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SPECIAL MENTION 



# AL OTRO LADO

(TO THE OTHER SIDE)



Al Otro Lado will be presented in 2006 on P.O.V., PBS's award-winning non-fiction showcase.  
A Co-production of P.O.V./American Documentary Inc.

# AL OTRO LADO

(TO THE OTHER SIDE)

## AL OTRO LADO (TO THE OTHER SIDE)

A feature documentary by Natalia Almada

70 min • digital video • color • 2005

An aspiring corrido composer from the drug capital of Mexico, faces two choices to better his life: to traffic drugs or to cross the border illegally into the United States. From Sinaloa, Mexico, to the streets of South Central and East L.A., *Al Otro Lado* explores the world of drug smuggling, illegal immigration and the corrido music that chronicles it all.

website: [www.altamurafilms.com](http://www.altamurafilms.com)

### Supported by:

Sundance Documentary Fund

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Arizona Humanities Council

New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship

Cherry Road Films and the Hyde Foundation

Fiscal sponsor: Women Make Movies

A selected project of Tribeca All Access, a program of the Tribeca Film Institute.

NALIP Producers Academy and mentorship with Beni Matias



# AL OTRO LADO

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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

From a small fishing village on the Sea of Cortez, Magdiel is a 23-year-old composer who writes songs about the fishermen who have turned their *pangas* (fishing boats) into drug trafficking vessels. The economic crisis in the fishing industry forces Magdiel, a fourth generation fisherman, to seek another way of life. His two choices: to traffic drugs to the “gringos” in his fishing boat or to leave his hometown behind and become another of an estimated 10 million illegal immigrants living in the United States.\* When Magdiel meets a coyote (illegal border crossing guide) who agrees to cross him for free in exchange for a corrido song praising the adventures of the coyote himself, Magdiel begins composing and prepares for the journey.

*Al Otro Lado* begins in Sinaloa, the drug capital of Mexico and birthplace of Los Tigres del Norte and Chalino Sanchez, two of the most famous corrido musicians. From the Sierra Mountains where opium and marijuana grow in abundance, down to the Sea of Cortez, where contraband is trafficked north in fishing boats, we look at the economic crisis that forces so many like Magdiel to turn to drug trafficking, or to risk their lives crossing the border illegally into the United States. Through the regional corrido music that takes its roots from medieval ballads and has the edgy grit of gangsta rap, we travel from Sinaloa north across the border to the streets of South Central and East L.A., the same journey taken by millions of illegal immigrants, tons of narcotics and even corrido music.

\*The Economist, March 12-18, 2005

“el corrido es la el diario, el  
archivo de la vida del  
hombre y mientras el hombre  
camina va seguir habiendo  
corridos.”

(the corrido is the diary, the  
archive of the life of man  
and while men are walking  
there will always be  
corridos)


Paulino Vargas, composer



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## SCREENINGS AND AWARDS

Gotham Awards: Nominee  Best film not playing in a theater near you 

Museum of Modern Art, New York (March 1-6th, 2006)



Tribeca Film Festival



Los Angeles International Film Festival

New York Latino International Film Festival  Cultural Voice Award 

Newark Museum of Art

Camden Documentary Film Festival

Morelia Film Festival  Honorable Mention - Best Documentary 

Boston Latino International Film Festival  Opening Night Film 

Vancouver International Film Festival

Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival

Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival (traveling festival)

Puerto Vallarta Film Festival, Mexico

Puerto Rico International Film Festival  Best Documentary 

Rehoboth Film Festival

Detroit Documentary Film Festival

CineFestival, San Antonio  Best Feature Film 

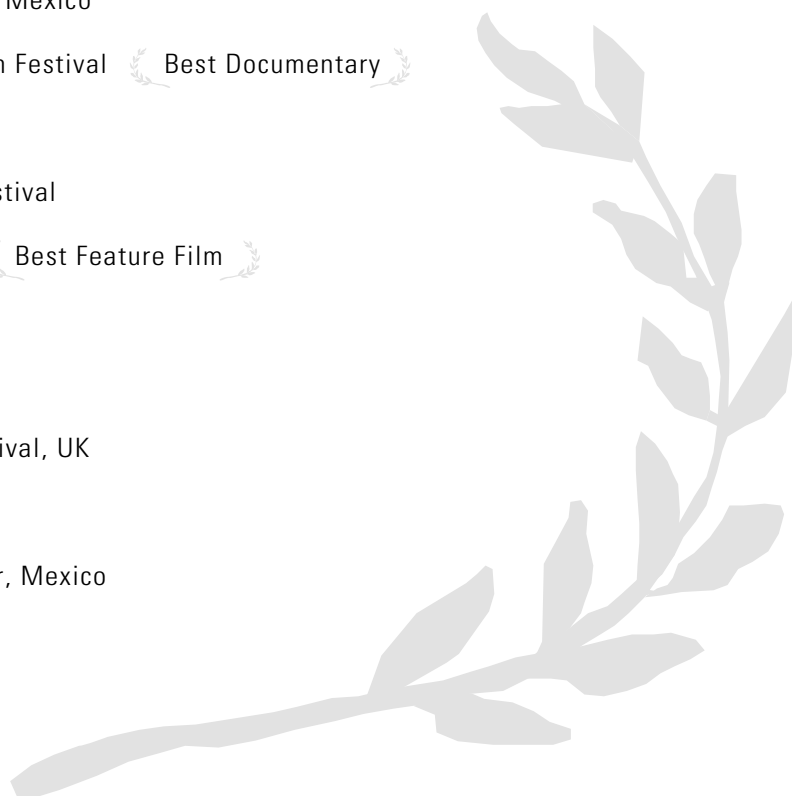
Havana Film Festival, Cuba

Gijon, Spain

Leeds International Film Festival, UK

Goterborg, Sweden

Ambulante Documentary Tour, Mexico



# AL OTRO LADO

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## MUSICIANS FEATURED IN AL OTRO LADO:

