

# HERE IS THE RESURRECTION

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THE TALE OF RODRIGUEZ IS ONE OF ROCK  
'N' ROLL'S GREATEST UNKNOWN STORIES.

IF YOU EXAMINED the record collection of any suburban middle-class home in mid-Seventies South Africa you'd expect to find three albums: 'Abbey Road' by The Beatles, Simon And Garfunkel's 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' and 'Cold Fact' by Rodriguez.

Of course, everyone knew the story behind those first two artists. The same wasn't true of Rodriguez. Considered by many South African music fans as the equal of Bob Dylan - in terms of both success and artistic accomplishment - even by the mid-Nineties, Rodriguez's fate was unknown. The most common story suggested a grotesque suicide in which the Mexican-American musician's final performance ended when he set himself on fire.

Two fans, journalist Craig Bartholomew and record store owner Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman, decided to see if they could uncover the truth behind their almost mythological hero. The story is told in full in Malik

Bendjelloul's superlative documentary *Searching For Sugar Man*, which is how the happily unscathed Rodriguez comes to be sitting here in central London.

"It's the best story I've heard in my life," beams Bendjelloul. "I found the story before I found the music. I didn't want to listen to the music because I fell in love with the story so much and I thought I was going to be disappointed." As David Holmes, Paolo Nutini and many others have discovered, Rodriguez's music is a lost gem. As Bendjelloul continues: "During editing, I listened to these songs thousands of times and never grew tired of listening to them."

Rodriguez signed to Sussex Records, fronted by music industry veteran Clarence Avant, and his 1970 debut album 'Cold Fact' was the label's first album release. Covering the musical spectrum from gentle folk-pop infused by Bacharach-esque production embellishments to fiery, riff-orientated psychedelia, perhaps the album's strongest trait is Rodriguez's poetic lyrics which cover social issues, caustic personal insults ("I wonder how many times you had sex / And I wonder, do you know who'll be next?") and observations of degenerative city life which could've come directly from the mind of Travis Bickle.

"Angry?" he questions in his almost meditative voice. Rodriguez seems to be in a permanent beatific state in which perfectly refined manners and an extreme sense of modesty are permanent fixtures. It's hard to imagine him ever describing someone as "the coldest bitch I know" as he does in 'Only Good For Conversation'. "I'm sure that emotion was there, and you have a right to emotions. We all do. So if you feel a little tear coming out, go ahead and do it. It's okay. Music is an expression."

After 'Cold Fact' and the following year's 'Coming From Reality' album emerged to minimal sales, Sussex Records encountered financial difficulties while Rodriguez soon realised that he needed to make a living through other means. "And that's where my career ended..." he says, with a lengthy, knowing pause. "So to speak."

Rodriguez's musical story is essentially then blank until 1979, when late night airplay and subsequent record sales persuaded promoters to book him for an Australian tour which included four sold-out shows at Sydney's Regent Theatre. He returned again in 1981 for a tour with Midnight Oil and a major festival ("Men At Work were there," he notes. "Before they got their haircuts!"). From thereon in, the narrative again goes quiet. He gained a degree in philosophy and worked in demolition. The mention

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that a philosophising demolition man is an odd dichotomy amuses him greatly.

In 1996, Seagerman and Bartholemew finally found their man with the help of Rodriguez's daughter Eva and the Internet. Rodriguez discovered the whole truth: 'Cold Fact' had become a favourite of the nation's white liberal middle-class during South Africa's apartheid era and had sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Home in Detroit, Rodriguez was surely a character but, aside from some dalliances in politics, he didn't have a public profile. In South Africa, he was a legend. "I didn't believe it," he states, still almost stuttering in disbelief. "I didn't believe any part of it. I didn't believe anything was happening there at all. How could I?"

The film shows the moment when Rodriguez played his first South African show in 1998. As the rolling bassline of 'I Wonder' echoes around the Bellville Velodrome in Cape Town, Rodriguez steps on stage to a roar of appreciation and is instantly struck silent. "How was that?" he repeats. "It was almost a frozen moment in a sense, but there it is right there on screen. The band was rehearsed and ready, but that interruption was great."

It also became apparent that Rodriguez hadn't earned anything from all those years of South African album sales. Bendjelloul states that it's a complicated case involving a

multitude of companies which one music lawyer suggested would take three years to address. Noting previous legal issues faced by the likes of The Rolling Stones and John Fogerty, Rodriguez is fully aware that it will be a long journey. "I'm certainly up to the challenge," he affirms. "I'm not going to dismiss it as just one of those things." He also reserves special praise for Avant who he describes as a pharaoh: "He helped me when I was in dire straits."

For now, though, *Searching For Sugar Man* is finally spreading word of Rodriguez's talents to a mass audience having earned rapturous receptions at influential events such as Sundance and Sheffield's Doc/Fest. He continues to tour and is often joined on his travels by members of his family. As for the possibility of a third Rodriguez studio album? Maybe in the future.

"Sure we do it for the recognition, the girls and a couple of bucks," he concludes in reference to his unlikely career path. "But we also do it to be part of rock 'n' roll history. This is just the way it worked for me. It's a different blueprint."

**SEARCHING FOR SUGAR MAN OPENS IN CINEMAS ON JULY 27TH. SONY LEGACY / LIGHT IN THE ATTIC WILL RELEASE THE ACCOMPANYING ORIGINAL MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK ON JULY 23RD.**



