



* Close up Malik Bendjelloul

Until five years ago, Malik Bendjelloul worked for Swedish TV. But while travelling in South Africa, he heard the story of singer-songwriter Sixto Rodriguez – often referred to as the Hispanic Bob Dylan. His two early '70s albums sunk like stones in his native US, but sold in their thousands to liberal whites opposed to the apartheid regime, who were convinced their idol had since died. Bendjelloul brings the Rodriguez saga to the screen in 'Searching for Sugar Man' (see Film of the Week, opposite). He tells Trevor Johnston about the challenge that almost defeated him.

You've previously directed for TV. What was it about the Rodriguez story that convinced you it should be a feature film?

'This was something bigger. Here you had a man who lived in poverty not knowing that his music was bigger than Elvis on the other side of the world. It sounded like a movie script, but no one would have believed it. It's "Cinderella" with a better soundtrack.'

Was it tough to get funding as a first-timer making a movie about an artist most had never heard of?

'Absolutely. People responded when I told them about Rodriguez and when they heard the music, because the Bob Dylan comparisons really aren't foolish at all. I knew I had to make a film that was as good as the story, and the real fight was to convince people to trust me to do that. The Swedish Film Institute was the major funder, but it pulled out after I'd been working for three years.'

And how far along were you then?

'Well, I had a rough assembly, but it was still missing the animated sections and a soundtrack to go alongside Rodriguez's music. In 2011 everything stopped. The money ran out. I could barely afford food.'

And yet a year later you were the opening film at Sundance?

'Yeah, I just felt like a loser having come so far without having anything to show for it. So I did some sketches and started putting the animation together myself, and fooled around on the computer to do the music. This was literally a movie made on the kitchen table. When Sundance accepted it, I almost withdrew it again to do a re-edit. But when they told me it was the opening film, that convinced me it must be in good shape after all.'

What's interesting about this music is that it spread without marketing, without the internet, it was a purely grass roots phenomenon...

'What you have to understand about South Africa is that they knew about the hippy movement. They knew about the other freedoms that were happening all over the world, but they were living in a closed society. It was essentially Nazi Germany: the state had the power, and it took them a while to challenge that. There's a line in one of Rodriguez's songs, "The system's gonna fall to an angry young tune", that captured the imagination of a lot of young people who listened to it. To me, it says that if you produce something that's really good, somehow, some way it slips through somewhere... just not where you expect it. And maybe it takes the rest of the world 40 years to catch up.'

During your time in TV, you worked with a lot of great musicians – from Prince to Björk and Kraftwerk. How does Rodriguez compare?

'All great artists have integrity. That's what makes Björk so interesting, for instance. But Rodriguez is on another level. He's a mystery. I've spent four years working on a film about him and I still don't have all the answers.'

'Searching for Sugar Man' opens on **Fri July 26.**