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MOVIE REVIEW

'Romántico'

Pain and perseverance in the life of a mariachi

By Sam Adams, Special to The Times

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The mariachi musician's job would seem to be as simple as providing a little authentic south-of-the-border atmosphere to go with that frozen margarita and those nachos grandes. But the diners who smile politely as Carmelo Muñiz Sánchez draws near don't seem to know what they're hearing.

Pain, poetry and perseverance form the backbone of Mark Becker's compassionate, well-observed documentary "Romántico," which follows Sánchez from the upscale restaurants of San Francisco to his hometown of Salvatierra, Mexico.



The movie begins as a straightforward portrait of Sánchez and his partner, Arturo Arias, a strumming-and-singing duo who bill themselves as El Trio Cometa. (As they explain, it's easier to get gigs as a trio, whether or not their nonexistent third member ever shows up.)

Life as undocumented troubadours is not easy. Arias picks up spare shifts at a carwash when the weather is sunny. Sánchez sleeps in a makeshift lean-to in a dead-end hallway, saving money to send home to his wife and two daughters. But no matter how hard his lot, Sánchez demonstrates the stoicism he sums up in an old

Mexican proverb: "God makes me, and I make do."

Sánchez's determination persists even as his circumstances worsen. After his elderly mother loses her legs to diabetes, he is forced to fly home to Mexico, knowing that, at 57 (when filming began more than three years ago), he likely lacks the physical stamina to undertake another border crossing. Unable to make ends meet as a musician, he takes to selling a homemade treat called nieves ("snow") on the streets, a risky proposition since even the paltry materials he needs to make it represent a significant financial risk. In Salvatierra, it takes him two weeks to earn the \$50 he could make in a night in the U.S.

Sánchez's teenage daughters say they prefer having him home, even if it means they live less well. But he is consumed with fears that they will fall into poverty and be forced to prostitute themselves. The only time this stout, stolid man's voice breaks is when he recalls the abject need of his own childhood. "I suffered a lot," he recalls, a simple statement that holds a world of grief.

Indeed, for Sánchez, money seems to hold an almost mystical power. When his wife begins to suffer from menopausal mood swings, he confides the belief that his earning more would ease her pain. "Money isn't life," he says, "but it is part of life."

Although Becker includes impressionistic footage of Sánchez's dangerous crossing into the U.S. from Ciudad Juarez, the movie's interests tend more toward the personal than the political. Cultural differences notwithstanding, Sánchez is the archetype of the overachieving dad, sacrificing his present to provide for his family's future. That his vigorous labor nets him only dollars a day is a tragedy best told in song.

"Romántico." Unrated. Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes. In English and Spanish with English subtitles. Exclusively at Landmark's Nuart, 11272 Santa Monica Blvd., West L.A. (310) 281-8223.

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Filmmaker Mark Becker is scheduled to appear at the 7:30 and 9:45 p.m. screenings today and Saturday.

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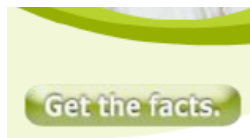
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