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## Article

### Report from Sundance 2005: Documentaries in Action

February 15, 2005

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#### Romántico

[Romántico](#) is a soulful documentary portrait of Mexican musician Carmelo Muñiz. The film follows Carmelo as he returns home to scratch out a living after years of trying to get ahead as a Mariachi singer in San Francisco. Along the way, the politics of illegal immigration and United States/Mexican economic relations bubble to the surface, all within the context of Carmelo's love for his family. *Romántico* premiered in the American Documentary Competition at this year's Sundance Film Festival. The doc was shot on film (both 16mm and Super16) by Mark Becker, who also directed, edited and produced the film. It's Becker's feature debut. His previous work includes the short *Jules at Eight* which was nominated for a Student Academy Award and broadcast on PBS. He has edited films for MTV, PBS, and the Learning Channel and coedited the *Lost Boys of Sudan* which won an Independent Spirit Award.

Harriette Yahr: I understand that *Romántico* started off as a shorter story, and evolved into the feature length doc it now is. Can you talk a little about that?

Mark Becker: Yes, I was researching ideas for a short film about these Mexican musicians that roam around the Mission District of San Francisco. I spent a few weeks approaching bands and Carmelo and Arturo were the last two musicians I interviewed. When I met Carmelo, I had a good feeling about him and he seemed to feel that he had an important story to tell. The very first interview he mentioned to me that he had been hoping for some time that he would get the opportunity to tell his life story, which was a bit overwhelming to me given that I was making a short. But I went with it. A few days into the first week shooting, Carmelo decided that he had to return to Mexico to see his family. I was completely blind-sided. I found myself shooting him leaving from the San Francisco airport. And at that point my short film evolved into the movie that it became an immigrant tale in reverse.

Yahr: Something that stands out in *Romántico* are the visuals. You shot on film. Was there something about the film aesthetic driving you or what did drive your format choices?

Becker: The texture, contrast, and visual dynamic of film feels perfect for a personal history. *Romántico* is essentially a montage of ideas, images, and recollections from a man's life. This sort of source material begs for a visual treatment that tells a story like a series of still photographs. I guess whatever I am working on, I'm thinking about telling a story visually, in film or video.

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, the unbuttoned structures of these films.

Yahr: The aesthetic, the beauty of your film, seems to invite the viewer into the story on an emotional level, something I think you are going after. It's as if your political commentary is secondary or at least less subtle here.

Becker: What I was trying to do with *Romántico* was to tell a story about a man. And the story is most definitely political, like most stories. But I leave the polemics for the Q and A and for the



[Romántico](#) will be used as an advocacy tool by the [Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights](#) in San Francisco and [Asociación Tepeyac](#) in New York.

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conversations after the film. Of course when you see the film, you sense that the filmmaker sympathizes with Carmelo, the main character, and that I have no issue with Carmelo's illegal border crossing. The film gives you a sense of how U.S. policies fragment families, and how they are most harsh towards those who are most in need. But my point of view is buried beneath a personal story about a guy and his world of music, work, and family.

The film does not explain how NAFTA has hurt the agricultural economy that supports Carmelo's hometown of Salvatierra. And how the biggest employer in Salvatierra is a maquiladora that sells denim to the States. Carmelo worked there on three separate occasions. And he made on average \$5 per day. Ten times less than he can make in the States. All of these details did not make it into the film because they did not come through organically, and only punctured the narrative purity of the story.



*Romántico* is Director Mark Becker's debut feature.

Also, when I weighed down the film with more context, it tended to conflate Carmelo to a symbol of the Mexican struggle, which felt uncomfortable and presumptuous. That being said, I made sure that the political context did bubble through the surface because it's what gives Carmelo's story a larger resonance. Ultimately, it was about balance.

Yahr: So what about outreach? Do you have any plans to use *Romántico* in any grassroots or community-based ways to raise awareness about immigration rights or other issues?

Becker: I would love to see U.S. policies and business practices reflect our absolute economic dependence on immigrant labor. And I would hope *Romántico* could help raise awareness on that level. As for grassroots distribution, both the [Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights](#) in San Francisco and [Asociación Tepeyac](#) in New York have agreed to use the film for their outreach and advocacy purposes.

And I want to play an active role in conceiving the best way to reach the film's target audiences. For me, it's not just about border police, it's about the myriad ways in which the U.S. encourages immigration through our policies and business practices, and yet pays no heed to the impact of our policies on the immigrants themselves.

The first thing I want to do is help Carmelo. The man was so generous of spirit throughout the filmmaking process, even when he was at his most despondent. And he has asked for so little from me. In fact, he has only asked for a VHS copy of the film. With a Mexican producer friend, I plan to coordinate a benefit screening for Carmelo and his family at a movie theater in a neighboring town. A couple of screenings could help him and his family enormously.

And after I break even on the film, I plan to share any profits with Carmelo's family. I suppose I would love to see that kind of direct impact. Filmmaking can feel like such a strange enterprise when the subject is someone who is economically destitute. At times, it can feel rather absurd, spending so much money on the film, and not on the film subjects. Now I feel like Carmelo and his family should reap some of the rewards.

Yahr: Perhaps this is a good example of how the personal is the political?

Becker: For *Romántico*, my instinct was to make sure that Carmelo was a three-dimensional character and not merely a symbol of larger issues. Carmelo is a real guy. He doesn't see himself as the "noble immigrant" archetype and he shouldn't be depicted that way. I made sure to keep away from polemics, and stick to Carmelo's life and worldview as much as possible. So the political subtext leaks through in a way that hopefully feels organic to the story of this one particular chubby 60-year-old musician who is just trying to get by and make a good life for his daughters.

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