyote* armed Carmelo with a fake work permit and put him in a van filled with onion farmers. After an overnight journey, he and a few others were placed on a bus to Los Angeles.

From L.A., Carmelo headed to Long Beach, where a *cuñado* (brother-in-law) promised to get Carmelo a job at a Mexican bakery. But the bakery job didn't work out. He went back to L.A. and found the L.A. trio and mariachi scene fiercely competitive. Moreover, he fought with his roommate over Carmelo's snoring problem, and soon enough he was homeless in East L.A. Depressed, with \$10 in his pocket and ready to trek home, Carmelo called his wife. She mentioned that he might phone Arturo, who then lived in San Francisco. She had heard that he was doing quite well up there.

"Come up", Arturo said to Carmelo. "*Ahorita!*" "I'll get you work, no problem."

Carmelo worked in San Francisco for close to three years. Aside from his work as a musician, he worked as a car washer and a baker in a *panadería* as well.

In December of 2000, at the age of 57 Carmelo headed back to Salvatierra. When he arrived home, his daughters Lupe and Juanita were 11- and 14-years-old respectively.

Carmelo has been trying to find a safe way back to the U.S. since his return to Salvatierra four years ago. And he remains ambivalent about heading across the border one more time.

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## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

**Mark Becker** works as a documentary filmmaker, editor and cinematographer. Most recently, Becker produced and directed ROMÁNTICO, which premiered at Sundance, and screened at the Los Angeles, San Sebastian, and Vienna film festivals, among others. ROMÁNTICO won a Special Jury Recognition at Silverdocs and has been nominated for two Independent Spirit Awards (Best Documentary and Truer than Fiction Award). Becker also directed the documentary JULES AT EIGHT, a film about eight-year-old jazz guitarist Julian Lage. JULES AT EIGHT (broadcast on PBS) was a Regional Winner of the Student Academy Awards and a Special Jury Prize from the International Documentary Association.

Becker co-edited LOST BOYS OF SUDAN, which won an Independent Spirit award, as well as a Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival. Becker has also worked as an editor for Lucasfilm, PBS, and on various independent productions. Working as a cinematographer, he has filmed documentaries for PBS, the BBC, MTV, and the Discovery Channel.

Becker is currently editing a documentary for Showtime and researching his next film.

Raised in Needham, Massachusetts (a suburb outside of Boston), Becker has a Masters Degree from the Documentary Film program at Stanford University. He lived in San Francisco for seven years, and currently resides in New York City.

## CREDITS

**Produced, Directed, Photographed, and Edited by**  
MARK BECKER

**Sound**  
DANIEL BAER

**Supervising Editor**  
RICHARD HANKIN

**Co-Producer**  
NADINE MALEH

**Associate Producers**  
DANIEL BAER  
ERIKA GOYZUETA  
PAOLA GUTIÉRREZ-ORTIZ  
SARAH HARBIN

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## **Sound Designer**

LIDIA TAMPLENIZZA

## **Composer**

RAZ MESINAI

## **Additional Sound**

GORO TOSHIMA

## **Production Coordinators**

NATALIE ARANGO

SOCO AGUILAR

## **Featuring**

CARMELO MUÑIZ SÁNCHEZ

## **also Featuring**

ARTURO ARIAS GARCÍA

CARMELA MARTÍNEZ ARENAS

JUANA MUÑIZ MARTÍNEZ

LUPE MUÑIZ MARTÍNEZ

GUILLERMINA VEGA MARTÍNEZ