

# Search for the old soul rebel

The story of two fans looking for forgotten singer Sixto Rodriguez is unexpectedly heartwarming, says **Wendy Ide**

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**Searching For  
Sugar Man**

12A, 86min

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ny films getting a release this week, a barren period scorched by fallout from *The Dark Knight Rises* last week, will be one of two things.

They will either be an out and out turkey getting shoved into the cinema equivalent of a shallow grave. Or they will be something special enough to chuck a spanner into the unstoppable Hollywood machine. *Searching For Sugar Man* falls firmly into the latter camp. At the heart of this gripping musical odyssey is the kind of story that should not be true — and indeed could not be true but for the unique set of cultural circumstances that aligned around the life and career of the 1970s folk artist Sixto Rodriguez.

Never heard of him? You are not alone. The Detroit-based troubadour crafted mournful, melodic songs that made Bob Dylan look like a political lightweight. His two albums are crammed with anthems for the discarded and the dispossessed of American society; torch songs for people burned by life. He was meant to be the biggest new star that the protest generation had produced. But for some reason, Rodriguez's career simply didn't ignite, and the American audience remained indifferent to the anguished eloquence of his poetry and music. Rodriguez vanished back into his gruelling former hand to mouth existence as a manual labourer.

But here's where the story gets weird. Unbeknown to Rodriguez, his music had found an enthusiastic audience. In South Africa, his star dwarfed that of acts like the Rolling Stones. He had a cultural weight to rival that of Elvis. His music fuelled the idea of rebellion among young Afrikaners chafing against the repressive nature of the government. He inspired a whole generation of



## Sixto Rodriguez and fans: reports of his death proved greatly exaggerated

white South African musicians to use their songs as a weapon against Apartheid. It seems incredible that Rodriguez never knew about his impact in South Africa, but bear in mind that this was a country in which the flow of information was locked down by censorship, and cultural exchange was precluded by sanctions. And South African fans were as much in the dark about their hero as he was about his success. They knew just one thing — that Rodriguez died by his own hand. But how? Rumours suggested either self-immolation on stage or a bullet to the head after a bad gig.

This extraordinary, involving documentary follows the quest of two dedicated fans, who set out to find out more about the elusive artist, and the truth about his death. They discover more than they could have ever hoped for in one of the most joyous moments in a cinema this year.

The churlish might suggest that the pair of fans made a meal of their search, scouring his lyrics for clues of where he might have lived when simply googling the name of the recording engineer might have opened a few doors a little earlier. Still, it's a treasure hunt of a movie that repays in musical gold.