



The builder who's bigger than Elvis

In 1970s Detroit, Sixto Rodriguez was just another failed Dylan imitator, but in South Africa he became a superstar. A new documentary tells the strange story of his rebirth. By **Kaleem Aftab**

It's not often that a musician comes back from the dead. In the early 1970s, the Detroit-based guitarist Sixto Rodriguez released two albums. They didn't sell in America and he was quietly dropped from his label. Yet unbeknown to Rodriguez or to his label, his debut album, *Cold Fact*, had become a platinum-selling hit in South Africa. Outlawed by the authorities and only played on pirate radio, his Dylan/Guthrie-esque folk sound was enthusiastically taken up by the anti-apartheid movement, which latched on to songs such as "I Wonder" and "Sugarman", turning them into anthems against the regime.

When no new songs arrived and with Rodriguez apparently having disappeared without a trace, the legend grew in South Africa that the musician had committed suicide on stage. Some said that he shot himself while others claimed that he set himself on fire, live on stage. Perhaps the conflicting reports should have alerted people that something was amiss. In reality, the singer was earning his keep as a builder in Detroit.

This extraordinary backstory occupies the first segment of *Searching for Sugarman*. Directed by Malik Bendjelloul, the new documentary describes how two of Rodriguez's South African fans – record-store owner Stephen Segerman and music journalist Craig Bartholomew – embarked on search to learn more about the singer. In 1998, they hit the jackpot when they received an email from Rodriguez's

daughter, Eva, saying the singer was alive and well. A sell-out concert tour of South Africa was hastily arranged and the singer, completely oblivious to his fame, suddenly tasted success.

"It was a culture shock at first," says Rodriguez, now 70 and looking ever inch the veteran singing superstar. "The country is beautiful, I really thought it was going to be third world and full of disgruntled Rastafari. It turned out very different."

The mystery of the first half, which recaps the search, becomes an essay on the rebirth of a musician, a biopic and a look at the changing landscapes of Cape Town and Detroit.

"I was so eager and nervous to meet this guy because I heard so many conflicting stories, mythological stuff. It was like he wasn't a real man, not real flesh. He became this huge mystery before I met him", Bendjelloul adds. "And in a way he keeps this mystery."

It doesn't matter, says Rodriguez, if you know that he ended up on a construction site rather than self-immolating on stage. "As Malik pointed out at Sundance [where the documentary picked up the coveted audience award] you know that the *Titanic* is going to sink and that doesn't stop people watching that."

While the documentary questions what happened to the royalties, Rodriguez is placid about the financial implications of his South African success. He still lives in Michigan and the income from his recent tours has been spread around his family or given to charity. "I don't believe the story that





Shades of greatness: Sixto Rodriguez (left); the singer with Malik Bendjelloul, the director of 'Searching for Sugarman' (above); Rodriguez in the early 1970s (below) © GALLO IMAGES / ALAMY; MARK DAVIS/

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there were royalties," he says. "In this business there are a lot of superlatives used, but it was just something to be able to play there and that I was able to take my family with me and share that with them. There are a lot of rewards, not just the recognition and the 'oxygen money'; I call money 'oxygen'. Everyone needs oxygen but that's not my goal."

In his wilderness years as he earned his keep in construction, he also spent a decade obtaining a degree from Wayne State University and continued to play his guitar to tiny audiences at local gigs. Detroit, home of Motown remains a haven for musicians; the problem is that the poor, deserted city no longer has sufficient audiences to

make music a viable career there. Rodriguez also ran for mayor, without success. "I describe myself as a 'musico-politico' and the thing is, I am for change, positive change. I wasn't very successful at running for office."

Rodriguez is at his most lucid and beguiling when talking about music. He enthuses about Dylan and Paul Simon, citing the influence that "I Am a Rock" had on his career. The success of the film – it has received awards at every festival it has played – and of his tours since his "resurrection" has seemingly given him new juice to start songwriting again. "I do write stuff down. It's easier at the moment," he says. "It lends you to poetry, all these things that happened."

For now, Rodriguez is content to support the film as it travels around the world. In London, he's been doing secret surprise gigs after screenings and has an official UK tour planned for November after the film's US release. Before then, it's back to building in Detroit. "You never throw away your work clothes. There is always something to do in the house. In Detroit there are a lot of houses they are going to demolish because no one is taking care of them. We picked up this duplex right near Wayne State campus for \$100. With all these foreclosures people can get a place and at least they have that, and Detroit has plenty of space."

'Searching for Sugarman' is out on Thursday; the 'Searching for Sugarman' soundtrack is out now