

“Stepping out before that first audience in South Africa gave me such a feeling of triumph.”



Rodriguez then and, right, now. His career was resurrected when he was found working on a building site by two ardent fans.

Photo, right: Chris Lopez

It was an incredible honour for the clearly moved star. “Stepping out before that first audience in South Africa gave me such a feeling of triumph and accomplishment. People were asking for autographs, one guy had the picture of me on the front of the *Cold Fact* album tattooed on his arm. It means a lot for my family, especially my daughters.”

Relaxed and sanguine today, Rodriguez nonetheless admits that he had been guarded at first about the film. “At first I was sceptical about the whole thing, even the tour. But everyone was so kind to me and it is true to say that *Searching For Sugar Man* has excited my musical career again.”

He has now seen it more than 30 times, and cannot disguise the sense of pride that is driving him to resurrect old ballads and compose anew for dates springing up across the globe.

Bendjelloul came across the story in 2006. “I heard this story and thought wow! This is the best story I have ever heard! It was like a script written by a screenwriter – but too strange to be fiction. Every stone you turned had a gold coin beneath it.”

Despite selling more albums than the Beatles’ *Abbey Road* in South Africa in 1971, Rodriguez, who Bendjelloul calls “shy and private”, never saw a penny from international sales, perhaps due to the fact that people thought he was dead.

He plays this down in favour of the fact that he was able to make a difference to the anti-apartheid movement. His lyrics are political, poetic and prophetic. On *Cold Fact* he asserts: “Garbage ain’t collected, Women ain’t protected, Politicians using people they’ve been abusing, The Mafia’s getting bigger, like



pollution in a river, And you tell me this is where it’s at.”

They translated well for a generation of South Africans muted by a racist regime and censored in their artistic endeavours. Bendjelloul says: “Rodriguez kind of had remote control – he really changed the society. You speak to the people there and they say that it really got them thinking.”

Words that applied to American civil rights issues were probably even more relevant to apartheid. Rodriguez says: “America had its fair share of issues like in Kent State when the National Guard were firing on the students who were protesting about the Vietnam war, and other events.

“Apartheid was going on at the same time and this was when I was writing my songs. You learn about another country’s history and it’s interesting. It is the same issue – government against the people.”

Rodriguez’s eagerness to return to his building work after sell-out tours is remarkable. His conversation is littered with gratitude. He calls Bendjelloul “charming” and his

cinematographer Camilla Skagerstrom “a dear person”. He urges us to reserve the real praise for those who found him.

“Sugar is the real hero of the film. He is amazing; the scene where he is pretending to hold the phone [when he discovers Rodriguez is alive] is brilliant. Malik is a self-made director and he has this skill of bringing these things out in people. I am a self-taught musician so I can relate to that.”

The film has already triumphed at Sundance, where it collected the People’s Choice award, and several other international film festivals, allaying Bendjelloul’s fears that he might “screw up” the story. He had met Rodriguez’s producers and interviewed them before the man himself and had been apprehensive due to conflicting information. “People talked about him as a seer, you know, that said things in his music. But when you meet him, he is this perfect rock star with a guitar on his back.” ■

Searching For Sugar Man is in cinemas now