

# Behind the Curtain

## Searching for Sugar Man

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DOCUMENTARIES NEEDN'T BE WITHOUT SUSPENSE, INTRIGUE AND THE OCCASIONAL SPOONFUL OF MYSTERY. MALIK BENDJELLOUL, DIRECTOR OF *SEARCHING FOR SUGAR MAN*, DISCUSSES HOW HE DISCOVERED AND COMMITTED SUCH A CURIOUS STORY TO CELLULOID.

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As the old adage goes, some realities are indeed much stranger than fiction, and this one in particular is more curious in its twists and turns than most. Traversing a remarkable time-span of over 30 years, *Searching for Sugar Man* is a fantastical, almost romanticised journey into uncovering the truth behind a mysterious singer-songwriter. It begins with the backdrop of early 1970s Detroit, a gritty urban landscape with a young, mysterious Mexican singer by the name of Rodriguez, who has a penchant for playing gigs with his back turned to the audience. Little is immediately known about his life, and his legacy is confined to hearsay, witness accounts and two albums released on a now-defunct subsidiary of A+M Records. With the music disappearing into the dark underground caverns of rock history of America, and Rodriguez himself vanishing into thin air, the story should have gathered dust and perished.

Somehow, through miraculous circumstance, a tape of his first album *Cold Fact* made its way to the Apartheid-ruled microcosm a world away in South Africa. Rumour has it that a girl brought her Cape Town residing boyfriend a copy from her native home of America. As the tape spread far and wide across the country, the politically charged social commentary of Rodriguez's lyrics created the perfect soundtrack for the struggle of the people. With music, television and newspapers controlled by the state, the climate was just right for Rodriguez to reach cult status. From such an extremely dismal reception to his albums in the USA, Rodriguez quickly became bigger than The Beatles and Rolling Stones in South Africa, speculatively selling over half a million records.

Despite the power that the music held, the man himself remained a mystery. Whilst bedrooms and bars from Cape Town to Johannesburg began to idolise Rodriguez as a beacon of hope, no information on him or his whereabouts were found.

*Searching for Sugar Man* finds director Malik Bendjelloul many years later, in a post-Apartheid South Africa, picking up the story with two lives affected greatly by the music and mythology of Rodriguez. Craig Bartholomew-

Strydom and Stephen "Sugar" Segerman play the two lead civilian-turned-detective protagonists determined to unravel the mystery of this ominous figure, embarking on a Hitchcock-esque journey to uncover some of the truths behind the man that inspired and uplifted a generation of South Africans. "I was travelling around Africa in 2006 with a camera looking for stories, and in Cape Town I met Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman. I'd found a few stories previous to this one, but as soon as I heard it I was like 'this is the best story I've heard in my entire life.'" Operating using a mixture of tested documentary techniques such as interviewing for character background, Bendjelloul takes aspects of the confrontational investigative techniques of Michael Moore (*Roger & Me*, 1989) and blends them with softer, more sentimental moments of discovery.

Bendjelloul follows the search as it goes deeper and darker into collapsed record labels, vast amounts of missing royalties and dead ends. All the while, Rodriguez floats on and off screen as an enigmatic nomad through coffee-stained photographs and distant sunglass-covered shaky footage. Bendjelloul describes the styling of these shots as arriving "very naturally", with almost every eye-witness account in the film describing Rodriguez as some sort of wandering spirit drifting around the city. "Even as he's sitting in the room next to me, I still find him a bit of a mystery", he laughs.

And sitting in the next room he was. In 1998, Rodriguez was resurrected from the dead thanks to the Poirot-like investigations of Segerman and Bartholomew. In his life post-music industry, Rodriguez had been living contentedly in Detroit as a blue collar, construction-working family man, completely unaware of his super-stardom across the Atlantic. Cue a series of successful (and highly dramatic, given that people had thought he was dead) comeback shows, and the singer-songwriter embarked on an emotional tour of South Africa.

14 years later, and with Rodriguez committed to press and dabbling in the 2012 worldwide festival circuit, his Machiavellian resurrection is not deemed to be the story's sole big-money draw. "I was worried about people knowing he



Screen stills from *Searching for Sugar Man*.

was alive before seeing the film at first. But people went to see *Titanic* (1997) knowing that the ship sinks in the end”, explains Bendjelloul.

Moving with the composed, and almost intimidating gait of Javier Bardem’s commanding assassin in *No Country For Old Men* (2007), Rodriguez is shown in extended shots that play out like music video clips that hadn’t previously existed for his forlorn albums. His discography sits next to scenes of him in the present day, continuing the same daily drifting he did when he wrote them. Bendjelloul retells: “To be honest that was the way to portray him. When you spoke to people in Detroit that’s how they knew him. He always walked. They knew he was this music guy; this drifter who was always on foot. Detroit is a city of cars, no one walks. But Rodriguez was always walking. That really is him.”

For the majority of the scenes in which Rodriguez appears, he is wearing sunglasses, pictured wearing black and often absorbing himself in the shadows. Shot at points like a thriller, with nods to the black and white suspense of films like *The Third Man* (1949), Bendjelloul keeps the audience at arm’s length for the first half of the film, wondering who, or even what, this arcane figure was. “We have this history in cinema of how to portray mysteries. It was done in the style of *Citizen Kane* (1941); the way you go around and try to find clues and truth about someone. The shadows and dark sunglasses are clichés – but clichés are used because they work so well.”

There are dashes of animation used in a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it fashion to show Rodriguez wandering around early 1970s Detroit because, as Malik puts it, “there was no footage of him from before the 1990s.” Using Super 8 film instead of overdoing it on animation “for economical reasons”, the pairing of the techniques gives the film a great warmth that some documentaries lack with their clinical nature.

Rodriguez is depicted as a fascinating and shy character. Newly filmed footage shows him comfortable with and accepting of the decades of not realising his true potential as a singer-songwriter, and at the same time he is

unfazed by his celebrity status in South Africa. “Before I met Rodriguez for the first time, I had met everyone else in the film. I’d heard so much about him, and all these mythological stories described almost like he wasn’t a real person.”

Touched upon briefly in the film, but not mentioned in any great detail, is one possible explanation for his lack of success in 1970s America. “If you were Mexican you could only be seen to play Mexican music. He was challenging the typical American rock scene,” Malik ponders. “[The success] was so small that you could almost have conspiracies about it, as his music was as good as, if not better than, everything else at that time. The reception he gets in South Africa makes more sense – he is literally as big as The Rolling Stones.” The music industry chewed up and spat out Rodriguez before people in his own backyard had a chance to hear his talent.

*Searching for Sugar Man*’s strength is that its focus is not particularly on the music itself, but rather on the solitude and simplicity of the one man’s life who created it, and its connection to a distant country’s struggle on the other side of the planet. Where Bendjelloul has succeeded is by detailing this intricate journey subtly, whilst still creating a very human, touching piece of cinema, falling at none of the hurdles of straight down the line, interview-based documentaries. The film poses a simple and important question about the creation of music itself. With the Rodriguez of past and present pictured entirely content without the major success of peers such as Bob Dylan, should music be created purely for recognition and success, rather than for the enjoyment and love of making it? Bendjelloul clarifies: “That’s what makes the story even better. This man is so different from anyone I’ve ever met, he almost has these Zen like qualities about him. He has other priorities in life than fame, and if you think about it he’s right. Rodriguez has very few things that he needs to survive. He’s a free creature.” The film is in cinemas this summer. [www.sugarman.org](http://www.sugarman.org).

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