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Carmelo Muniz, the subject of Mark Becker's "Romantico." Photo provided by Kino International

indieWIRE Interview: Mark Becker, director of "Romantico"

by indieWIRE (November 1, 2006)

Hailed by indieWIRE as one of the ten best films of 2005 without U.S. distribution, **Mark Becker's** acclaimed documentary "**Romantico**" is hitting theaters nearly two years after the filmmaker first got the call that his movie would debut at the '05 **Sundance Film Festival**. On indieWIRE's best undistributed list the film was described as, "A touching portrait of a mariachi musician who heads back to Mexico to be with his family, Becker's debut employs an old school verite approach a la the Maysles brothers. Originally about San Francisco street musicians, the project narrowed when Becker discovered Carmelo Muniz Sanchez and traveled with him to his hometown a thousand miles south of the border." As iW doc columnist Jonny Leahan wrote about the movie for indieWIRE, "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 far-reaching implications of two intertwined economies in a post-NAFTA world."

A double nominee at the **Independent Spirit Awards**, the film was selected in both the Truer Than Fiction competition for emerging filmmakers and nominated for best documentary of the year by the annual selection committee. It had a successful festival run, screening at the **Los Angeles Film Festival**, Silverdocs and many others. The film, being released by **Kino International**, opened tonight (Wednesday) at the **IFC Center** in New York and will play in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Berkeley, CA early next year.

Filmmaker Mark Becker recently participated in indieWIRE's email interview series and his answers to our standard set of questions are published below.

Please tell us a bit about yourself. Where did you grow up? Where do

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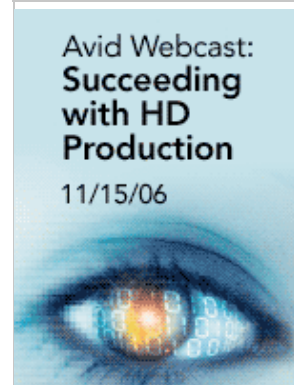
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you live?

I'm 36. For 7 more days. I often work as an editor of documentaries. I like editing, although I would love more sunlight.

I grew up in Needham, MA. There, I had tall hedges, a crab apple tree and room to roam, but now I live in a modest one-bedroom in the Village with my wife and 3-year old daughter. My office is in the apartment as well. It's a bit cramped, as my office keeps expanding. I still roam though - or pace.

**What were the circumstances that lead you to become a filmmaker?
What other creative outlets do you explore ?**

My family on my father's side has home movies dating back at least to the thirties. From 16-mm to 8-mm to Super-8mm to VHS and so on. When I was young (7, 8, 9 years old), my father would shoot Super-8 of vacations, the home life... And he and I would edit little movies out of it. With a viewer, a splicer, and splicing tape. We would do "sound-on-sound" recordings, putting in narration and music. It was all rather propagandistic of course, but I suppose it was appropriate for the content and the viewing audience.

Did you go to film school? Or how did you learn about filmmaking?

I went to the Stanford Documentary Film program. It really worked for me, mostly because it's a super small program, production intensive, and there were a couple of inspiring professors. I felt really fortunate to do something I loved all the time. In some ways it's such a selfish time of your life, but since those selfish days are fewer in number now, I appreciate that time even more. Of course, it's ten years later and I still have a year left on my student loans.

Before graduate school, I held a regular desk job and interned at night or whenever I could for documentary production companies. I never felt like I would be able to work my way up. But then it was a different era (back in '93) - that is, seemingly more difficult to just pick up a camera, shoot and edit on your own.

How/where did the initial idea for "Romantico" come from?

I was living in the Mission District of San Francisco when I began to make this movie. My initial inspiration was the nomadic lives of these Mexican trios that roamed the restaurant circuit in my neighborhood. They play their norteno and ranchero music at the taquerias and bars, Chinese restaurants and hipster joints. These musicians play love songs to gringos, and for the most part they are men who have wives and children they are supporting back in Mexico. The dynamic intrigued me and I began to research the film.

And then I met Carmelo. The film is ultimately inspired by my experience (after production began) following this disarming, chubby guy from Guanajuato.

As I filmed, Carmelo's sensibility (his manner, his storytelling style) helped me find a vocabulary for the film. Carmelo looks at his own life with this strange mix of humility and pride. Although he rose from impossible poverty, he thinks of his life in grand terms, replete with signposts and plot twists. And I believe this dynamic between gritty reality and the more epic plays out in "Romantico."

I suppose that at a certain point (once I followed Carmelo home from San Francisco to Salvatierra), I realized that this guy - who could easily be looked at as inspiration for a film about immigration - had the kind of complexity and charm that would be wasted on a more politically charged kind of filmmaking. The most honest and nuanced portrait of Carmelo, the man, became the holy

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grail. Could I start with this (in some ways) invisible character of the San Francisco streets and bring out the indelible individual?

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in either developing the project or making and securing distribution for the movie?

Can I tell you a highlight of the filmmaking process?

I purposely avoided showing "Romantico" to Carmelo, knowing that the moment would arrive when he would see it in a theater setting. He finally watched the film for the first time at the **Morelia Film Festival** at a projected outdoor screening in the central plaza of Morelia, a town only an hour away from Carmelo's Salvatierra. There were a few hundred people watching the projection, standing and sitting. Carmelo looked nervous, and watched the film with his hand covering his mouth.

When the film was over Carmelo and I were invited to the front for the Q & A. The crowd stood and gave Carmelo a protracted ovation. He bowed before the audience with teary eyes. They announced his name with deference, "Don Carmelo!"

Towards the end of "Romantico," Carmelo (age 60) said that he had always hoped that he would "be somebody" in his life. During the Q & A in Morelia, he told the audience that he felt like he had now achieved this goal. He is still struggling at home, still working like a man half his age. He is still in the same economic situation as at the start of production. But he feels like he's accomplished something significant. He has told his story.

So now Carmelo has done radio and print interviews in Salvatierra, and has become something of a local hero. He seems proud.

Distribution

I started shooting "Romantico" in December of 2000, finished the film in January 2005 for Sundance, and now it's being released in theaters in November 2006. It's easy to read between the lines. Nothing was easy. But I'm so glad the film will have a continued life now. Funny that it will be broadcast on Sundance Channel in January of 2008.

How did you finance the film?

The entire film was financed with an i.v. drip of grants from foundations. I would shoot a bunch, run out of money, write for some grants, and cross my fingers. I kept my head above water until the very end when the film got into Sundance. Then post put me in credit card debt. Still digging myself out.

What are your biggest creative influences?

Many of my favorite documentaries of all time are the verite films from the 60's and 70'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. I love the unbuttoned structures of these films.

I especially love documentaries that feel like stories, where the big ideas are subtext and characters loom large. "Important" isn't my thing. Of course, there's a place for that kind of work.

How do you define success as a filmmaker? What are your personal goals as a filmmaker?

For me, I always think success is around the corner. My goals always keep a safe distance. Right now, I would love to find a nice balance between editing work and making my own movies. I really look forward to getting going on

my next movie.

[For more information on "Romantico", please visit [the Meteor Films website](#).]

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