

# Searching for Sugar Man

United Kingdom 2012

Director: Malik Bendjelloul

Certificate 12A 86m 19s

The artist who's 'big in Japan' but nowhere else; the artist who toils in quiet obscurity for years before finally, in their twilight, being rediscovered and achieving their due recognition. Malik Bendjelloul's first feature-length documentary, *Searching for Sugar Man*, combines both of these classic music-biz stories in one hugely enjoyable narrative: two South African music fans set out to discover the fate of their idol Sixto Rodriguez, an American singer-songwriter rumoured to have shot himself in despair on stage in the early 1970s, and their detective work ends up sparking an unlikely resurrection in the present day.

In a sense, *Sugar Man*'s very first moments subtly anticipate what's to follow. A car is driving down a cliff-top coastal highway, high above the waves, lit by the setting sun, an American voice singing over a strummed acoustic; it has to be California's Route 1, surely? But in fact it's South Africa – assumptions and superficial appearances, we realise, aren't safe. Similarly, the members of the South African musical counterculture that Bendjelloul introduces us to are wrongly convinced that Rodriguez is both an internationally adored songwriter, as recognised as Dylan or Joni Mitchell, and long dead. As its initial interviewees recount ever more gory rumours about Rodriguez's supposed suicide, *Sugar Man* acquires as one theme the unruly way in which musical mythologies developed in an era before the internet and its high-speed hive-mind fact-checking.

But this is also an exercise in myth-making itself. Bendjelloul's film is a masterful piece of storytelling, not just in the way it builds up to a classic emotional payoff for both the fan-detectives and their hero-slash-quarry, but for the care with which he approaches the story at its outset. Bendjelloul barely provides a glimpse of Rodriguez in the first act of the film – a couple of old publicity stills in which he's masked by dark shades flash before the viewer. His first producer recounts seeing (or rather not seeing) Rodriguez perform live, hidden by smoke and facing away from the audience in a Detroit dive (depicted in one of several well-judged animated vignettes). Even when we meet the definitely alive Rodriguez he sits back from the light cast by a window, sunglasses on even in the shade – all of which accentuates his natural unworldliness, a kind of Zen indifference to externalities that makes him seem near-absent, even when present in the room. This quality makes it all the more extraordinary that when his music career proved to be stillborn, he slipped uncomplainingly out of the limelight to work for decades on backbreaking construction jobs, ripping the fixtures and fittings out of Detroit houses (though it does seem a slightly uncanny flashforward to downtown

Detroit's present-day physical decay).

With so much material in Sixto's life and the South African backstory to fill in, Bendjelloul occasionally skimps on the American context: he draws no connections between Rodriguez and the fertile music scene of Detroit at the time, which included Motown, the Stooges, the MC5 and Parliament-Funkadelic. You can also see some of the stitches holding together Bendjelloul's narrative: the two super-fans, Steve 'Sugar' Segerman and journalist Craig Bartholomew, are almost too eloquent in telling their stories. At times their contributions have the slightly flat vivaciousness of the over-rehearsed raconteur. But *Searching for Sugar Man* is also full of fascinating details: the shady record-label owner who takes unkindly to questions concerning the whereabouts of Rodriguez's royalties from South African sales, or the moment when a South African official reveals how censors ensured a Rodriguez song with explicit lyrics couldn't be played on the radio (the track on the station's copy of the LP was scratched into oblivion). And of course, for anyone who's never heard them, there's the pleasure of discovering Sixto Rodriguez's poetic and beguiling songs.

♦♦ Sam Davies

## CREDITS

### Produced by

Simon Chinn  
Malik Bendjelloul

### Written by

Malik Bendjelloul

### Director of

### Photography

Camilla Skagerström

### Edited by

Malik Bendjelloul

### Sound Designer

Per Nystrom

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### Production

### Companies

A Red Box Films &  
Passion Pictures  
production in  
association with  
Canfield Pictures &  
The Documentary  
Company  
A film by Malik  
Bendjelloul

### Executive Producers

Hjalmar Palmgren  
Sheryl Crown  
Maggie Montieth  
John Battsek

### In Colour

[1.85:1]

### Distributor

Studiocanal Limited

7,7768 ft +8 frames

**SYNOPSIS** A documentary telling the story of two South African music fans who set out to discover what happened to Sixto Rodriguez, an American singer-songwriter who notched up few sales in the US but, unbeknown to him, gained a huge cult following in South Africa. Interviews with producers, label executives, fans, Rodriguez and his family reconstruct the story of the artist's shortlived recording career in the 1970s, the subsequent years spent working in construction and political activism, and Rodriguez's eventual rediscovery, culminating in a series of concerts in South Africa.