

# searching for Sugar Man

A generation of South Africans grew up to a soundtrack of Rodriguez. We were living in troubled

times, and the anti-establishment poetry of his lyrics drew us in. We never knew that – instantly recognisable as his music was to us – Rodriguez was only famous in South Africa; he was completely unknown in the rest of the world. Even more bizarrely, he had absolutely no idea that he was famous anywhere. About Rodriguez himself, we knew nothing. Was he alive, or – as rumoured – had he killed himself on stage?

South African music journalist Craig Bartholomew Strydom spent years trying to track down Rodriguez. This is his story.

## A PERSONAL QUEST

When Rodriguez – in the title track to his second album – invited listeners to ‘climb up on my music’, little did he know the journey it would entail for me.

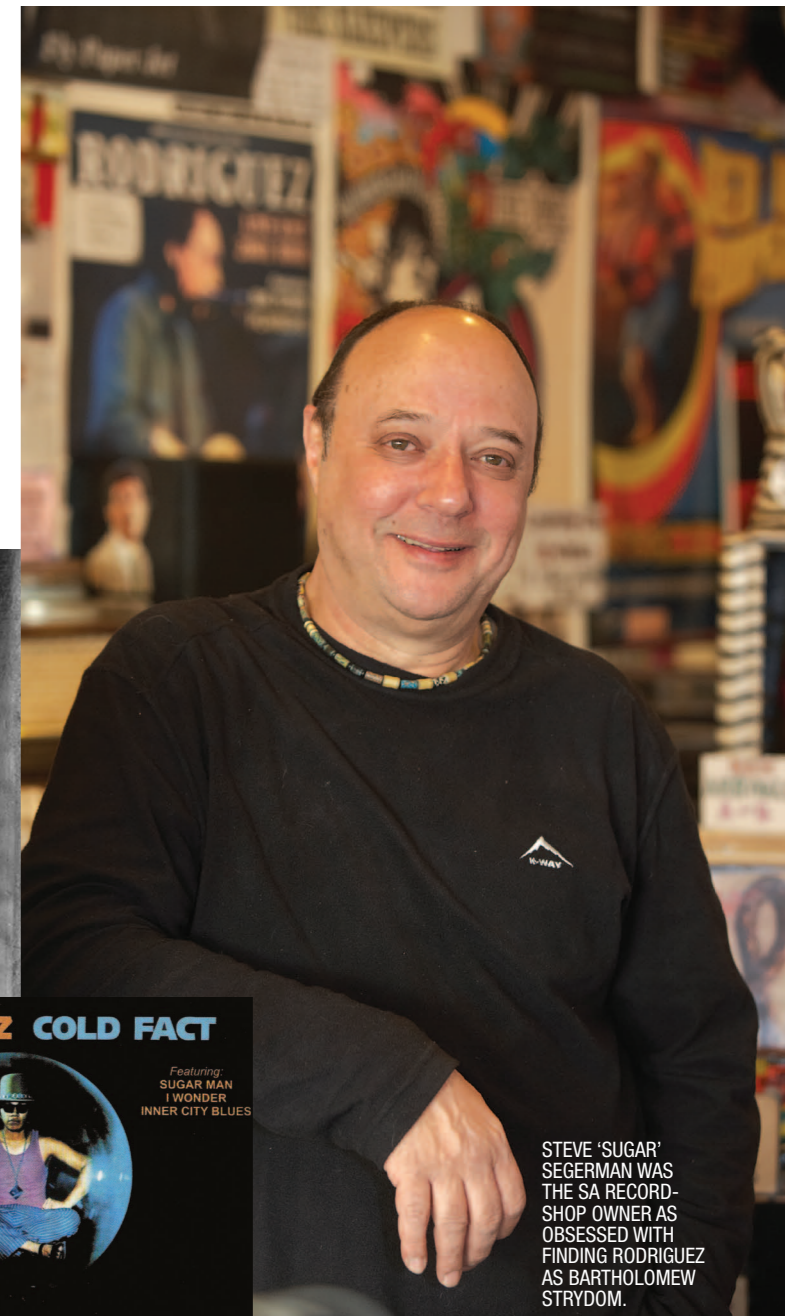
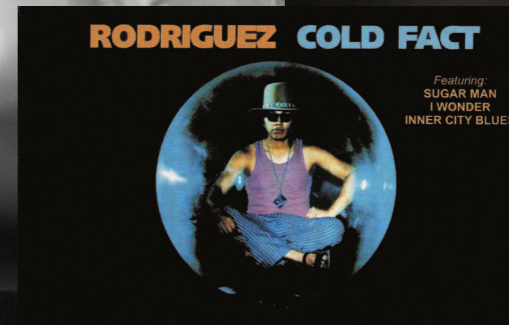
He made that request in the early seventies, when I was still a long way off from climbing anything more than the odd jacaranda tree. In fact, looking back, 1973 was a bad year for me: it was the year I



‘FOR SEGERMAN AND BARTHOLOMEW STRYDOM (PICTURED HERE), IT’S LIKE FINDING ELVIS ALIVE AND WELL AND READY TO PERFORM AGAIN.’  
—VIEWCAMBRIDGE.CO.UK

‘The Moon is Hanging In the Purple Sky’, ‘Woman, Please Be Gone’, ‘I Wonder (How Many Times You’ve Had Sex)’... Like us, you probably know every word to every track on the album *Cold Fact*. But what you may not know is that a documentary telling the amazing story of two South Africans’ epic search to find Rodriguez is winning major documentary awards.