### LOS TIGRES DEL NORTE

In the mid 1970s Los Tigres Del Norte popularized the narco-corrido with their hit about a heroic female trafficker, "Contrabando y Traición" ("Smuggling and Betrayal"). They went on to become the "voice of the people" on both sides of the border, singing about the immigrant experience in the United States and addressing such taboo political issues as the corruption of President Salinas and the killings of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juarez. The Tigres have sold over 30 million records and been awarded two Grammys.

### CHALINO SANCHEZ

"He sang for the mafia, but he did it with class," says Pepe Garza director of programming of L.A.'s biggest Regional Mexican music radio station, La Que Buena. Chalino's murder in 1992 turned this Sinaloan corrido composer and singer into a legend and transformed L.A.'s Mexican and Chicano youth. No one had been realer or tougher than Chalino, and a generation raised on rap began tuning in to the raw, nasal voice of the Sinaloan mountains.

### JENNI RIVERA

L.A.'s First Lady of the Corrido was born in Mexico but raised in Compton California, daughter of Pedro Rivera, the man who produced Chalino's early hits and fathered a corrido dynasty that has ruled LA for over a decade. Corridos are often considered a male genre, but Jenni knew that "tambien las mujeres pueden" ("women can do it too"), whether "it" was smuggling, shooting, or recording some of the most popular hits on the LA streets.

### JESSIE MORALES (EL ORIGINAL DE LA SIERRA)

Jessie Morales grew up on the gangsta rap of his South Central LA neighborhood, but after Chalino recorded a song about his murdered cousin, he realized that the corridos were telling his story. At 19, his tribute to Chalino became the first Latin album to make the Southern California pop top ten, and since then he has continued to hit the charts, most recently with pioneering fusions of corrido and hip-hop styles.

La Jaula de Oro	The Golden Cage
De que me sirve el dinero	What good is money
Si estoy como prisionero	If I am like a prisoner
dentro de esta gran nación	In this great nation
Cuando me acuerdo hasta lloro	When I think about it, I cry
Y aunque la jaula sea de oro	Even if the cage is made of gold
No deja de ser prisión	It's still a prison.)

# AL OTRO LADO

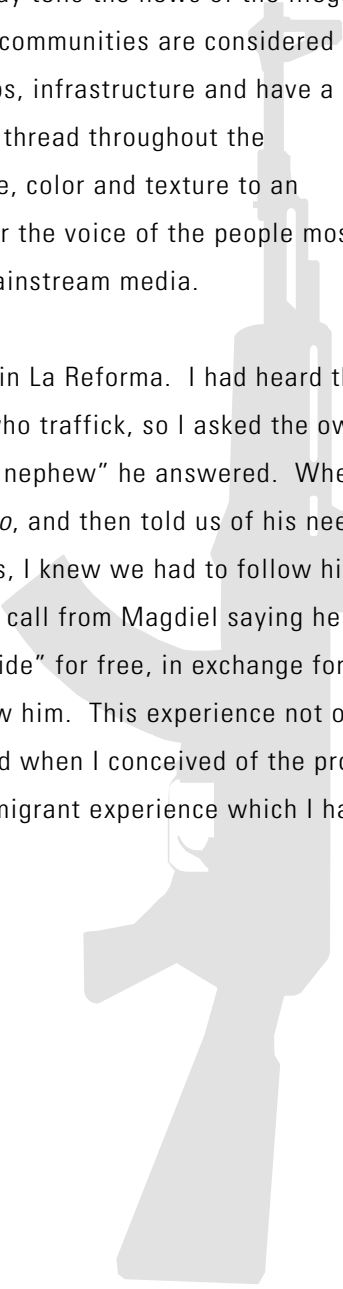
(TO THE OTHER SIDE)

## DIRECTORS STATEMENT

In Mexico there is a saying, "poor Mexico so close to the United States and so far from God." This is no truer anywhere than in the north of Mexico where the world's most powerful, wealthiest country is just a stone's throw away. My family has lived in Sinaloa for six generations, but it was my generation that saw how free trade with our wealthy neighbor changed our economy and culture. This compelled me to make a documentary that looked at the economic crisis that was forcing so many young people, in fact leaving our towns without productive young men, to immigrate or to traffic.

Corridos are virtually the only music you hear in the streets of Sinaloa. For over 200 years it has been the musical underground newspaper that today tells the news of the illegal drug traffickers and immigrants, people who in the rural communities are considered not criminals, but heroes because they provide necessary jobs, infrastructure and have a dispensable income. I decided to use corrido music as a thread throughout the documentary because not only did it provide some culture, color and texture to an otherwise glum reality, but it was also was a way to hear the voice of the people most affected by the economic crisis and least heard in the mainstream media.

