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The ballad of Carmelo

Romantico proves documentaries can be gorgeous and soulful

BY DENNIS HARVEY

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By the time you read this, a whole lot of filmmakers, publicists, journalists, and miscellaneous affiliates from Los Angeles will have once again descended on Utah for the annual feeding frenzy known as Sundance. Just what the aforementioned feed on isn't always or exactly movies — the original raison d'être can get lost in the general scuffle. Classic old-school festival films — those quiet, starless character dramas and vérité documentaries sans hot-button topic and celebrity endorsement — tend to get elbowed to the back of the crowd by more pushy types.

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Such was the case two years ago for *Romántico*, which finally gets a theatrical release this week. As good as if not better than anything else in Sundance's 2005 American Documentary Competition, it nonetheless attracted no awards and scant interest. Admittedly, a film about undocumented immigrant Mexican musicians in San Francisco didn't sound so compelling next to docs about mentally ill indie rock heroes, death row exonerations, Enron, kick-ass jock paraplegics, clergy sex abuse, and every comedian in the world telling one dirty joke. Plus, there had been a lot of documentaries about undocumented Latin Americans in the States of late — like Iraq (and clergy sex abuse), it's an inevitable subject du jour for nonfiction cinema.

Most similarly themed docs before and since *Romántico* have had a ripped-from-the-headlines feel, tackling specific issues with activist zeal. Several (*Wetback: The Undocumented Documentary* and *Un Franco, 14 Pesetas* among them) have been very good. But despite the concern they share, they're

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Environmental film fest
With a focus on conservation and eliminating our reliance on fossil fuels, the four-day Film Festival for the Environment, presented by Sustainable Peralta and the Northern Alameda Sierra Club, features films such as a documentary about Cuba's farming practices, *The Power of Community*. See Web site for showtimes, free Laney College Theater
900 Fallon, Oakl. (510) 272-6695, [\[link\]](#)
FRIDAY, JANUARY 19
Cost to consumers
Watch *Affluenza*, a documentary that examines conspicuous consumption in America and its environmental impact and advocates for choosing a simpler way of living. The film is paired in a double feature with *Tales of the San Joaquin*, a documentary about California's second longest river.
7:30 p.m., \$5 donations accepted
Humanist Hall 390 27th St., Oakl. [\[link\]](#)
SATURDAY, JANUARY 20
Plot with Democrats
Come to the Progressive Democrats of the East Bay's first planning meeting of the year and help shape the group's mission to make the most of the Democrat majority in Congress.
11:30 a.m.–2 p.m.
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like well-crafted news bulletins, while at core *Romántico* seems like something else entirely — soulful and poetic, its tone and narrative oddly reminiscent of '40s Italian neorealist classics.

Part of the reason is that it simply looks great. A frequent cinematographer on other directors' projects, Mark Becker shot his own first feature himself. Not only does he have a definite eye, but he also made the deliberate decision to shoot on film (16mm and Super 16) — an approach practically unheard of for a documentary these days. Yeah, yeah, new formats have done a great service in making the so-called seventh art more affordable, immediate, flexible, democratic, and so forth. But anyone who tells you video can look just as rich as film stock is high. It (still) just ain't so.

Though he's since moved to New York City, Becker was living in the Mission District when he became intrigued by Mexican émigré musicians who play for tips in the area's restaurants and on its streets. They form a subterranean "bachelor culture," making enough money to support the wives and children back home they might not see for ...

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at the Center for Political Education's eighth annual Winter Celebration and Left Memorabilia Auction.

7 p.m., free
Soap Gallery
1142 Howard, SF
(415) 431-1918,

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Antichoice countermarch
For the past three years antichoice activists have convened in San Francisco to march along our beautiful waterfront and offend the heck out of our overwhelmingly prochoice population. Let them know how San Franciscans feel at a countermarch organized by the Bay Area Coalition for Our Reproductive Rights.

10:30 a.m. rally and countermarch
Pier 5, Embarcadero and Market, SF
4 p.m. postmarch party

1908 Mission, SF
(415) 730-2917,

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Meeting the president
Listen to LA Times veteran reporter, syndicated political columnist, and TruthDig editor in chief Robert Scheer recount his close encounters with US presidents, especially the current one, at an event sponsored by the Alameda Public Affairs Forum.

7-9 p.m., free
Home of Truth Center 1300 Grand, Alameda

(510) 814-9592,

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MONDAY, JANUARY

22

Roe v. Wade anniversary party
Celebrate with Planned Parenthood the 34th anniversary of Roe v. Wade with a discussion on the status of reproductive rights in the United States, multigenerational and multicultural reports on abortion experiences, and performances by local artists. 7 p.m., \$10

El Rio 3158 Mission, SF
(415) 282-3325,

[\[link\]](#)

Study group response
Get former Clinton administration defense secretary William Perry's inside perspective on the Iraq Study Group's recommendations at an event sponsored by the

Commonwealth Club. 6 p.m., \$30, \$15 for members

Fairmont Hotel, Gold Room
950 Mason, SF
(415) 597-6700

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 3543 18th St., SF
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