

Sugar Man is a sweet



EDGY: Panthaki and Bashy Thomas in *The Man Inside*

WITH THE competing pressures of the new Batman and the Olympic Games cinema distributors have abandoned hope of enticing in audiences with any major new releases this week beyond Dr Seuss's *The Lorax*, a so-so animation aimed squarely at young children.

What we get instead are stale leftovers, literally so in the case of the yawn-inducing *El Bulli: Cooking In Progress*, but then we also get ***Searching For Sugar Man***, one gem of a documentary. It will not rival *The Dark Knight Rises* at the box office but tells one of the best stories of the year.

The challenge for the filmmakers is to get people to watch a documentary about someone they have never heard of. It is the subject's very anonymity and lack of success that lies at the heart of the story, although conversely this is why it is so absorbing, surprising and thought-provoking.

Have you ever heard of a Mexican-American singer-songwriter known as Rodriguez? Released a couple of critically acclaimed albums in the early Seventies after being discovered in a smoky nightclub in Detroit? He was then compared with Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash and The Beatles?

Nope, me neither and the less you do know about him the better. I won't give away more than is

FILM

By Henry Fitzherbert



necessary to entice you to see it; for this is no ordinary biography of a musician, it is a mystery and a detective story and a contemplation of what it means (and takes) to be successful, with some astonishing twists and a remarkable central character in the long forgotten, and long dead, Rodriguez.

As far as he had lodged in the public consciousness it was over the manner of his demise with rumours circulating that he had committed suicide on stage shortly after delivering these final lyrics: "But thanks for your time, then you can thank me for mine and after that's said, forget it."

According to who you believe he either shot himself in the head, or as more widely accepted, doused himself in petrol and immolated himself in the manner of a Tibetan monk.

It was his response to the world's brutal indifference to his two albums: *Cold Fact*, released in 1970 and which included the haunting title track



Sugar Man, about a drug dealer and his clients, and Coming To Reality released two years later.

Despite good reviews the albums sank without trace and he was dropped by his label A&M records to the despair of his collaborators who believed him to be one of the greats. "I have produced a lot of big-name artists with big hits, like Peter Frampton and Jerry Lee Lewis but I have never worked with anyone as talented as Rodriguez," says Steve Rowland who produced Coming To Reality. "I never understood why he didn't become a big star."

YOU might think, despite the man's obscurity, that at least the manner of his death would be well established. The reason it is shrouded in mystery as the documentary unfolds is because the story is told from the perspective of two South Africans who became devout fans and determined in their shared enthusiasm to unravel the mystery of what became of him. From their vantage point in isolated, Apartheid-era South Africa, before the internet, they had very few facts to hand.

It is here that the story takes its first bizarre twist as we learn that Rodriguez did find an appreciative audience somewhere in the world, South Africa, and in fact became something of a superstar there. A bootleg recording of Cold Fact found its way to South Africa in the early Seventies and over the following years Rodriguez became a rock legend as his anti-establishment lyrics and soulful melodies found resonance with a generation of disaffected, liberal white Afrikaners. As one person puts it: "He gave people permission to free their minds."

So who was this man whose anthemic songs like I Wonder, Establishment Blues and the aforementioned Sugar Man became as familiar to

treat of a film



NOSTALGIC:
Two South
Africans
set out to
discover what
happened
to singer
Rodriguez in
*Searching For
Sugar Man*

SEARCHING FOR SUGAR MAN

★★★★☆

(12A, 85mins,
documentary)

Director:

Malik Bendjelloul

DR SEUSS'S THE LORAX 3D

★★★★☆

(U, 86mins)

Director:

Chris Renaud

Voices:

Danny De Vito,
Ed Helms,
Zac Efron

THE MAN INSIDE

★★★★☆

(15, 100mins)

Director: Dan Turner

Stars: Ashley
Thomas, Michelle
Ryan, Peter Mullan,
David Harewood

EL BULLI: COOKING IN PROGRESS

young white South Africans as Tracy Chapman did to middle-class youngsters in late Eighties Britain?

The two men who teamed up for answers were music critic Craig Bartholemew and record shop owner Stephen Segerman (inevitably known as "Sugar Man") and it is their investigation that is retold in Swedish filmmaker Malik Bendjelloul's fascinating film.

Taking their cue from Watergate journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein the pair resolved to "follow the money". If they could unravel what became of the huge royalties from Rodriguez's South Africa sales (Cold Fact went platinum) they might be able to find out what became of the man himself.

This results in one of the picture's most memorable encounters as Bendjelloul sits down with record boss Clarence Avant, a former chairman of Motown records, who owned the label that released Rodriguez. "You think it's something I'm going to worry about, a 1970 contract?" he explodes when questioned about the royalties.

To reveal any more would detract from the picture's many pleasures but be reassured that the end result is poignant, touching and inspiring, even if it doesn't tell you quite as much as you would like to know about Sixto Rodriguez, to give him his full name.

The film will probably sink without trace in the multiplexes but it is sure to endure as a word-of-mouth hit, much like the man himself.

fabulously colourful but the story is on the thin side, padded out with long flashbacks.

Set in a town where everything is plastic, with not so much as a real tree or blade of grass, we learn how this environmental nightmare came to pass as lovestruck 12-year-old Ted (Zac Efron) attempts to find a real tree to win the heart of local cutie Audrey (Taylor Swift).

His quest leads him to the "Once-ler" (Ed Helms), a sinister but remorseful figure, whose greed and ambition resulted in the destruction of a once idyllic valley brimming with nature, including mini-bears and singing fish, and presided over by The Lorax (Danny De Vito), the "guardian of the forest", a furry orange peanut-like environmentalist, below.

The latter is frankly a bit of a preachy bore, a few jokes would have been nice but after sagging in the middle the story picks up for a fun, whirlwind conclusion. Younger children should be satisfied.

THE Man Inside is a well-intentioned British film examining knife crime and gang culture through the eyes of troubled youngster Clayton (Ashley Thomas) raised on his now-incarcerated father's horrific violence and trying to keep a lid on his own angry instincts.

Peter Mullan is good as a father-figure boxing coach but other performances are poor, there are too many characters and the storytelling is weak and predictable.

Hailed as the world's greatest restaurant, El Bulli in Spain is now closed but tedious documentary **El Bulli: Cooking In Progress**, allows food nostalgics to drool over its legendary multi-course menu as we follow the laboratory preparation of a new season's menu under owner/chef Ferran Adria.

Not only does the food look barely edible but the film is remarkably unilluminating about the history of the restaurant, the characters or those who ate there.