I met Magdiel while shooting at the fishing boat factory in La Reforma. I had heard that there were local composers who sang about fishermen who traffick, so I asked the owner of the boat factory if he knew of any such composers. "My nephew" he answered. When Magdiel sang his corridos, *El Navegador* and *Lobo Marino*, and then told us of his need to get out of La Reforma because of the economic hardships, I knew we had to follow his story. Then one day when I was in New York City I got a call from Magdiel saying he had met a coyote who had agreed to take him "to the other side" for free, in exchange for a corrido that he would compose about him. I had to follow him. This experience not only gave the documentary a narrative climax I never imagined when I conceived of the project, but it also changed and shaped my own views on the immigrant experience which I have tried to bring to the forefront in *Al Otro Lado*.



# AL OTRO LADO

(TO THE OTHER SIDE)

## BACKGROUND

### IMMIGRATION/DRUG TRAFFIKING

Immigration and drug trafficking are not only problems on the U.S./Mexico border but on borders around the world. Every year, countless Mexicans and Central and South Americans risk their lives trying to cross the U.S. border in hopes of a better life, or just to send some dollars back home. Today, Hispanics are the largest minority group in the United States, of whom, nearly 70% are Mexican. Since the United States increased its border security in 1995, as many as 2,592 illegal immigrants have died trying to enter the country. These are issues that are common in today's global economy and are of concern to all in our efforts to create more sustainable solutions and policies.

### CORRIDOS

The contemporary corrido is one of the most vital music styles in North America and a chronicle of immigrant life and the narcotics underworld. These troubadour-like ballads with a polka beat have become the voice of populations who rarely see their ideas reach the outside world. Little attention has been dedicated to the contemporary corrido despite it being the most eloquent chronicle of Immigrant life in America, (Elijah Wald) and perhaps the only opportunity we have to hear the voice of illegal drug traffickers and immigrants. While bands like Los Tigres del Norte and Chalino Sanchez have reached stardom and economic success, in the small towns like La Reforma, the local fisherman still compose and sing corridos to each other, keeping alive the folk tradition of the corrido as a troubadour's song. Corridistas see themselves as true reporters, the chroniclers of their time.

#### El Navegador

Yo soy de un campo pesquero  
que siempre rifo mi suerte,  
Con mi vida he jugado  
y a los riesgos les he gando,  
Con mi 500 caballos  
a las leyes he burlado.  
Son dos 500 libras  
que los gringos gozarán.

#### Magdiel

#### The Navigator

I am from a fishing village,  
And I always try my luck.  
I've gambled with my life,  
But I've always come out on top.  
With my 500 horse powered engine  
I have mocked the authorities.  
There are two 500-pound loads  
That the gringos will enjoy.

# AL OTRO LADO

(TO THE OTHER SIDE)

## CREDITS

Director/Producer:

Natalia Almada

Producers:

Tommaso Fiacchino

Kent Rogowski

Director of Photography:

Chuy Chavez

Additional photography:

Natalia Almada

Editor:

Natalia Almada

On-line editor:

Off Hollywood

Consulting editor:

Sam Pollard

Music Advisor:

Elijah Wald

Historical Advisor:

Guillermo Hernandez

Sound recordist:

In Sinaloa:

Jorge Sepulveda

In California:

Yuri Raicin

Tom Koester

Production Assistant:

In Sinaloa:

Ramiro Rodriguez

## PERSONNEL

### **Natalia Almada: director/producer/editor**

*Al Otro Lado* is Natalia Almada's debut feature length documentary for which she received support from the Sundance Documentary Fund, The Tribeca All Access Program, The New York Foundation for the Arts and the Arizona Humanities Council. Her experimental short, *All Water Has A Perfect Memory*, about a cross-cultural family remembering the loss of a child, was an official selection of the 2002 Sundance Film Festival, was awarded best short documentary at the Tribeca Film Festival, and a gold plaque award at the Chicago International Film Festival. Natalia was born in Mexico and was raised in both Mexico and the United States. Natalia is a 2005 recipient of a Creative Capital Grant for her new project in development *El General*. She received her Masters of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design and she currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

### **Kent Rogowski: producer**

Kent Rogowski is a photographer and graphic designer currently living and working in New York. He was a finalist for the Calumet/Friends of Photography Emerging Artist of the Year Award, and was awarded the Center Award from the Center for Photographic Art, California. He has shown his work nationwide and is currently a photography professor at the Rhode Island School of Design.

### **Tommaso Fiacchino: producer**

Tommaso Fiacchino began his producing career with *Quienes Son* a short film about the search for extraterrestrial life in Cuba which was an official selection of the 2002 Sundance Film Festival. Most recently he co-produced *El Destino no Tiene Favoritos* winner of the audience Award at both Montreal's Festivalissimo Film Festival and Madrid's International Comedy Festival, and *Revolución* (currently in post production) a high-definition feature documentary about Cuban photography since the Revolution. Tommaso was awarded a scholarship for the European Master in Law and Economics in the audiovisual sector (EMALE), which he completed while working as a script analyst for MIRAMAX FILMS and while getting his Master's degree in Organizational Psychology from New York University. Tommaso is currently the VP of development and acquisitions at Cherry Road Films, a Los Angeles-based film production company.



