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## San Francisco Chronicle

### MUSICIAN'S MISSION

[Delfin Vigil](#)

Sunday, January 14, 2007

It was in between bites of a burrito that Mark Becker first saw the man he was destined to make a documentary about.



"I was like a lot of gringos living in the Mission District who would go to (restaurants) El Toro or Taqueria Cancun and -- whether you were in the mood for it or not -- would get serenaded by roving musicians while you ate," Becker says of the origins of what would become his film "Romántico."

The touching documentary follows the sometimes tragic trail of the Mexican troubadours of El Trio Cometa as they make their way in and out of San Francisco taquerias and dive bars before heading back home to Mexico.

In 2000, Becker had the vague idea of interviewing musicians in the neighborhood, many of whom were reluctant to talk. When he approached Carmelo Muñiz Sanchez, "Romántico" was born.

"He was the last musician I approached before filming," Becker says. "And without a trace of skepticism, Carmelo acted like he was waiting his entire life for that moment to meet. He said, 'You know, Mark, I've been waiting a long time to tell the story of my life. I think this might be it.' "

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For five days, Becker followed Sanchez and his musical partner, Arturo Arias, as the two musicians roamed the Mission District, collecting tips from tipsy hipsters and dudes trying to impress their dates. Even though they're actually a duo, Sanchez and Arias call themselves Trio Cometa because it's easier to book gigs that way. Coming up a little short on numbers is a common theme in the film as both men count every coin. They send money to their families in Mexico and live in dilapidated rooms divided by bedsheets and pieces of furniture.

They were also short on time. Less than a week into filming, Sanchez, who had been living in San Francisco for three years, had to move back to Mexico to care for his dying mother.

"On day three we were supposed to meet up, and he wasn't there," Becker says. "When I found Carmelo, he was uncharacteristically drunk. The good thing was that he's an affectionate drunk. He put my face in his hands and said, 'Mark, I'm so sorry, but I have to leave the film.' He felt like he let me down."

For the next couple of days, Becker continued filming "Romántico" anyway, focusing more on Sanchez as he headed to the airport. The filmmaker couldn't afford to get on a plane with Sanchez that day, but he promised to come to Sanchez's hometown of Salvatierra, though the musician figured the film was over.

As Becker spent the next few months raising money to finish the film, he began to understand what "Romántico" would be about.

"I started to see the man emerge from the archetype," Becker says. "Carmelo became more distinct. He ceased to be the undocumented immigrant or the roving musician and became this wonderful guy with a mixture of humility, pride and talent."

Becker and his film crew spent eight weeks over nearly four years filming Sanchez and his family in the face of financial struggles. In Mexico, Sanchez dreams of the days when he made upward of \$100 in tips on a single night in San Francisco, compared with the barely 100 pesos a week he took in at home.

While "Romántico" checks in with a couple of side characters and their hardships, Sanchez remains the real star, or estrella, of the film. It is something he still has trouble coming to terms with. A couple of years into filming, he asked when he was going to be replaced with a real actor.

"We realized that Carmelo was thinking of himself as research. Maybe he thought all this time we were spending with him was so that we could use his life as a template for a 'real' movie," says Becker, who sat next to an awestruck Sanchez when he watched "Romántico" in a theater for the first time. "Someone

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made a joke about Antonio Banderas playing the role of Carmelo. But from then on, I consistently made it clear that he was the estrella of the film."

Sanchez has become a hometown hero and star in Salvatierra, where the film has been written about in newspapers and screened in theaters as well as in several classrooms.

"All the kids call me 'Romántico' when I'm walking in the streets," says Sanchez, who finds getting gigs much easier these days. "I never thought the film would take on a life of its own. I was mostly hoping that it would be just something I could leave for my daughters as a small memory of my life."

Coming up with a name for the film was one of the hardest parts for Becker. "Romántico" became a working title early on, but he couldn't quite figure out why he liked it.

"These musicians, they play romantic music, but there's something terribly unromantic about their lives," Becker says. "When Carmelo was in San Francisco, he wasn't the happiest man on earth. But he merges his memories of San Francisco with idealism rather than pure reality. It's because Carmelo is a romantic."

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Romántico (not rated) opens Friday at Bay Area theaters.

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