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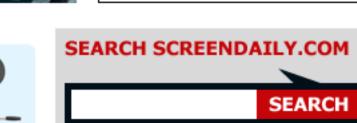
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Malik Bendjelloul

19 July, 2012 | By Ian Sandwell

The Swedish director talks to Screen about Searching For Sugar Man, set for release in the UK on July 26 after gaining critical

acclaim and awards on the festival circuit.

Since winning two awards at this year's Sundance Film Festival where it world premiered, Malik Bendjelloul's engrossing documentary Searching For Sugar Man has been garnering critical acclaim on the festival circuit, having played at the likes of Sheffield Doc/Fest, Moscow International Film Festival - where it won the Audience Award - and Tribeca.

Centred on the improbable (but true) tale of Rodriguez, a Mexican-American singer from Detroit, Searching For Sugar Man explores how Rodriquez, who released two albums in the US and barely sold anything, became a cult hero and bestseller in South Africa during the Apartheid. The film follows two South African fans - record store owner Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman and journalist Craig Bartholomew-Strydom - as they attempt to uncover the myth of Rodriguez, who was rumoured to have killed himself onstage.

Searching For Sugar Man is produced by Simon Chinn, with John Battsek as executive producer. Protagonist Pictures handle international sales.

Ahead of its UK release, through StudioCanal on July 26, and US release, through Sony Pictures Classics on July 27, as well as the release of the soundtrack on July 23, Screen spoke to Bendjelloul about the making of the film, which is his feature directorial debut.

Can you tell us a bit about how the film came together?

I found the story in 2006. I was looking for stories, travelling around South Africa and America, and thinking the purpose was to sell them to Swedish TV, because I'd been working for Swedish TV before. I found this story and it was the best story I'd ever heard in my life and probably ever will; a great, great story. I felt I couldn't tell the story in six minutes, even if I spoke quickly, I needed to make something longer probably, but it took a long while to understand this because it was a big step to go from Swedish TV to feature length film. I haven't ever done something more than 25 minutes and never spent more than a month on one thing before, and this I spent four years on. It was a big step to take, but I had the best story ever and someone had to make it. Maybe it shouldn't have been me, maybe it should have been someone with more experience but I thought that if I really worked hard, I could make this to the quality of the story.

And was it difficult finding the people to talk to for the film?

[Record store owner] Segerman still has this website, a fanpage, so he wasn't that hard to find and they were all very happy to talk. I thought when I spoke to the producers, this happened in the early seventies, almost forty years ago, and I didn't know if they would be alive or if they would remember him, but they were like "Rodriquez? Yes please, come here and I will give you all the time you like". It felt they'd been waiting for this film for a long time as no one had asked them anything about Rodriquez, they didn't even know he became famous in South Africa - at least Rowland [music producer Steve Rowland] didn't know that - so it was very pleasurable that everyone was so helpful making this film; everyone

notice any major differences between creating a TV documentary as opposed to one on film?

This is your feature directorial debut. Did you

wanted to help.

It is different, but you still need to structure it the same way. You need to have almost every second minute a payoff, it's like the photographs that are consisting of smaller photographs - The Truman Show poster for example. You need to have all those little small pieces that are interesting. I thought the story was 10/10, then you need to have 40 scenes inside this film that are as close to maximum and great as well. I always try to work on making the worst scene a little bit better; that was my focus every single day: I was only working on the worst scene, I tried to save that one [laughs]

the project?

There were many, many problems. Problems with the

Were there any major issues that occurred during

funding, I didn't get any salary for the first four years of work, so it was really hard in many ways to finish this film. There was so much bullshit going on with production and it took a while to get to Simon Chinn and John Battsek who are brilliant producers, but before then, there was so much stupid things, people were involved that didn't even want to be involved. It really is a strange thing to go to people and say "can you give me a dollar...", but at the same time, I was happy because every time I was editing, I felt that this is beautiful, this is going to be something.

film? I tried to get hold of them from the start, so almost all

the rights, we had from the beginning. Not all of them,

Was it difficult securing the music rights for the

but almost. The thing with Clarence [Avant, former Motown Records chairman] was he was also very happy to talk; he said "I still have his music in my car years later". He's been working with the big ones - Michael Jackson, Dionne Warwick... - and of all the artists he worked with, Rodriguez was top five, and he wanted to talk about him as well. While not a closed-off interviewee, is it fair to say

of the camera? Are his sunglasses an extension of this? It's very much like that. He used to perform with his back

to the audience; he doesn't like the limelight in that

Rodriguez wasn't completely comfortable in front

respect. In the same way, he likes performing, he likes singing. He always says to me "I'm about audio, not visuals". He's a singer; he chooses to express himself with music, he didn't choose to express himself with writing or doing lectures, it's about singing. It's an unnatural habitat to be in an interview situation. He always had shades. I don't think it's by purpose, he doesn't try to be a mystery but it makes him a mystery, which is beautiful. Any plans for a South African release?

We will soon. It's in Durban [International Film Festival] in late July and it's going to be distributed. In South Africa,

he's in the pantheon of rock Gods: Hendrix, Dylan... But I hope they're going to like the movie because in a way, it's them who made the film possible. It's their search. Can you tell us about your next project?

I have a long list of ideas and I'm still adding a few things. I have stuff that I think is probably going to be

the next thing. I have both features and documentaries on that list, but if I do a documentary, it's going to be hard to find a story that is better than this one. I've been working for four years and every time I get an idea, I write it on paper and that paper is now 45 ideas long and they're all pretty decent, so let's see which one to go for. Finally, what lessons do you think you'll take from

film?

I think I learned so much. This is my first film, so I pretty

making Searching For Sugar Man, into your next

much learned everything. I don't think there are any truths. It's not like next time, I'm going to do it quicker; it takes as long as it takes and every single film is unique in so many ways, that you can't really say that I'm going to do the same way this time. You have to adapt your ideas to that story. You learn you can do something; for me, I realised that from my living room in Stockholm, I could do something that you here in London ask me about. It was made primitive, everything. The paintings were made on the kitchen table; the music was made for 200 bucks. Everything was made in a very simple and DIY way which is inspiring that you can do stuff like that. The same way that Rodriguez did stuff. HAVE YOUR SAY

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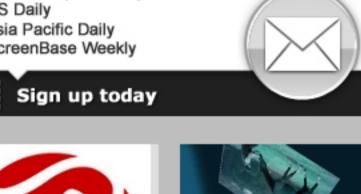
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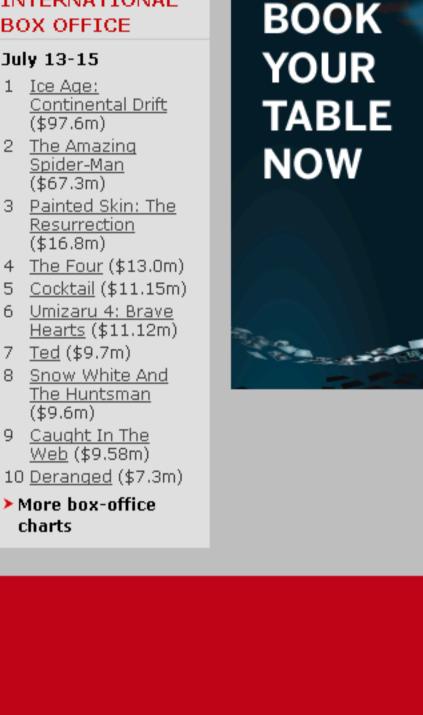




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