# AL OTRO LADO

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## PERSONNEL

### **Chuy Chavez: director of photography**

Chuy Chavez is one of Mexico's premiere cinematographers. He recently shot *Me You and Everyone We Know*, an official selection of the 2005 Sundance Film Festival and Arthur Allan Siedelman's *Sisters* an official selection of the 2005 Tribeca Film Festival. Chuy was also the director of photography on Mexico's largest budgeted feature in history entitled, *El Zurdo* for which he was awarded a diosa de planta in cinematography. His additional credits include: *En El Espejo del Cielo*, *Chuck and Buck*, *Star Maps*, *Tortillas Heaven*, *Hearsay*, *Gringuito* and *Bienvenido Welcome*. Chuy has also shot numerous commercials for international clients including Mitsubishi, Sears, Speed Stick and Office Max.

### **Sam Pollard - consulting editor**

Sam Pollard's professional accomplishments as a feature film and television video editor, and documentary producer/director span almost thirty years. His first assignment as a documentary producer came in 1989 for Henry Hampton's *Blackside* production *Eyes On The Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads*. For one of his episodes in this series, he received an Emmy. Eight years later, he returned to *Blackside* as Co-Executive Producer/Producer of Hampton's last documentary series *I'll Make Me A World: Stories of African-American Artists and Community*. For the series, Mr. Pollard received The George Peabody Award. He recently received another Peabody Award as one of the producers on the 2002 PBS series *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. Between 1990 and 2000, Mr. Pollard edited a number of Spike Lee's films: *Mo' Better Blues*, *Jungle Fever*, *Girl 6*, *Clockers*, *Bamboozled*. As well, Mr. Pollard and Mr. Lee co-produced a couple of documentary productions for the small and big screen: *Spike Lee Presents Mike Tyson*, a biographical sketch for HBO for which Mr. Pollard received an Emmy, *Four Little Girls*, a feature-length documentary about the 1965 Birmingham church bombings which was nominated for an Academy Award and *Jim Brown All-American*, a two hour profile of the acclaimed football player, actor and activist. Mr. Pollard's latest credits was as producer on Episode One of *The Blues Series* that was executive produced by Martin Scorsese. In February 2005 a show titled *Black Preachers* that Mr. Pollard directed premiered on The History Channel. Sam Pollard is a Professor of Film Studies at the New York University Tisch School of the Arts.

# AL OTRO LADO

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## PERSONNEL

### **Elijah Wald: music advisor**

Elijah Wald is the foremost authority on the contemporary Mexican corrido, author of numerous articles on this topic, and of the book, *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas* (Rayo/HarperCollins 2001). He also served as advisor and contributed photographs and text to the 2002 Smithsonian exhibition *Corridos Sin Fronteras/Ballads Without Borders*.

### **Guillermo Hernández: historical advisor**

Guillermo Hernández is currently a Professor of Spanish at the University of California in Los Angeles in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. He is the director of the UCLA-Arholie Foundation's Strachwitz Frontera Collection, the largest repository of Mexican and Mexican-American recordings in existence. He is co-Director of UCLA's Program on Mexico and was the Director of UCLA-Chicano Studies Research Center until 2002. Guillermo has multiple publications on the corrido and was the curator of *Corridos Sin Fronteras: A New World Ballad Tradition*- a traveling exhibit that began at the Smithsonian. Guillermo also worked as a consulting editor on Les Blank's documentary *-Chulas Fronteras-* about Texas-Mexican border music. He is currently on the board of Profmex, The Tigres del Norte Foundation, The Arholie Foundation, and the National Committee on Latino Leadership.

# VARIETY

By Robert Koehler • July 14, 2005

## Al Otro Lado (To the Other Side)

The dreams of a young balladeer and the mixed love-hate feelings across the U.S.-Mexico border help Natalia Almada's debut docu feature, "To the Other Side," take flight as a lyrical and beautiful account of border culture. As expected from the filmmaker of the stunning experimental short, "All Water Has a Perfect Memory," pic is humane, visually exquisite and resists simple descriptions while moving toward a more mainstream non-fiction form. This should be music to the ears for festivals around the world with an interest in cross-cultural issues. Public television should also take note.

Almada is primarily interested in young singer-songwriter Magdiel (going only by his first name), who has grown up in the fishing town of La Reforma, a notorious drug center. Deeply under the sway of late corrido legend Chalino Sanchez, whose narcocorridos -- polka-style folk tunes extolling the bravery of Mexican drug traffickers -- are the standard by which all others are measured, Magdiel lusts to escape the poverty of his family and get rich Stateside.

His father works hard to provide for his kin with his shrimp fishing biz and some subsistence farming, but Magdiel is painfully aware he's in a dead-end life.

Denied a visa to enter the U.S., Magdiel considers an illegal crossing, despite his parents' worries, which include his mother's observation that Magdiel is far too trusting of others.

"To the Other Side" gains its texture by weaving various other threads in and around Magdiel's story, such as a mini-documentary on the leading corrido artists (including the flashy and popular San Jose-based Los Tigres del Norte) and the legacy of Sanchez, whose musical martyrdom equals that of Tupac Shakur.

Viewers unaware of the music -- hugely popular among Mexicans -- and the often intensely nationalist sentiments behind it, may blanch at the open chauvinism and celebration of outlaw lifestyles. But part of the pic's strength is its presenting the cultural strain as it is, without comment.

This is also true of the politics of the border itself, which Almada shows on both sides as Magdiel makes his way north with the help of an unexpectedly sympathetic coyote. Magdiel's fate is left up in the air, as we last see him approaching the Colorado River and cracking a joke about the Coca-Cola bottle in his hand.

