

# Ballad of a Cinderella hippy



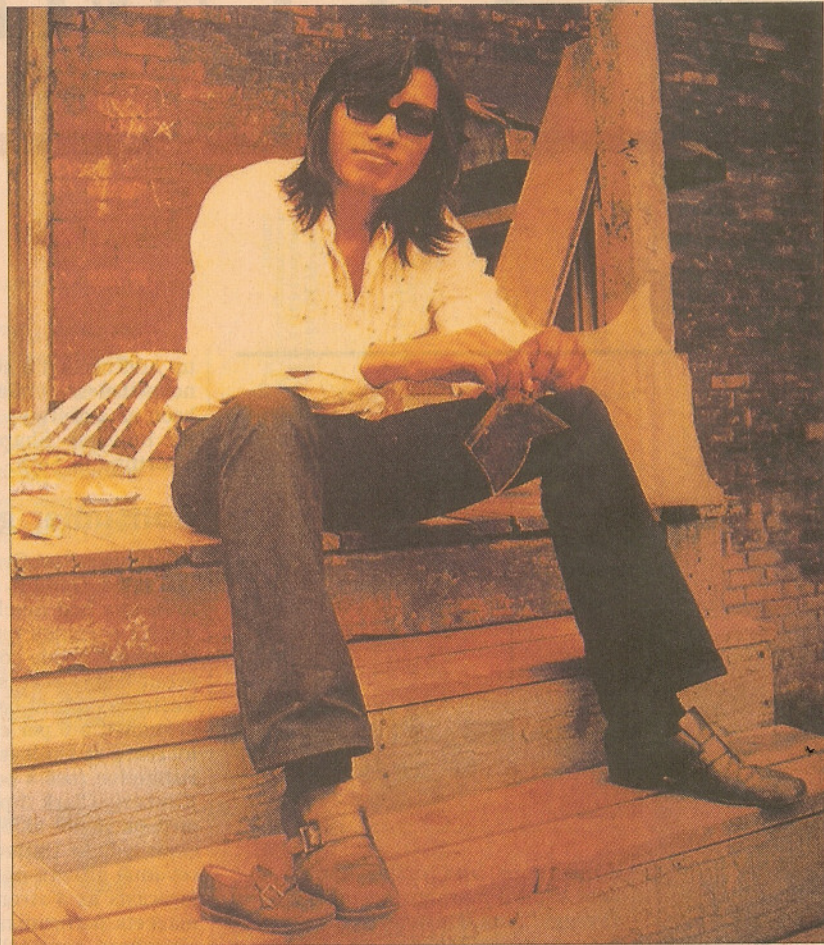
**Nigel Andrews**

FILM

This is a spoiler alert. Read no further – go straight to the mad chefs of *El Bulli* (below) – if you want to delay knowing why *Searching for Sugar Man* is a head-spinning, signpost-turning, psyche-twirling treat: a music-culture Cinderella story to beat them all. I don't want to be torn apart by pink-paper-perusing Maenads for spilling surprises I cannot proceed far without spilling. In the late 1960s – this paragraph and the next are safe – the Hispanic-American singer-songwriter Rodriguez was a minor folk music cult with a sweet, strong voice, Dylan-worthy lyrics (some said) and a well-reviewed but ill-selling debut album. He was a hit in smoky clubs with names like The Sewer. Back then the myth mill insisted he finally shot himself or even burned himself alive on stage. Why? How did that happen? And why was he, and is still, so big in South Africa?

Cut to Cape Town. Swedish-born documentarist Malik Bendjelloul tells the Rodriguez story through two intrigued South Africans who sleuthed it first, a record shop owner and “musicologist detective”. They couldn't understand how a hippy-generation hero for apartheid-era rebel Afrikaners, a US singer who told it how it was about the evils of authority and the high cool of love, peace and marijuana, had vanished effectively in his native country. Rodriguez's music had gone platinum in South Africa. In Los Angeles and American points east it had, well, just gone.

We learn with a cheekiness almost brilliant – Defcon-3 spoiler alert (you have three seconds to stop reading) – that Rodriguez is not only alive but



## **Searching for Sugar Man (12A) ★★★★★**

Malik Bendjelloul

## **El Bulli: Cooking in Progress (12A) ★★★★★**

Gereon Wetzel

## **Leave It on the Floor (15) ★★★★★**

Sheldon Larry

## **Dr Seuss' The Lorax (U) ★★★★★**

Chris Renaud

## WEEKEND ARTS

'The new piece mounts an attack on the modern art world from two sides': Leo Robson witnesses the new Tate Turbine Hall show and meets its creator, Tino Sehgal, in tomorrow's Life & Arts section

well, the father of pretty daughters, a monosyllabist with a shy smile, and a law unto himself living out of a Detroit demi-hovel. His two hunter-interviewers, meeting him, say: “But don't you know you're huge in South Africa?” The rest is spellbinding history, surreal and enrapturing, as the resurrected folk hero visits the far continent. Think Norman Wisdom in Albania and multiply by infinity; though viewers should be warned that Bendjelloul takes a fair few liberties of omission (including an intervening Australian concert tour) to persuade us his protagonist's

story was the overnight peripeteia portrayed.

That still isn't it, though. The film's ace in the hole, its Zen howitzer, is that the hero doesn't seem to *give a damn*. It is not that Rodriguez isn't grateful. He thanks the crowd, signs the albums, even falls in love, we're told, with his South African limo driver. But he is still at movie's end, partially at least, the ensorcelling enigma of its beginning. A man too good for fame (though we learn he once ran for mayor of Detroit and came in 139th). Did his music ever rival Dylan's? We doubt it. The songs are easy-listening counterculture. But it's the triumph of this documentary that we feel, after learning so much about a game-changed yet weirdly unchangeable street messiah, who we're told still lives in his demi-hovel, that there is more to learn yet. The searchers for Sugar Man are still searching.

Fact, this week, kicks fiction into the far grass. If *Sugar Man* outdistances credence, what about the Michelin-starred restaurant on the Catalan coast that serves 35 courses to every guest, including calf cartilage, rabbit's brain and water-and-hazelnut-oil cocktails? “Did serve,” we amend. *El Bulli* shut shutters in 2010 to become a cooking