

The tide has turned

Searching for Sugar Man is an uplifting tale of a rock musician rediscovered, says Cosmo Landesman

This documentary by the Swedish director Malik Bendjelloul is the story of an audacious attempt to rescue the singer-songwriter Sixto Rodriguez by two of his fans, the record retailer Stephen "Sugar" Segerman and the music journalist Craig Bartholomew. What they saved him from was not drugs or drink, but something equally deadly to the truly talented: obscurity.

Segerman and Bartholomew are a kind of Woodward and Bernstein of pop, but through their investigative efforts, they put an idol back on his pedestal, rather than pushing him off. This was no easy task, as they started their search for Rodriguez in the pre-internet days. All they had was an album sleeve and his songs as clues to where their hero might be. They had heard he had killed himself on stage — one version said that he set himself on fire, the other that he shot himself. So this film is a kind of vindication of the redemptive power of the adoring fan.

Rodriguez was a Mexican-American singer-songwriter who played the seedy bars of Detroit in the late 1960s and early 1970s. (He was so shy that he often played with his back to the audience.) His songs were a lush, lyrical mix of folk, funk and blues — with a dash of protest. Imagine Jose Feliciano meets Bob Dylan. To the locals, he was a mysterious poet/troubadour drifter, dressed in black. Not a man who left a large footprint. Throughout, the film overcomes the lack of archive footage by offering a moody bit of animation, with Rodriguez walking those mean Detroit streets, or a series of talking heads.

In 1970, his debut album, *Cold Fact*, was released, and everyone expected a big hit. The album bombed, as did his next one, *Coming from Reality*. Rodriguez was dropped from the record company and dropped out of sight, turning his back on the music business. But unbeknown to him or to the outside world, he was hugely popular in South Africa, where his first two albums were critical and commercial hits.

The film is at pains to establish Rodriguez's credentials as a protest singer who inspired a generation of young, white, middle-class South African liberals to take a stand against apartheid. The link is pretty tenuous. One of the film's contributors says: "He gave people permission to free their minds"

— but that is true of all pop groups in the 1960s. Some of his songs were censored by the South African authorities, but Puff the Magic Dragon, by Peter, Paul and Mary, was also banned. The South African section lasts too long and isn't really germane to the story.


If Bendjelloul makes an error of inclusion, however, he is spot-on when it comes to omission. A good documentary is as much about what you leave out as what you put in. So, while the film does an excellent job of giving us a chance to hear this man's wonderful music, it wisely avoids giving us much of the man. The unstated irony here is that Rodriguez the man is still an obscure figure. The one current interview with him reveals little personal information; nor does he give much away about his feelings, his life or his career. He doesn't even talk about his music or his musical influences, never mind deal with the obvious question: how did you handle decades of failure?

For a glimpse of the private man, we have to rely on interviews with his two daughters, who give us a portrait of a good, hard-working dad who did arduous demolition and clearance work to support his family. Curiously, and no doubt significantly, there are no ex-wives or girlfriends to add their perspective. But this is why the film works so well:

**New wave: Sixto Rodriguez,
now rescued from obscurity**

Rodriguez remains the cool guy in dark shades who is always dressed in black.

Searching for Sugar Man is not a big wow of a documentary, but it leaves you with a warm glow. It's a feelgood work you don't have to be embarrassed about liking. It has struck such a chord with people because it

shows that, in our age of instant X Factor fame, it is possible for someone with real talent to find his or her audience after decades of "failure". It's really a film about justice. And doesn't it also play on our repressed hopes that, one day, the world will recognise our talents — however modest — for what they are worth? 

 **Searching for Sugar Man**

12A, 86 mins

★★★★