Chuy Chavez, ace cinematographer of such Mexican hits as "Zurdo" and Miranda July's "Me and You and Everyone We Know," crafts a dazzling color scheme. Never overtly educational in tone, pic is buttressed by historical and music research from experts Elijah Wald and Guillermo Hernandez.

Camera (color, B&W, DV), Chuy Chavez; music, Los Tigres del Norte, Chalino Sanchez, Magdiel; music supervisor, Christina Kline; music adviser, Elijah Wald; sound, Jorge Sepulveda, Yuri Raicin, Tom Koester; sound designer, Mike Frank. Reviewed on videodisc, Los Angeles, June 26, 2005. (In Los Angeles Film Festival -- competing. Also in Tribeca Film Festival.) Running time: 66 MIN.

## Los Angeles Times • June 2005

### **Al Otro Lado (To the Other Side)**

Natalia Almada's poignant, punchy "Al Otro Lado" ("To the Other Side") (Sunset 5 Saturday at 7:30 p.m. and at the DGA 2 June 22 at 4 p.m.) chronicles 23-year-old Magdiel's decision to become an illegal immigrant. The son of a fisherman in La Reforma, Sinaloa, a region in economic crisis — and a shrinking shrimp catch but abundant opium and marijuana crops — Magdiel has but two choices if he is ever able to afford a home of his own and support a family: to become a drug trafficker or to try to cross the border into the U.S. But Magdiel has a gift that provides perspective on the plight of impoverished Mexicans: He is a singer-composer of corridos, ballads that give voice to the people and their dreams and despair — and also tell stories of the drug smugglers. Almada interweaves his story with interviews and performances with such famous corrido musicians as Los Tigres del Norte, the late, legendary Chalino Sánchez, Jenni Rivera and Jesse Morales. Los Tigres composer Paulo Vargas cuts straight to the status of illegal immigrants when he says bluntly that that the U.S. needs cheap labor and that Mexico is glad to get rid of them.

LA Weekly June 17-23, 2005

# LOS ANGELES FILM FESTIVAL

## GO TO THE OTHER SIDE

(MEXICO/USA)

Natalia Almada's debut documentary feature begins by proposing Mexican *narcocorrido* ballads — whether performed on the streets of Sinaloa and East L.A., or in concert by legends like Los Tigres del Norte — as the Latino equivalent to rap music, commemorating the lives and aspirations of outlaws and outsiders, the ruthless and the uprooted. From there, somewhat disorientingly, it shifts to a portrait of the "coyotes" who usher illegals northward across the Rio Grande, and of those on the far side who seek to block their arrival. By the end, though, the film has gained considerable coherence by virtue of a deceptive juxtaposition of narrative elements that leads to a moment of true and complex revelation — an epiphany of sorts about the compensatory delusions of the disenfranchised. (Sunset 5, Sat., June 18, 7:30 p.m.; DGA 2, Wed., June 22, 4 p.m.) (RS)

TRAS LALENTE DE NATALIA ALMADA

# Retrato de la sinergia de dos culturas

Tribeca Film Festival se ha convertido en un importante escaparate para los cineastas independientes. Tal es el caso de la mexicano-estadounidense Natalia Almada, quien con la obra *La memoria perfecta del agua* empez a llamar la atenci n.

RUB...N VICTORIA  
ESPECIAL PARA TIEMPOS DEL MUNDO

**P**ara la edici n 2005 de este festival, Almada present a otro lado, que aborda el fen meno migratorio desde la perspectiva del corrido mexicano.

TIEMPOS DEL MUNDO entrevist a a la cineasta sobre el documental y su labor en el cine latino en Estados Unidos.

- TIEMPOS DEL MUNDO:  xiste una tendencia por parte de los cineastas j venes a incluir la tem tica social en su obra?

- Natalia Almada: Para m , en lo particular, el tema social es muy importante porque vivimos en un tiempo donde los medios mainstream suelen entrar a fondo en temas sociales. En el otro lado a m  me interesaba enfocar me en la crisis econ mica que est  llevando a los j venes a emigrar o a traficar porque no ven otras posibilidades para tener una vida mejor. Decid  usar el corrido como el hilo conductor en el documental porque los corridos de hoy representan las voces de los emigrantes y traficantes que no tienen otra oportunidad de ser escuchados.

- TDM:  C mo se dio el contacto con los personajes que film en el otro lado?

- NA: Mi familia es de Sinaloa, entonces yo conoc a a muchos de los personajes que salen en el documental. Tambi n me ayud  mucho Elijah Wald, escritor-investigador del corrido mexicano norte o, que tuvo contacto previo con los m sicos m s conocidos, como los Tigres del Norte.

La clave al hacer un documental como el otro lado es tener acceso a los personajes, que confluyen en ti, que te abren las puertas a sus vidas y sus sentimientos m s personales. El hecho de que soy sinaloense y que mi familia es de ah , fue muy valioso. Por ejemplo el abuelo de Magdiel, el personaje principal, trabaj  con mi abuelo. La m sica tambi n ayud  mucho porque al preguntar sobre los corridos y no sobre temas m s profundos hace que la gente se sienta m s c moda, se abren m s y as  poco a poco vas creando m s confianza.

