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Mexico and the US: New Documentaries Explore a Strained Relationship Through Personal Stories

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by Jonny Leahan

With the **Los Angeles Film Festival** in full swing, and over 260 films vying for attention, the viewing options can seem unwieldy at times. As one explores the individual sections of the LAFF slate, however, it becomes clear that there is a method to their programming madness. In the Documentary Competition, for example, a survey of the eleven films offered reveal an emphasis on personal portraits, three of which follow very different stories that ultimately reveal the same underlying theme the dysfunctional economic relationship between the US and Mexico and its drastic effect on individual lives.



A scene from Mark Becker's "Romantico." Photo courtesy of the filmmaker.

In **Mark Becker's "Romantico,"** which follows Mexican musician Carmelo Muniz Sanchez, that theme is never directly explored, but always lurks just beneath the surface. "My film doesn't have that overt political struggle; it's all subtext," Becker told indieWIRE. "You're better off leaving some stuff on the cutting room floor, even though you might think it will give you the broader political context. Invariably, the moment I cut to anything from the broader struggle it only hurt the film, and the more I stuck with Carmelo and his personal drama the more it spoke to me... it made you imagine the political context in a way that ended up being more provocative than showing it to you."

Beautifully shot and edited on 16mm by Becker himself, "Romantico" employs an old school verite approach, invoking the spirit of films like "**Salesman**" and "**Don't Look Back**." Like the **Maysles brothers**, he wisely lets the story tell itself, one that began as a film about the street musicians in San Francisco's Mission District who are mostly illegal immigrants from Mexico. The project changed, however, when Becker discovered Carmelo, and realized that it was this man's story that needed to be told. "I knew I was compelled by Carmelo's personality," says Becker, "but I was willing to let the film lead me where it would. So three days into the shoot, I showed up at Carmelo's apartment and he was uncharacteristically drunk. He put my face in his hands and said 'Mark, I'm so sorry, I'm leaving for Mexico'

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sorry if I'm hurting the film, but I must go home."

Just two days later, Becker found himself shooting footage of Carmelo at the airport, and as the course of the film evolved, the crew would ultimately travel to Carmelo's hometown of Salvatierra, a thousand miles south of the US/Mexico border. It was there that Becker discovered Carmelo as a whole human being, watching him as a father, a husband, and as a performer brimming with confidence, no longer the humble street musician. The trip also taught Becker something about the larger picture something about the far-reaching implications of two intertwined economies in a post-NAFTA world.



A scene from Natalia Almada's "Al Otro Lado" (To the Other Side). Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Film Festival.

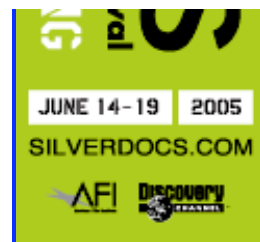
remittances from the US from relatives who have made that decision to be away from their families."

That common dilemma, whether to travel to the States in order to provide a better life for your family back home, or to stay at home and be a present father or son, is also addressed in **Natalia Almada's "Al Otro Lado" (To the Other Side)**, the difference being that a third option is also explored here that of becoming a drug trafficker. The film begins in Sinaloa, the drug capital of Mexico, and home to several legendary figures of corrido music a centuries-old form of street music that serves as a means of communicating the true stories of every day people. Much like rap music, corrido songs have evolved to reflect the times, and now often tell tales of drug trafficking as well as the struggles of illegal immigration.

Despite being shot in digital video, "Al Otro Lado" is lush and colorful, perfectly capturing the contrasting hues of the Sierra Mountains and the Sea of Cortez. This visual beauty is in stark contrast to the struggle of the residents of these areas, one of whom is a 23-year-old composer named Magdiel who is determined to escape his poverty-stricken life. Confronted with the choice to traffic drugs or cross the border, he finds a coyote (illegal border crossing guide) who is willing to cross him in exchange for a corrido song about the coyote's adventures. Magdiel begins to write the song, and prepares to leave on a journey just like the ones he's been singing about for years.

Not everyone wants to leave home when things get tough, however, as is evidenced in **Beth Bird's "Everyone Their Grain of Sand,"** which is having its US premiere today at LAFF. A compelling document of grass roots activism in action, the film follows the tenacious citizens of Maclovio Rojas, a poverty-stricken community just outside of Tijuana, Mexico, in their quest for the most basic means of survival. In an Orwellian campaign to force the locals out of town, the state of Baja California refuses to provide water, electricity, and schooling for the youngsters all in an attempt to make room for the multinational corporations who want their land to build factories where they can take advantage of the glut of cheap labor.

"What I was interested in doing was trying to make a film that made Americans aware of the inter-relationship between their lives and the lives of people in Tijuana," Bird



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told indieWIRE. "The reason I can afford two television sets is because the person who assembled that television set is living in a shack built of scrap material with no electricity, no running water, and no sewer. They're using an outhouse, they have a dirt floor, and that's not an acceptable standard of living as far as I'm concerned, especially for someone who lives 20 minutes from San Diego."



A scene from Beth Bird's "Everyone Their Grain of Sand." Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Film Festival.

In a fascinating chronicle of community activism, Bird documents the residents' fight to provide their own families with running water and a school basic needs which they ultimately pay for and create themselves, over the course of four years of filming. Unrelenting, the Mexican government finally raids the homes of the community leaders, one of whom is caught and jailed on trumped-up charges. "Nicolasa Ramos was jailed in December of 2002," says Bird, "and was only finally sentenced in April of this year, so she was held without bail for almost two-and-a-half years. They just sentenced her to six years in prison. I was shocked because it was so obvious to me the whole time that she hadn't done anything."

From watching these three films, it seems clear that the rocky economic marriage between Mexico and the US doesn't seem to be getting any better, but that really isn't the point of any of these documentaries. The real message comes through the unique individual stories of their subjects, and far from being purely political, these are messages of hope and resilience from a world that says there just might be salvation to be found in something as simple as a song.

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