

MOJO REPORTS

CULT HEROES HIT THE BOX OFFICE!

How have yesterday's forgotten men become immortalised on the big screen? And after Rodriguez, Jobriath, Lawrence and, er, Anvil, who's next? Mark Paytress finds out...

On August 14, Detroit-based singer Sixto Rodriguez performed *Crucify Your Mind* on David Letterman's *The Late Show*. First released 42 years ago, the song had originally sunk without trace, as did the singer, soon afterwards. Now, thanks to the surprise success of a remarkable film biography, *Searching For Sugar Man*, Rodriguez is hitting four million viewers and being described as a "phenomenon".

"It's transformed my life," says the gentle-voiced septuagenarian singer. "Letterman, my music career, travelling the world speaking at film festivals – it's all come from the film. And I'm only in it for eight minutes!"

Searching For Sugar Man is the latest in a string of documentaries that

set out to rescue reputations from the rock'n'roll dustbin. Others whose flawed reputations have been recently reassessed on screen include ex-Felt anti-hero Lawrence (Lawrence Of Belgravia), superhyped glam flop Jobriath (Jobriath A.D.) and, of course, 'the real Spinal Tap', Anvil. A huge hit at Sundance last year, *Searching For Sugar Man* is now wowing the world.

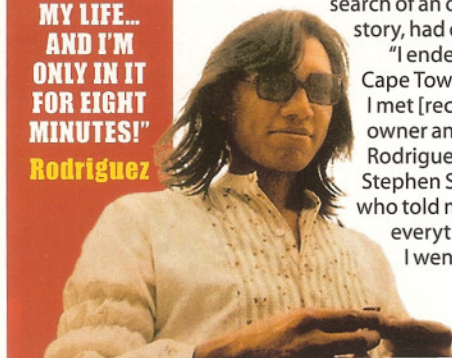
"Had it simply been a music documentary, I wouldn't have been interested," says producer Simon Chinn. But director Malik Bendjelloul, who quit his job in Swedish television in 2006 and took off with his camera in search of an original story, had other ideas.

"I ended up in Cape Town where I met [record shop owner and Rodriguez buff] Stephen Segerman, who told me everything. I went, This is the

best story I've ever heard!" He corrects himself. "Three stories. There was the music documentary, about a man who made one of the great lost albums, whose producers said he was at least as good as Marvin Gaye and who, without his knowledge, had become this superstar in South Africa. There's the detective story – following these people searching for a dead man who discover him alive and well in Detroit where he's a construction worker. Then there's the resurrection, where he performs in South Africa to thousands of screaming fans who know the songs better than he does."

Because that denouement – caught on film – took place in 1998, a large chunk of reconstruction was in order. "But essentially it was true," he says. "This mythology had grown up around him that he was dead, and that's the thing about myths: who cares about the truth?" The key truth of the film is the slow revelation of Rodriguez as a true cult hero with great songs and rare personal integrity.

"THE FILM TRANSFORMED MY LIFE... AND I'M ONLY IN IT FOR EIGHT MINUTES!"
Rodriguez



"It's a film for our times," says Simon Chinn, who came on board in 2009 to help finance a project that had been largely funded from the director's pocket. "It's a film about hope, for anyone who has talent and integrity, anyone who wants an antidote to celebrity culture. It's an epic human narrative. What better example for those going through difficult times than Rodriguez? I mean, most of these stories end on a downbeat note."

That's certainly the case with Kieran Turner's fascinating *Jobriath A.D.* (2011), which ends in 1983 with the Stateside Bowie wannabe dying in obscurity, an early Aids casualty. A shy, classically trained pianist and actor thrust into the role of "the true fairy" by a Svengali-like manager, Jobriath was destined for a hubristic come-down. That it's everything *Searching For Sugar Man* isn't limits its crossover potential. But like recent docs on The Minutemen (death), songwriter Paul Williams (recovery), Nilsson (booze), Daniel Johnston (mental illness) and Wild Man Fischer (*The Ubin Twinz'* Derailroaded from 2005 is the granddaddy of the genre), it serves up a fresh alternative to the well-worn heroics of the rock biopic.

There's probably no better example of the fetishisation of failure than last year's *Lawrence Of Belgravia*, which took director Paul Kelly eight years to make. It's a warm, occasionally worrying glimpse into the fame-obsessed world of the one-time Creation Records nonconformist who at the film's climax deadpans: "There's no one who's gone this far and failed."

But Lawrence may yet be outflanked as king of the failures on the art-house circuit. While big-budget biopics on greats such as Keith Moon and Marc Bolan stall, the rush to immortalise rock's unsung renegades continues. Heavenly Films are currently finishing off their documentary on Croydon proto-punks Johnny Moped. Irish-born director Paul Duane is currently shooting *Very Extremely Dangerous*, chronicling one-time Sun Records artist Jerry McGill, a terrifying rock'n'roll outlaw who makes Jerry Lee Lewis seem saintly. On a more dignified note, Paul Kelly is currently chronicling the life of Bob Andy (of two-hit wonders Bob and Marcia fame).

There will be no follow-up for Malik Bendjelloul, though. "I found the one great artist that no one's heard of," he says. "I don't think I should resurrect any more." But what of the remarkable man whose life he's changed?

"Musicians do it for the music, the girls, the money for the recognition. But we also do it for the pleasure," says Rodriguez. "I'm 70 now. I think I can handle it!"

Searching For Sugar Man soundtrack is out now on Light In The Attic Records; DVD out November 20. For other info, including UK November tour dates, go to sugarman.org