- TDM:  xiste alg n punto en com n de su trabajo con el que realizan otras



EN ESCENA. Durante la filmaci n de el otro lado, un documental sobre la inmigraci n mexicano-americana.

cineastas como Heather Courtnay ( he workers) o Adriana Bosch?  realiza un trabajo en conjunto con algui n por el estilo?

- NA: Nunca he realizado un trabajo con otra directora o productora, pero siento que cineastas como Lourdes Portillo abrieron el camino para una directora como yo.

- TDM:  De alguna forma plantea su obra como un medio para ayudar a comprender mejor la relaci n M xico-E.E.U.U. o es en un plano netamente personal?

- NA: Siendo mitad mexicana, mitad estadounidense, este tema es algo heredado para m . Por ejemplo, lo trat  de una manera muy personal en *La memoria  ya* que es una historia familiar, y de una manera m s colectiva y social en el otro lado ya que es una historia de un problema social existente de la regi n donde crecí y sigo viviendo.

Pero mi experiencia bicultural es lo que m s influye en mi trabajo, independientemente de c mo decida yo realizarlo o el tema en que me enfoque.

- TDM:  Qu  tan dif cil es para los cineastas latinos tener acceso a festivales como el de Tribeca para promover sus obras?

- NA: Creo que el problema para los cineastas latinos no es tanto tener acceso a los festivales, porque cualquiera



CINE SOCIAL. La latina Natalia Almada quiere rodar sobre las Maras Salvatruchas.

puede presentar su pel cula para que sea considerada. En mi opini n el problema es el financiamiento para realizar los proyectos. Un pa s como Estados Unidos tiene m s recursos e instituciones para apoyar el desarrollo de j venes artistas; en M xico desafortunadamente estos recursos son m s escasos.

Ahora que hay tantos latinos viviendo en E.E.U.U. y m s inter s en trabajos

sobre o para latinos, aunque todav a somos una minor a, en E.E.U.U. todav a hay escasez de programas que representen nuestras culturas y puntos de vista. Pero est  mejorando poco a poco y se ven iniciativas como Latino Public Broadcasting o Tribeca All Access Program que intentan darles oportunidades a ellos.

- TDM: H blenos del proyecto El General...

- NA: El proyecto El General surgi  porque hace unos a os mi t a me dio unas grabaciones que hizo mi abuela (hija del ex presidente mexicano Plutarco El as Calles) antes de que muriera. Decid  usar las grabaciones como la base para un documental, no s o sobre Calles como personaje de la historia de M xico, sino para ver c mo la historia, los acontecimientos, se van pasando de generaci n en generaci n, y c mo la historia de una familia y la historia de un pa s se entrelazan.

Adem s de este proyecto me gustar a hacer algo sobre la frontera de Guatemala y M xico y sigo trabajando como editora o productora en proyectos de otros directores, lo cual me inspira y alimenta mucho. El problema de la Mara Salvatrucha est  creciendo enormemente no s nicamente en E.E.U.U. y M xico sino incluso est  llegando a Espa a y otros pa ses de Europa.

## EN COMUNA POBRE DE CHILE

# Un r o los puso a escribir

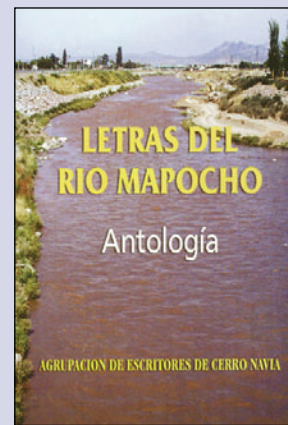
FERNANDO VALENZUELA  
ESPECIAL PARA TIEMPOS DEL MUNDO

**E**l R o Mapocho, que cruza la comuna pobre de Cerro Navia, en Santiago ha sido el tema de inspiraci n de un concurso de cuentos. Centenares de adultos y j venes estudiantes participaron en un encuentro inter-generacional, organizado por un grupo de escritores de la zona.  El r o es un elemento que siempre ha llamado la atenci n de los vecinos, es por esto que se hizo confluir la creaci n literaria con algo que nos represent , dijo a TDM Alma Aparicio, escritora

encargada del proyecto. Los resultados del concurso fueron excelentes y a ade con entusiasmo:  la experiencia fue maravillosa, porque sirvi  para darnos cuenta del gran potencial art stico y literario que existe en la comuna. Por otra parte, los adultos y ni os que se prepararon en los talleres y participaron en el concurso sintieron que sus creaciones eran importantes, cuesti n que los motiva a seguir escribiendo.

El fruto de esta singular y positiva campaa para promover el h bito de la lectura   denominada *Letras del R o Mapocho* fue plasmado en un libro que guarda una antolog a de los mejo-

res cuentos. All  se encuentran las vivencias y sentimientos fant sticos de los autores, entre los cuales destaca el cuento ganador: *R o Marr n* de Luis Pavez, quien narra la historia de un par de amigos que viven de la venta de arena que extraen del r o. En el primer captulo est n los ganadores; en el segundo, una selecci n de cuentos realizados en los talleres de las escuelas b sicas y liceos, y en el tercero est n las narraciones de la Agrupaci n de Escritores de Cerro Navia. La iniciativa ser  pronto imitada en otros sectores, bajo el lema   escribir para que otros lean



## By Ulysses de la Torre for Inter Press Service News Agency

www.ipsnews.net

A young man arrives at a fork in the road and neither choice before him presents a lesser risk to his survival, neither one is less traveled and neither one is morally higher or lower than the other. Option one is a livelihood sustained on the lucre from trafficking drugs to a wealthy northern neighbor with seemingly insatiable demand; option two is embarking on a journey so physically trying that it may very well leave him for dead. No U-turn allowed.

