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Discovering 'Sugar Man' Rodriguez



Both Rodriguez albums originally flopped in the US, before resurfacing in South Africa where he became "bigger than the Rolling Stones"

Sixto Rodriguez has been called "the greatest 1970's music icon that never was". Now with the release of an award-winning documentary about his incredible story, could it finally be for the 70-year-old singer-songwriter to make it big?

When producers stumbled upon Rodriguez performing in a Detroit bar in the late 1960s, they thought they had found the next Bob Dylan. Sadly, the US public didn't agree.

The Mexican-American singer's widely-praised debut album Cold Fact, and its follow-up Coming to Reality, were commercial flops. So, Rodriguez disappeared and rumour he had dramatically killed himself on stage.

However, a bootleg copy of Cold Fact made its way to South Africa where it became not only a must-have record, but the unofficial soundtrack to youth protests against apartheid.

But it was not until two Rodriguez super-fans, Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman and Craig Bartholomew, turned detective in the mid-1990s that they discovered their musical hero was alive and well and living in Detroit, having returned to a life of obscurity and construction work.

Just a few years later Rodriguez was performing sold-out shows in South Africa's biggest arenas, to thousands of fans he did not know he had.

"In South Africa he is as famous as the Rolling Stones - or Bob Dylan. He's on that level," says Swedish director Malik Bendjelloul, who has turned the unique story into the documentary Searching for Sugar Man.

"There, he is in the pantheon of rock gods," adds Bendjelloul. "And I think that's where he belongs."

Emotional audiences

It seems perhaps the rest of the world might finally be starting to agree. Sugar Man has already won two prizes at Sundance Film Festival, including the Audience award, and opens in cinemas across the UK on 26 July.

"It's so beautiful to see the reactions," says Bendjelloul. "People stand up screaming and crying and it's so, so overwhelming. It's hard to find words actually."

Rodriguez himself was initially sceptical his story was interesting enough for a film, but finds the reaction "amazing".

At 70 he still looks every inch the rock star, with black shoulder-length hair, requisite dark shades and a black suit jacket - although he does admit to being "dressed up" by one of his three daughters.

He is also philosophical about why he failed to make it first time round.

"I was ready for the world but I don't think the world was ready for me," he suggests.

"My lyrics are a little bit less boy and girl theme, and more socially conscious expressions."

With tracks such as The Establishment Blues he describes himself as "musical political", citing Dylan as a big influence, although he is keen to play down comparisons.

"Well I've only written 30 songs," explained Rodriguez. "Bob Dylan has written over 500. So he's the Shakespeare of rock and roll and certainly deserves that title."

But his own lyrics have received their fair share of praise, especially signature track Sugar Man, which DJ and producer David Holmes remixed for his 2003 album Come Get It I Got It:

"Sugar Man, won't you hurry/Cos I'm tired of these scenes/For a blue coin won't you bring back/All those colours to my dreams".

Drug references in the lyrics saw it banned by the South African government in the 1970s, with records scratched so they could not be given radio airplay. However that only served to fuel Rodriguez's cult status.

'Cinderella story'

Bendjelloul says he sometimes doubted the film would ever get made, remembering a "really dark moment" about a year ago when a lack of funding meant he "should have given up".

But after the intervention of British producers Simon Chinn (Man on Wire) and John Battsek (Project Nim), "now everything's changed".

The film has recently been championed by the likes of Fahrenheit 9/11 director Michael Moore and 30 Rock actor Alec Baldwin.

Scottish singer Paulo Nutini is also a big Rodriguez fan, and the pair became friends after meeting at a festival in Byron Bay, Australia.

When Rodriguez played an intimate show in a London basement bar earlier this month, Nutini joined him on a tiny stage for an impromptu duet of I Wonder, calling him "his hero".

Rodriguez says he would like to keep performing, with a US tour planned and a London show to follow in November.

"I'm very conscious that I'm ancient!" he laughs. "But the people I work with make it very comfortable. My entry level has always been pretty high in the music business."

That covers starting out with renowned producers such as Steve Rowland and achieving Elvis-level fame in South Africa. But Rodriguez has maintained a simple life in Detroit throughout, staying true to his values and construction work.

"There's nothing to be ashamed about hard work," he said. "You know I enjoy that and I get just as much satisfaction as anything I'm involved with from A to Z."

However he does admit to recently enjoying such "trappings" as a fancy hotel and his first ride in a Jaguar.

For director Bendjelloul, who has worked with Prince, Madonna and Kraftwerk, the film's release also marks the end of years of hard graft.

"It is the best story I have ever heard in my life, and I think I ever will hear," he said, explaining why he spent around five years on the project, instead of his usual four weeks.

"I realised this is never going to happen again in the history of the world," he continued. "It's a true Cinderella story. It's better than Cinderella because Cinderella didn't have as good a soundtrack."

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"I was ready for the world, but I don't think the world was ready for me."

Rodriguez



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Paulo Nutini recently joined his "hero" Rodriguez on stage in London for an impromptu duet

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