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San Francisco Chronicle

Who really is that man with guitar?

[Mick LaSalle, Chronicle Movie Critic](#)

Friday, January 19, 2007



Romántico: Documentary. With Carmelo Muñoz Sanchez and Arturo Arias. Directed by Mark Becker. (Not rated. 80 minutes. In Spanish with English subtitles. At Bay Area theaters.)

"Romántico" is a modest documentary, small in scope and ambition, but it achieves one of the higher callings of art in that it forces viewers to look at a something in a newer, deeper and more humane way.

[\[Podcast: Mick LaSalle talks "Romantico" and "Samoan Wedding."\]](#)

You ever go to a restaurant and see two guys walk in with guitars and start singing Mexican songs? And you think, "Oh, no. Not only do I have to get tortured listening to music I don't want to hear, and not only has dinner conversation come to a standstill, but I'm even going to have to pay for the privilege when they pass around the hat." No? You never think that? Well, then you're one of the nice people and have nothing to learn from this movie.

The picture is about two guys from Mexico, illegal immigrants,



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talented musicians and singers who are making their living in precisely this way: They go from restaurant to restaurant in San Francisco, doing a small set of songs and earning tips. On a weeknight, they might make \$30 each. On a weekend, they can make between \$50 and \$100. During the day, they have other jobs. One works in a car wash.

These are men in their 50s who were born poor and are probably going to die poor, but they're working like pack animals to give their families in Mexico a leg up in life. The film follows Carmelo Sanchez, the "romántico" of the title, who has two daughters, and the nightmare that he has is that one or both of them might end up so poor they turn to prostitution. To prevent that, he works in the United States in a kind of exile, staying away for months and even years at a time.

The film touches on the terrible loneliness of this exile, and then follows Sanchez back home to Mexico. He's there for his mother's final illness and then lingers there, reluctant to go back. Earlier, someone warns him against returning home, that it makes coming back to the United States all the more "harsh" -- not that the Americans are nasty, just that America isn't home. In Mexico, Sanchez continues his life as a musician, but he makes a 10th of what he can make in San Francisco.

"Romántico" would be nothing if it were just a hard-luck story. The movie is something else: the revelation of a way of life, of a whole area of human experience going on right under our noses -- or standing over our restaurant tables. More than that, it's an encounter with a special man. Sanchez has wisdom, humility and devoutness, and he's a real artist. Maybe we've seen him before, but without director Mark Becker we'd have never gotten to know him.

-- Advisory: Adult themes.

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