This is the situation in which Magdiel, a 23-year-old Mexican corrido musician from the state of Sinaloa finds himself in “Al Otro Lado” (To the Other Side), a 70-minute documentary whose world premiere screened last week at New York City’s Tribeca Film Festival.

“I was really interested in that moment young people have when they decide what to do with their lives, they don’t have a lot of education and there’s an economic crisis in the industries their families are traditionally in,” director Natalia Almada told IPS. “In smaller towns, people who would have followed in their parents’ footsteps and become fishermen or farmers just can’t, it’s not an option anymore.”

From this beginning premise, Almada, a native of Sinaloa now living in Brooklyn, New York, leads us into the nexus where narco-trafficking, immigration and corrido music collide in the form of Magdiel, whom drug-traffickers pay to write songs about their exploits. Throughout the film, he openly wavers between joining his friends in the drug-trafficking business versus going “to the other side” to realize his dream of making it as a corrido musician.

Entwined in the story of Magdiel is the story of corrido music, a genre with heavy polka influences whose origins date back more than 100 years and have traditionally served as a type of “musical newspaper” through which the voice of the people could be heard. During the Mexican Revolution, corrido ballads frequently spoke of legendary figures such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. In keeping current with the times, the art form has evolved over the past few decades into a medium through which the stories of drug traffickers are told, roughly mirroring rap music's rise as an artistic representation of urban blight in the United States. As the drug capital of Mexico, Sinaloa has served as an easy breeding ground for the genre and is the birthplace of the corrido group Los Tigres del Norte and the legendary singer Chalino Sanchez, who was gunned down in 1992.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that corrido music was until recently banned from Mexican radio stations for being perceived as celebrating drug trafficking and gangsterism, it has now become a \$300 million industry in the United States and is the most popular form of Latin music on the market.

“Music is an ideal way to talk about immigration and drug trafficking because the musicians are singing those songs and they’re really the closest thing to giving access to the voice of the immigrants and the drug traffickers instead of me as a documentarian coming in and imposing that voice,” said Almada.

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Indeed, the lyrics of Magdiel's compositions set the tone for the film:

“Yo soy de un campo pesquero  
Que siempre rifo mi suerte,  
Con mi vida he jugado  
Y a los riesgos le he ganado  
Con mis 500 caballos a las leyes he burlado.”

(I come from a fishing village  
And I always try my luck;  
I've gambled with my life,  
And have beaten the odds;  
With my 500-horsepower engine  
I have outsmarted the law.)

From opium- and marijuana-laden mountains, to Magdiel's seaside hometown of La Reforma where drugs are shipped northward in fishing vessels, to the streets of East Los Angeles, Almada allows the cheeky lyricism of the music to infuse a sense of lightness into an otherwise tragic phenomenon. As with most discussions about Mexico, the issue of immigration is an inevitable subtext and is addressed directly when a coyote offers to cross the composer to the United States for free in exchange for a song about the coyote's way of life. It is at this point that the story reverses its focus: all of a sudden we are viewing the life of a man through the issues rather than the issues through the man, culminating in an emotional finale that pulls back the curtains of corrido music's subtle wit and reminds us of the gravity of the situation.

“There's a really strong influence and pull from the United States. There's a consciousness about how the shrimp that the fisherman catch is for the Americans and the drugs that they make and they traffic are for the Americans and of course people are migrating to the United States,” Almada told IPS. “It's very easy for Americans to villainize the drug traffickers and put all the blame on the production of drugs in Mexico and not take responsibility for consumption in the United States. The views on immigration often don't take into account how important illegal labor is to the American economy. It's a really complex issue and I really wanted to give it a more human face on the Mexican side.”

Ms. Almada previously won the best short documentary prize at the 2002 Tribeca Film Festival for “All Water Has a Perfect Memory.” Her next film will be about her great-grandfather, Plutarco Elías Calles, who was the President of Mexico from 1924-1928 and the founder of the Mexican political party now known as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

More information: [www.altamurafilms.com](http://www.altamurafilms.com).





## **Contrabando y Emoción: Corridos, Immigration, and Drug Trafficking in *Al Otro Lado*** By Claire Frisbie

You know the story. You've heard it on the news for years, especially with the recent buzz about the controversial *Guía del Migrante Mexicano* and the brigade of armed vigilantes hunting Mexican immigrants along the U.S.-Mexico border. The abundant and illegal trafficking of people and drugs across the border has long been pegged by conservatives as one of the biggest threats to U.S. national security and foreign policy, but young filmmaker Natalia Almada's portrayal of the situation in her documentary film *Al Otro Lado* moves to a much different tune.

Framed within the age-old musical genre of the corrido, *Al Otro Lado* gives the dangerous world of drug- and people-trafficking a human face, vividly and honestly portraying it through the stories of those who live it and presenting the situation as the direct and unavoidable result of Mexico's economic crisis.

