



SWEET FINDINGS

The story of obscure 70s musician Rodriguez, who unknowingly found a cult following in South Africa, has to be seen to be believed. James Mottram speaks to the filmmaker behind a new documentary on the man

It was like a blessed film,' says Malik Bendjelloul. 'Every rock you looked under, there was a little gold coin.' There isn't a better way to describe Bendjelloul's debut *Searching For Sugar Man*, a documentary that boasts what the director calls 'probably the best story I've ever heard in my life – and probably ever will hear'.

He's not exaggerating, either. Sixto Rodriguez, a Detroit-born folk musician, cut two albums, *Cold Fact* and *Coming From Reality*, in the early 1970s. While both flopped and Rodriguez's career stalled, bootleg copies surfaced in South Africa, where he became a superstar. 'He was on that level of Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan or The Rolling Stones,' says the Swedish-born Bendjelloul.

The trouble was, in an isolated, Apartheid-driven country, nobody knew who Rodriguez was. Rumour had it that he'd committed suicide on stage, setting himself on fire. Back in the US, Rodriguez fulfilled the prophecy of his debut single 'I'll Slip Away', blissfully unaware his discs had gone platinum in South Africa. 'It was a once in a lifetime thing,' says Bendjelloul. 'It was the time before the internet. It will never happen again.'

Named after Rodriguez's song 'Sugar Man', the film picks up the story when two fans independently decided to research the musician's background. Like everyone else in South Africa, music critic Craig Bartholomew and record retailer Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman believed Rodriguez was no longer alive, with biographical details sketchy at best. Eventually they teamed up, swapped notes and published a fan website.

After Rodriguez's eldest daughter, Eva, discovered the site quite by accident, it led to her father making

a triumphant return to packed auditoriums in South Africa in 1998. Gig footage, included in the film and shot by Eva, showing hysterical fans simply has to be seen to be believed. 'This is like a Cinderella story,' laughs Bendjelloul, 'but it's better because it has a better soundtrack.'

Indeed, the fairy tale will continue, thanks to the film, which is finally introducing Rodriguez's music to his fellow Americans. Set to follow: a 100-city tour in the US, a scheduled appearance on David Letterman and the release of the movie's soundtrack (essentially a greatest hits disc). 'Most music careers slowly but surely go down,' says Bendjelloul. 'He has this strange coda to his career where everything is going up.'

It's only what he deserves. As the film shows, the royalties from his overseas sales mysteriously disappeared – though Bendjelloul believes Rodriguez, a man as mellow as his music, didn't let that embitter him. 'He studied philosophy and he's got a broader look on life.' Curiously, the only person who was unsure about the doc being made was Rodriguez. 'He's a very private man, a very shy person.'

Known for playing on stage with his back to the audience – one of several reasons that contributed to his albums flopping in the first place, argues the director – Bendjelloul believes he understands this innate reserve. 'He's a singer, he's not a film star – he always says that. "Malik, I'm audio, you are visual!"' Well, he's a film star now.

***Searching For Sugar Man* is on selected release from Thu 26 Jul. The soundtrack is released on Mon 23 Jul.**



APOCALYPSE Archives

Edinburghfilmcollective **SCREEN BANDITA**, whose events breathe new life into old film, choose five films that they would save at the end of the world

1 Annie Hall (Woody Allen, 1977) 'Keaton is hip and heart-warming and she's a Bandita for sure. The lobster scene, the Marshall McLuhan scene, "Jew eat? Not did you eat. Jew eat?" and Allen as a frustrated youngster in Brooklyn lamenting the expansion of the universe. Allen's telling of the various stages of a relationship can never be watched too many times.'

2 L'Avventura (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960) 'Our reason for choosing this film? Its leading lady: Monica Vitti. Vitti looking mysterious, Vitti looking sullen, Vitti laughing, Vitti stroking the rocks as she connects with the landscape. She is an antidote to Antonioni's haunting, sometimes depressing view of human relationships.'

3 The Mirror (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975) 'Rarely has there been an auteur so adept at capturing and distilling visually the manifestations inherent to the concept of the ephemeral "inner life", and in his brooding landscapes, stillness and juxtaposition of colour and light there is an absolute poetic vision, vitality and breathtaking beauty.'

4 La Belle et la Bête (Jean Cocteau, 1946) 'So brilliantly does Cocteau embrace the medium of the moving image to retell the tale of *Beauty and the Beast* that we couldn't resist this selection. Cocteau bewilders and bewitches with a perceptual overload of dreamlike sets, surrealist elements and mesmerising, luxurious storytelling.'

5 Glitterbug (Derek Jarman, 1994) 'Jarman is a Bandita inspiration. In a web of creativity that zig-zagged cinema, painting, garden design and the written word, he concocted intensely personal, uncompromising works. *Glitterbug* is an incandescent visual inventory of fragments that hangs adrift of time and place.'

■ Screen Bandita present *Ritualised Frequencies*, a night of 16mm film and live music, Church of the Sacred Heart, Lauriston Street, Edinburgh, Sat 21 Jul.