

Singer who didn't know he was a star

*A new film tells the remarkable story of a Sixties
singer feted in a faraway land, says **David Gritten***

It's among the most extraordinary stories thrown up by popular music in our time: a singer-songwriter who recorded two albums four decades ago that barely sold at all, resigned himself to a life of poverty and obscurity – and then became a superstar in a faraway land without even knowing it.

Sixto Rodriguez, a Mexican-American construction worker from Detroit, used to perform his songs in the city's small, smoky clubs in the late Sixties. Known simply as Rodriguez, he was a reclusive presence and performed with his back to the audience. "There was something mysterious about him," says one local who saw him back then. "He looked like a drifter."

Still, two producers thought enough of Rodriguez to work with him on two albums, *Cold Fact* and *Coming From Reality*. One of the producers, Dennis Coffey, a respected Motown session musician, still compares his talent to Bob Dylan's. The albums were released but achieved pitifully small sales before disappearing without trace.

In America, no one thought much more about Rodriguez after that. But a bootleg copy of *Cold Fact* ended up in South Africa, where it circulated among white Afrikaans musicians fiercely opposed to apartheid. His songs, with titles such as *The Establishment Blues*, inspired them to speak out and protest against the government.

Another song, *Sugar Man*, was banned on the government-run radio station for its drug references, but his albums were available. *Cold Fact* was distributed on a small South African label in 1991, and the reputation of Rodriguez gradually spread.

So did the myths about him. In those pre-internet days, there was no information from the United States about this long-forgotten artist. Word was that Rodriguez had committed suicide; a popular variation insisted he had set fire to himself on stage. These conjectures helped fuel his phenomenal popularity in South Africa.

Documentary film-maker Malik Bendjelloul stumbled on the Rodriguez story in 2006 while looking for subjects in Cape Town to make seven-minute films for Swedish TV. "I'd do vox pops on the street, and every other person knew and loved Rodriguez," he recalls. "He was huge there – bigger than the Rolling Stones."

But a decade earlier, two of his most fervent South African fans, Cape Town record store owner Steve Segerman and music journalist Craig Bartholomew, set out to find out what happened to Rodriguez – and specifically how he had died.

The two men studied every Rodriguez lyric to establish where he might have lived. Finally, Bartholomew decided to follow the money: if Rodriguez albums were selling in South Africa, where were the royalty cheques going? In the end he visited America, where he met the other *Cold Fact* producer, Mike Theodore.

And finally the truth was revealed: Rodriguez was alive – living in the same tumbledown house in a poor part of Detroit. He had three adult daughters. He still did construction work. He had become a community activist, and had made failed attempts to run for mayor of Detroit and as a city councillor.

Bartholomew finally met Rodriguez and an ecstatic Segerman spoke with the singer from Cape Town in the middle of the night. Rodriguez knew nothing of his astonishing popularity in South Africa.

The next logical step was for him to perform there. He flew in from the States with his daughters and was astonished to find a limousine awaiting him. More incredibly, cheering fans had made their way to the airport to herald his arrival. On



STUDIO CANAL

Enigmatic: a young Sixto Rodriguez in the documentary 'Searching for Sugar Man'

that first tour, Rodriguez (backed by the local Afrikaans musicians who first spread the word about him) played six sold-out concerts in a 5,000-seat hall. Crowds went wild for him. And *Cold Fact* went platinum, selling half a million copies in South Africa.

But how good is he? His body of work is too slim to justify comparisons with Dylan, but his songs, rooted in folk and blues, are poetic, intimate and passionate.

Footage of those first concerts, and the fan frenzy they inspired, can be seen in *Searching for Sugar Man*, an 80-minute documentary that is the culmination of Bendjelloul's efforts to tell the story of Rodriguez. The film was shown in January at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the documentary jury prize and audience award. It's been a labour of love for Bendjelloul, who continued making it alone for five years. "It was hard to keep going at times," he said. "People promised money, then backed out." Bendjelloul cold-called British film producer Simon Chinn, who had success with the documentary films *Man on Wire* and *Project Nim*. "He left a message saying he had a better story for a film than *Man on Wire*," Chinn says now. "There was something about Malik. His enthusiasm was infectious." Which is why *Searching for Sugar Man* has UK producers and is partly financed by British film fund The Documentary Company.

Rodriguez is an almost ethereal presence throughout the film. As a young man he was striking: slender, with high cheekbones, physical grace, enigmatic behind his shades. The film confirms he still has great presence. He'll be 70 next month: the same vintage as Dylan, McCartney and Jagger, but without global fame all his adult life.

Finally his work will be heard widely. Chinn says the film will be distributed in 15 countries, and Rodriguez will be touring the world. Sony is re-releasing the first two albums wherever the film is shown.

Fame seems unlikely to tarnish the Rodriguez legend. "Even after we met, and I was filming him, he didn't really want to be on camera," Bendjelloul says. "He never said no, but he was hesitant. He's a shy, mysterious guy."

'Searching for Sugar Man' will be screened at the Sheffield Documentary festival this evening, and at BFI Southbank on Saturday. It opens in cinemas on July 27