



# Second coming in South Africa

Sixto Rodriguez drifted into obscurity after his two albums flopped in the US in the 1970s. Some fans even thought he'd committed suicide. Instead, his music became the inspiration for thousands of South Africans fighting against apartheid. By **Jean West**

**Sixto Rodriguez smiles wryly when he remembers he is supposed to be dead. "It's great to be here," he says. Thousands of miles away from his unassuming apartment in the US motor city of Detroit, the 70-year-old construction worker and grandfather is clearly delighted to be risen, alive and in Sheffield, England.**

His is a story almost biblical in wonders and humility, subject now of *Searching For Sugar Man*, a phenomenal new film showcased at the city's documentary festival by the award-winning Swedish director Malik Bendjelloul.

Apocryphal tales of its hero were chilling – they had said that this once young, hip Latino rock star of the seventies had blown his brains out or overdosed in the tradition of other luminaries like Janis Joplin or Jimi Hendrix.

After all, what reason had he to live? His two albums *Cold Fact* and *Coming From Reality* bombed in the US despite the efforts of some of the finest producers, and a name that some say held the same promise as Bob Dylan or the Stones dived into obscurity.

But the swarthy gentleman sitting before me now, still beautiful in rock 'n' roll shades, suited and booted, his chiselled cheekbones cloaked at times by a shock of long dark hair, clearly didn't die. He was heaving bricks on building sites in Detroit, raising a family and living a quiet ramshackle life. "I was working in construction all that time. It was a dirty, dusty job. It involved a lot of heavy lifting."

Unknown to him, *Cold Fact* was being devoured by a generation of white liberal South Africans who had

chosen its soulful wisdom to shield them from the savage blows of apartheid.

"I almost can't think about it because it's so crazy," says Rodriguez in syrupy tones that make the mundane poetic. "It was amazing – I couldn't believe it. I hadn't thought I had meant anything to anyone."

He was wrong, as shown by a remarkable second coming made possible by South African music journalist Craig Bartholomew and record retailer Stephen "Sugar" Segerman, both ardent fans, who in a forensic act of devotion unearthed the truth, exposing the suicide as a sham. But they nearly didn't find him. It was only when they published a fan website and Rodriguez's daughter Eva stumbled on it by accident that contact was made.

South Africa rejoiced and this little man, devoid of ego, was invited "home" in the late nineties for a Lazarus tour where he was received with a reverence reserved for Mandela before rapturous audiences in stadiums the size of Wembley.