

Film review: Searching For Sugar Man

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MYSTERY is one of the tools of the trade for a musician. Some of us wonder what David Bowie is doing with his rock retirement, why Madonna refuses to contemplate it, or what is being hidden by Bono's ubiquitous sunglasses. But you probably haven't heard of - Sixto Diaz Rodriguez, who recorded two albums of confessional soul-folk in 1971 and 72.

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

Director: Malik Bendjelloul

Running time: 86 minutes

His voice had the sweetness of James Taylor, backed by some of Motown's finest session musicians, including British guitarist Chris Spedding. Steve Rowland produced some of his tracks, before going on to work with the Cure. However, when two albums flopped, his record company lost faith. And Rodriguez was an artist with some personal eccentricities – he was known to perform with his back to the audience so he could concentrate on his music.

No-one knows how his album Cold Fact washed up in South Africa in 1972, but Rodriguez's rankled, revolutionary style struck a chord with Afrikaaners. One line, "I wonder how many times you had sex", was about as counterculture as you could get in the repressive apartheid regime, and when some tracks were censored by state radio, by the blunt act of scratching the vinyl so that they were unplayable, this only increased his popularity.

Rodriguez became a staple in liberal South African record collections, alongside Simon and Garfunkel, the Doors and Neil Young. In a population of four million, platinum record sales made him bigger than Elvis or the Rolling Stones. The fact that information about Rodriguez was so, in those pre-internet days, simply added lustre to his legend. It was variously assumed he was dead from a heroin overdose, had been committed to a mental hospital, was serving a prison sentence for murdering his lover, or had killed himself at the end of an unsuccessful gig, or died in prison.

Eventually a South African fan named Stephen Segerman and journalist Craig Bartholomew took it upon themselves to find out more about the mysterious Rodriguez – and if you are unfamiliar with Rodriguez, or the 1998 documentary Dead Men Don't Tour, it seems a pity to spoil the rest of Malik Bendjelloul's detective story here. It's certainly a terrific yarn, which would have been even more satisfying if the investigation had been more dogged. For instance, who siphoned off the royalties for Rodriguez's best-selling albums? Clarence Avant, the former chairman of Motown Records, is allowed to bat that one away.

And although we learn more about Rodriguez, some questions about the artist and his family hang in the air after the credits roll. Nevertheless, this is a remarkable tribute to uncompromising talent and fiercely devoted fandom.

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