

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.