



A Mexican Bob Dylan: the neglected singer Rodriguez

FILM

## Lost in music

A forgotten singer is relaunched a little too late, writes *Ryan Gilbey*

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

dir: Malik Bendjelloul

Cinema never used to have much time for the musician with limited or exotic appeal: music documentaries were restricted to the legendary, from Bob Dylan (*Don't Look Back*) to Madonna (*In Bed with Madonna*) to Metallica (*Some Kind of Monster*) and back to Bob Dylan (*No Direction Home*). But current or future admission to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is no longer a prerequisite for a film-maker's attention, as Daniel Johnston (*The Devil and Daniel Johnston*), the Brian Jonestown Massacre (*Dig!*) and a metal band easily mistaken for Spinal Tap (*Anvil! The Story of Anvil*) have all proved. True cachet now lies in a career of near-obscurity with a documentary chaser.

If so, there can't be anyone cooler than Rodriguez, the Mexican-American singer-songwriter celebrated in *Searching For Sugar Man*. Rodriguez emerged from late-1960s Detroit to release two albums that were compared favourably to Dylan. I detected more of Nick Drake or Cat Stevens but let's not split mung beans: this is music to go barefoot by.

After this overlooked spell of productivity, Rodriguez vanished. Rock'n'roll rumour insisted that he perished by his own hand but it's only the smallest of spoilers to say that *Searching for Sugar Man* ends not in the cemetery but the packed sports arena. The search in question was undertaken in the 1990s by a South African journalist, Craig Bartholomew-Strydom; the

film, piggy-backing on his findings, is essentially old news. But it does evoke an age when spadework involved more than typing a name into a search engine. It's almost disappointing to discover that the final connection was made when one of Rodriguez's adult daughters stumbled across a website dedicated to her father.

Rodriguez never knew that his domestic failure was not mirrored abroad. In South Africa, he was revered by tens of thousands of liberal, anti-apartheid Afrikaners, who found in his lyrics the inspiration to think freely. The authorities scratched the songs from the radio: in the government archives, we see that the offending vinyl was grazed with a sharp implement rendering airplay impossible – an extreme response, even to an artist who used without embarrassment the euphemism "Mary Jane".

With his papery skin, Jackie O shades and lips pursed in mild amusement, the latter-day Rodriguez seems nonplussed when asked about the success to which he was oblivious. But he is, after all, being quizzed about a shock he received more than a decade earlier and it's hard to shake the suspicion that this story was over long before we got here. The feeling is not staved off by the film-maker Malik Bendjelloul's retrospective pop videos, where Rodriguez's effortlessly authentic music accompanies contrived new footage (Rodriguez opens a window! Rodriguez plods through the Detroit snow in his Johnny Cash coat!).

Bendjelloul does undertake some investigative work, putting on the spot Clarence Avant, the Motown boss who released Rodriguez's records. The singer can be excused for not knowing of his own success but a label manager could hardly misplace royalty cheques from sales exceeding 50,000 units. Bendjelloul includes a few seconds of silent awkwardness before the questioning of Avant begins – the documentary equivalent of a caption that reads: "Warning: unreliable witness ahead". That the movie generally adheres to the warmly surprised incline of its subject's personality makes Avant's hostility feel even more treacherous.

In that scene, the film has some of the shape it struggles to find elsewhere. It's a shame there's no facility in the film to express what we can see from footage of Rodriguez's comeback shows: that there isn't a single non-white face visible among the thousands of Cape Town concert-goers. There's also no explanation for the 14 years that have elapsed between those shows and the film's release now.

Perhaps the answer is contained within another nagging question: what has happened to the singer's unreleased third album, of which no mention is made save for a brief caption? Maybe this movie is paving the way, commercially speaking, for the release of that collection. If this is the case, no one could begrudge Rodriguez that sliver of contrivance in a career defined only by altruism and honesty. ●