


Rodriguez could have been as big as Dylan, but gave up on his music career. For 25 years, fans thought he had died. His rediscovery has inspired a great documentary, says Jonathan Dean

They all thought he was dead. That's the madness — he was in Detroit all along, gutting houses, when he should have been playing stadiums and glad-handing Bono. Sixto Diaz Rodriguez. No, you've never heard of him, but his is a rock'n'roll story of apartheid, lies, second chances and fans who thought he'd set himself on fire until, one day in the mid-1990s, two South Africans found him alive and well, and said, where we're from, you're bigger than the Rolling Stones.

"It was a surprise," smiles the 69-year-old Rodriguez when we meet in London just before an extraordinary film about his life, *Searching for Sugar Man*, opens. "They said, 'I heard you were dead.' What do you say to that?" A time-capsule tale of a pre-internet age when information was local, Malik Bendjelloul's documentary holds its own alongside *Man on Wire* and *Senna* — recent films that take fact and play it tense like fiction, so you can't believe half of what you're seeing, and Wikipedia the gaps later.

Or, in Rodriguez's case, buy the music. A similar story of the metal band Anvil was made into another brilliant film in 2008, but they were tuneless and atrocious, while Rodriguez's two albums — *Cold Fact* (1970) and *Coming from Reality* (1971) — are exquisite. The title song, *Sugar Man*, and the coming-of-age *I Wonder* are the "hits", *Cause and Crucify Your Mind* the classic ballads, with *This Is Not a Song, It's an Outburst*: Or, the *Establishment Blues* the one that brings to mind the star this singer should have been for the past 40 years — Bob Dylan.

"Let's be clear," says Rodriguez, in black from hair to boot, save for a blood-red tie. "Bob Dylan has written more than 500 songs. I've written 30 — but the comparison is sweet, thanks a lot." Softly spoken, bright, Rodriguez looks and sounds like a hippie taken out of deep freeze, with a story thawing off his lips. He talks of nepotism, cronyism, greed, how "the system's going to fall", class, Huxley, Marx, Orwell. He says "young bloods" three times in our hour. He calls people "cats". Yet, despite his denials, maybe because little ever changes, he sounds more fired up and politically relevant than most pop stars recording today. Even Olly Murs.

A man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a black sleeveless shirt and blue jeans, is walking backwards on a sandy beach. He is carrying an acoustic guitar over his shoulder and holding the neck with his right hand. The ocean waves are breaking behind him, and the sky is overcast. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

**'It's too late to go
backwards. Forward
is the whole deal':
Sixto Diaz Rodriguez**

Dead man walking

So why haven't we heard of him until now? Rodriguez is level-headed, explaining with no hint of understatement that "in the music business, there are no guarantees, there's a lot of rejection, criticism, disappointment", but Bendjelloul, who discovered the story in 2006, is more forthright, more damning of a country that is supposed to be the land of the free. "In America in that era, if your name was Rodriguez, you were supposed to play mariachi music," he says, sitting across the table from his subject. "He was a serious challenge to the white rock scene, which was very much an exclusive members' club at the time."

As such, his albums flopped, but when a tape of Cold Fact found its way to apartheid-ridden South Africa, it was latched upon by liberal Afrikaners against the regime. It is ironic that a Michigan-born child of Mexican immigrants should find success here, but in this closed society his protest music sold more than 500,000 copies. The white population of South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s grew from 3.8m to 4.8m. Most of them weren't sending food parcels to Nelson Mandela. Rodriguez's are phenomenal sales, perhaps buoyed by the mysticism of an artist whose "death" became truth. "If you're a

good doctor, you go to the top of the food chain, but not in music," he says. "But it's not competitive to me. It's too late to go backwards. Forward is the whole deal."

He stands up, clomping off to fight a losing battle for fresh air with a window latch. "Tell him how many countries you've been to," he bellows to Bendjelloul, a Swedish first-time feature director. The answer is 45, and whatever experience that and a career in television have given him bleeds into his film. Animation, blockbuster cityscapes of Detroit, gripping footage of the singer's first South African stadium gig after his (re)discovery — it belongs on the big

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screen. Then, as conversation turns to Clarence Avant, Rodriguez wanders back. Avant is an American music producer and label founder, and the point at which all royalties from those 500,000 plus sales appear to end.

"He didn't like speaking about money. He really didn't," laughs Bendjelloul, who interviewed Avant for *Searching for Sugar Man*. I say the mogul seems threatening. "Oh, threatening. Good one. Yeah. All right," nods Rodriguez, clapping, adding that legal inquiries have commenced. "I still don't know what happened to that money. It would take years. But the basis of music is publishing, and now we have information we didn't before."

What a story. Javier Bardem could play him in a biopic. At the end of the interview, Rodriguez's wife, Konny, asks to take a photo of the two of us. He puts his arm around me. This doesn't happen much in this job, and his story can never happen again. A rare mystery in a modern music world in thrall to social media, when he plays nowadays — as he did twice in London last week — everything is on Twitter. YouTube ensures no living artist can ever be presumed dead.

He still lives in Detroit — "You've got to be from somewhere" — and, despite

performing to rapturous Australian audiences (he's also big there) who know every word, has carried on working on building sites. "I didn't feel lost. I knew exactly where I was," he says of his decades in the musical wilderness. He's delighted that his time has finally arrived, but doesn't it annoy you, I ask, that if the world were fairer, if the music industry weren't such a mess of greed, producers, writers, litigators and absolute bastards, you would have been bringing down houses rather than working on them? Rodriguez chuckles again. It's nice, he says, for his three daughters. They find it all exciting. "We all have our histories and our countries have their histories, but enough is enough," he says. "There are things to get done, and no matter how lofty our ideas, you only get so much time to figure this out. The impermanence of life, the mystery of life — you've got to deal with what you can. I feel pride."

He has waited half his life to tell that to people who will listen. Seventy this week, he's more alive than he has ever been. That's the madness. ☐

Searching for Sugar Man is in cinemas on July 27; the soundtrack is out on July 23