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Film preview - Searching for Sugar Man

July 19, 2012 by [Phyllis Stephen](#) · [1 Comment](#)

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We are willing to bet you that you will come out of the cinema after watching this film and head straight for the nearest music store, or download the music immediately from iTunes. The film, *Searching for Sugar Man*, is a documentary, but having already won the Special Jury Prize and the World Cinema Audience Award for Documentary at this year's Sundance Festival, and was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize, as well as winning second place at the Tribeca Festival, you know that it has to be special. And it is.

The story is true of course, but it is one which is barely believable, even when the film draws to a close. (And you will not want it to end anyway). Sixto Rodriguez, a singer songwriter of Mexican descent, lived in Detroit and sang in less than fabulous bars there, including one called The Sewer. Two record producers, Dennis Coffey and Mike Theodore, signed him to make his first album called *Cold Fact* in 1970 and a second album *Coming from Reality* followed which was produced by famed music producer, Steve Rowland. But neither of these amazing offerings became a hit in the US, despite the fact that all three of the record producers worked with many huge stars, both before and after working with Rodriguez. It fell to the South African market to buy his records, and he became a musical legend there. His songs, in the words of one person interviewed in the film, were 'the soundtrack of our youth.' This was the South Africa of apartheid, of oppression. His songs appeared to speak directly to the people at the heart of that struggle, and they simply loved him.

The music is sort of Bob Dylan but better. It is quite mellow, but with enough lyrical twists and turns to engage you. And in our view his music is better than Dylan in many respects, principally that you can understand what he is singing.

In the opening sequence of the film you might think that you are on the Pacific Highway in California, but this is not possible as the car is driving on the left hand side. It is only when you are told that it is Cape Town that you realise the film is starting on a different continent with staggeringly beautiful scenery. This proves to be a world away from the streets of Detroit.

There are some unanswered questions, including the destination of money earned from the sale of the records, but we think it is just as well that those areas were left unexplored, at least for the time being. The intrigue and mystery might easily have been compromised, and a great film spoiled. But the team behind it knew what they were doing.

It is the work of Director, Malik Bendjelloul. Based in Stockholm, Malik Bendjelloul has been directing documentaries for twelve years, primarily based on musicians. In 2001, Bendjelloul directed the first ever documentary about German electronic pioneers Kraftwerk. He has also made a documentary series about the history of heavy metal as well as some single documentaries, collaborating with such iconic artists as Björk, Sting, Elton John, Rod Stewart, Madonna, Mariah Carey, U2 and Kylie Minogue. Last autumn Bendjelloul directed a filmed concert with Prince.

Bendjelloul has also worked as director and creative producer for Swedish Television's international cultural weekly show *Kobra*, where he made short documentaries covering a wide range of stories. Among the subjects were the First Earth Battalion – the American army division who tried to teach their soldiers to walk through walls; and a profile on Alfred Merhan, a man who has been living in Charles de Gaulle airport for 18 years and who became the inspiration for Steven Spielberg's *THE TERMINAL*. Other subjects have included the controversial story of British pop band The KLF burning a million pounds, and a film exploring the rumours surrounding Paul McCartney's death.

He had worked on *Sugar Man* for a long time before meeting up with the Producers Simon Chinn and John Battsek who helped complete the film. Bendjelloul said: "In 2006, after five years making TV documentaries in Sweden, I spent six months travelling around Africa and South America looking for good stories. In Cape Town I met Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman, who told me about Rodriguez. I was completely speechless – I hadn't heard a better story in my life. This was five years ago and I have been working on this film more or less every day since then."

The producer Simon Chinn has already won Oscars and other plaudits and you will possibly know him for his most recent films *Project Nim* and *Man on Wire* (the latter did win the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance). It became Rotten Tomatoes best-reviewed film of all time.

In 2005, Chinn established his production company, Red Box Films, to produce *MAN ON WIRE* (taking inspiration from Philippe Petit, who kept his ideas for future projects, including his high wire walk between the Twin Towers, in a red box under his bed) and it currently has a slate of projects – including feature documentaries, feature films and television dramas – at various stages of production and development.

We loved it, and we are struggling to tell you about it in too much detail since we really do not want to spoil it for you. It is the story of Rodriguez, an American singer, his music and his life. Maybe that is all you ought to know before you storm the doors of your nearest cinema from 27 July 2012 when it is available on general release. Then sit back and prepare to be amazed by the story of a singer songwriter who was bigger than Elvis in South Africa.



Searching for Sugar Man opens in the UK on 27 July 2012 including [The Cameo](#) where we had the privilege of seeing it.

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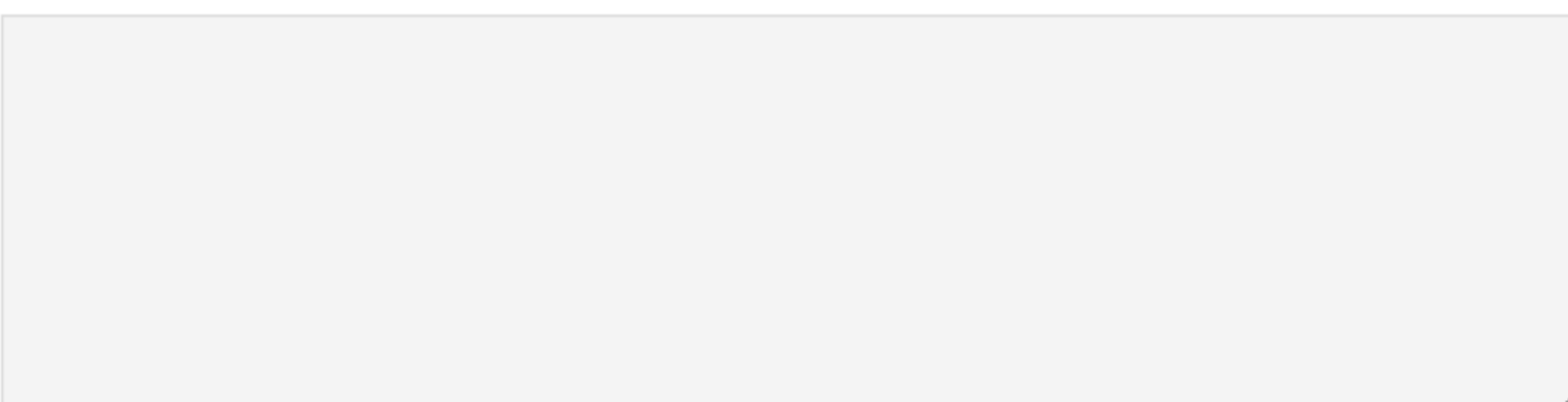
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