But *Al Otro Lado*, which premiered at last month's Tribeca Film Festival, is not your typical developing-world, poverty tale. Natalia knew she wanted to create a film about the northwestern Mexican state of Sinaloa, where she is from, but "doing a story just about the economic crisis is really depressing, and people have seen it and are not that interested," she told NYMosaico. "I really felt that somehow there needed to be culture, a sense of humor, and other things to make it a little more alive and not just a tragic story."

Her inspiration and the subsequent driving force of the film came in the form of a book by American ethnomusicologist Elijah Wald, who collaborated on the film. Wald's book *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerillas* recounts the history and the current world of the corrido—the musical genre of northern Mexico that is part ballad, part musical newspaper, and part gangster rap. Traditional in their sound, corridos chronicle—often humorously—the lives and concerns of the people of the region, covering everything from drug-trafficking to crossing "al otro lado" (to the other side) in search of a better life.

*Al Otro Lado* features interviews with Jorge Hernández of Los Tigres del Norte, the most famous players in the corrido scene. The film also interviews other corrido stars like Jenni "La Chacalosa" Rivera, Jessie Morales, and composer Paulino Vargas, who share their opinions about both corridos and immigration issues.

*Al Otro Lado* is composed of shots of Los Tigres del Norte in concert, old footage of people crossing the border, and interviews with corrido musicians, immigrants, drug traffickers, and residents of La Reforma, a fishing village in Sinaloa where much of the film takes place.

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The “star” of the documentary is an entirely unknown corridista named Magdiel, 23, whose lyrics celebrate the local fishermen of La Reforma who use their boats for trafficking contraband for the “gringos”. At the time of filming, Magdiel was weighing the all-too-common decision of whether to stay in Sinaloa in relative poverty, or to brave crossing the border in search of a better life. *Al Otro Lado* chronicles Magdiel’s ultimate resolution to cross, as well as his family’s and friends’ reactions to his decision. He crossed with the aid of a coyote, a guide who helps people make the dangerous trip across the border. Instead of charging the standard hefty fee, however, the coyote offered Magdiel his services in exchange for a song written in his honor.

Most of the people Natalia interviews in La Reforma are young men who make a living as coyotes or traffickers. The bulk of the interviews take place on Magdiel’s porch, centering on a group of young guys in shorts and flip-flops, hanging out—and thus immediately dispelling the stereotype of flashy, beefy drug lords.

“I’m not dealing with big, big drug dealers. These are small-time: like a fisherman ... or a farmer who does it once or twice to get out of a [financial] problem,” Natalia pointed out. “It’s not that these people are inherently evil and greedy. They’re just people who are trying to get by the same way everyone is.”

Only one man—one of the main coyotes—refused to show his face on camera, but he still agreed to be interviewed for the film. The man paints his job in a much more positive light than might be expected, pointing out that many more people would die crossing the border if he weren’t there to help them out.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *Al Otro Lado* is just how much Natalia was able to capture on film. In addition to the extremely intimate interviews, *Al Otro Lado* contains footage of Magdiel’s border crossing, the U.S. Border Patrol’s discovery of a truckload of illegal immigrants, and an almost surreal scene of Chris Simcox and the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps’ patrol of the Arizona desert as they “capture” four Mexican immigrants hiding under shrubbery

About this scene, Natalia commented, “At first we thought, ‘Oh, this is a joke...’ So we didn’t expect to find anybody, but when we did, it was really, really tough because I was shooting, and it was the first time, for me, that ... I was in a position that I really felt that my camera was making the reality for the people in front of the camera worse. It’s so humiliating for them, and I felt really horrible about that, but at the same time, [I felt], ‘I need to shoot it, I need to show it, and hopefully I’ll be able to talk to them and they’ll understand,’ which is what happened.”

Natalia, soft-spoken and petite, has blond hair and blue eyes and cites her appearance and being a woman, as well as the small size of her crew (at most five people at any given time) and camera (a Panasonic 24p DVX-100), as some of the advantages in the shooting of the documentary: Few people considered her intimidating in any sense, and Chris Wilcox from the Homeland Defense crew never suspected she was Mexican and thus missed her motives for tagging along with him.

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Credit must also go to Natalia's talent and sensitivity as an interviewer, as the honesty and willingness of all of the interviewees—from Magdiel to the coyotes to the scared immigrants hiding in the desert—is absolutely remarkable. It provides the film's unique rawness and intimacy, which drew tears to the eyes of so many members of the audience at the three sold-out screenings at the Tribeca Film Festival.

Al Otro Lado made its world premiere at Tribeca, and will continue on the festival circuit with three screenings at the Los Angeles Film Festival in June. Natalia hopes to reach a broader—and more Mexican—audience, however, by collaborating with community centers across the country, organizing free screenings for people who might not otherwise see the film. She and the crew would also like to show the film in Mexico. None of the people from La Reforma have seen it yet, and Natalie spoke of perhaps touring Sinaloa with a truck, equipped with a projector and a screen, and showing the film outdoors because many of the towns don't have movie theaters.

As for future film projects, Natalia has already begun work on her next documentary, tentatively titled *El General*, about her great-grandfather Plutarco Elias Calles who was president of Mexico from 1924-28. Although Natalia is based in New York, she plans to continue making films about Mexico.

"In Mexico there aren't as many people doing this kind of [documentary film]," she said. "And to have the privilege of having gone to school, to have the skills, and the access, and all that, I really feel that it's important for me to work in Mexico and to deal with issues that have to do with Mexico."