RODRIGUEZ, ALSO CALLED SIXTO (BECAUSE HE WAS THE SIXTH CHILD) WAS BORN TO MIDDLE CLASS MEXICAN PARENTS WHO MOVED TO THE STATES IN THE '20S.



STEVE ‘SUGAR’ SEGERMAN WAS THE SA RECORD-SHOP OWNER AS OBSESSED WITH FINDING RODRIGUEZ AS BARTHOLOMEW STRYDOM.

was sent to Klipdam Holpan Primêr as one of only three English-speaking boys. Built during the diamond rush, the school had shrunk to a mere 26 kids. During break, when other kids spun their tops, I would explore the forgotten corners of the largely shuttered school, nurturing my dream of becoming a detective. They didn’t know that the pen I carried in my top pocket was actually a telescope.

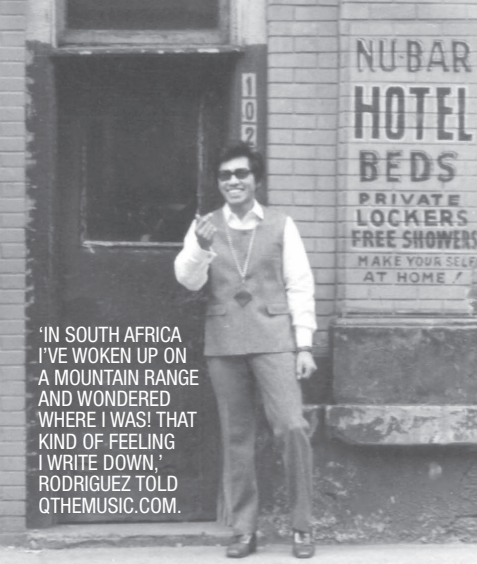
**Fast forward to 1984.** My telescope is long gone; my curiosity is not. It’s



a Sunday, which means we have the day off. My fellow soldiers have carried their mattresses out into the sun to read the latest copy of *Scope* magazine or, in the case of the very nationalistic, a deadly dull SADF magazine called *Paratus* (a common joke at the time was that if the Border didn’t kill you, *Paratus* would).

Others are washing and ironing. My group of friends is philosophizing around snacks of Salticrax and tinned mussels. In the distance, an Afrikaans radio show broadcasts messages of goodwill from girlfriends. In the foreground, an audio cassette blasts out the latest craze, an album called *Cold Fact*. And it is like nothing I have ever heard before. ‘Who is this?’ I ask. ‘Rodriguez.’ ‘What happened to him?’ ‘He blew his head off on stage





'IN SOUTH AFRICA I'VE WOKEN UP ON A MOUNTAIN RANGE AND WONDERED WHERE I WAS! THAT KIND OF FEELING I WRITE DOWN,' RODRIGUEZ TOLD QTHEMUSIC.COM.



missing), I begin to explore the lyrics. Rodriguez's words become a musical scavenger hunt, with few leads and many dead ends. Unlike other pop music, Rodriguez never really sang about love in the 'I love you, you love me' sense. Instead, his lyrics are dense; descriptive and cryptic. It takes Sugar and me many months to finally track down Mike Theodore, the producer of *Cold Fact*, who tells us, in a second, that the artist we have been searching for for so long is not only not dead, but is alive and kicking and living in Detroit. It turns out that 1973 was a bad year for Rodriguez too. It was the year that he sold his guitar and traded in his dreams for the backbreaking reality of

life as a construction worker. His music career had lasted less than three years.

**I start writing the story.** Assuming the man I was looking for is called Jesus Rodriguez, I call my first article, 'Looking for Jesus'. South Africa's most political newspaper, which I thought would buy the story for sure, slams the phone down on me: I have dared to ask for an extra 25c per word. Fortunately for rock and roll history, *Directions* magazine buys the piece and publishes it in 1997 as 'Looking for Rodriguez'. And then, somehow, as things in the internet age are wont to do, the article makes its way across the Atlantic and into the hands of Eva Rodriguez, the daughter of Sixto Rodriguez. Shocked and surprised that her construction worker dad is actually famous in a parallel universe, she in turn begins a reverse search for more information. She finds an item posted online by Sugar and business partner Brian Currin – old school, but it worked: it features the face of Rodriguez and the words, 'Have you seen this man?'

after reciting the lines, "Thanks for your time, and you can thank me for mine, and after that's said, forget it." My curiosity is piqued. I climb up on his music. How can one not?

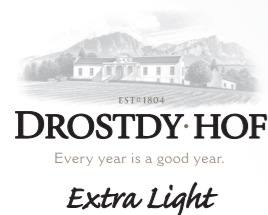
**It's 1987, and I am on a train to Brighton, England.** I have a copy of *Q Magazine*, in which there is a letter from someone called John E Gainney, asking if anyone knows what happened to the musician known as Rodriguez.

It reminds me of that day in the army. And so begins my physical search through record stores, libraries and book stores. Surprisingly, no one has heard of the man.

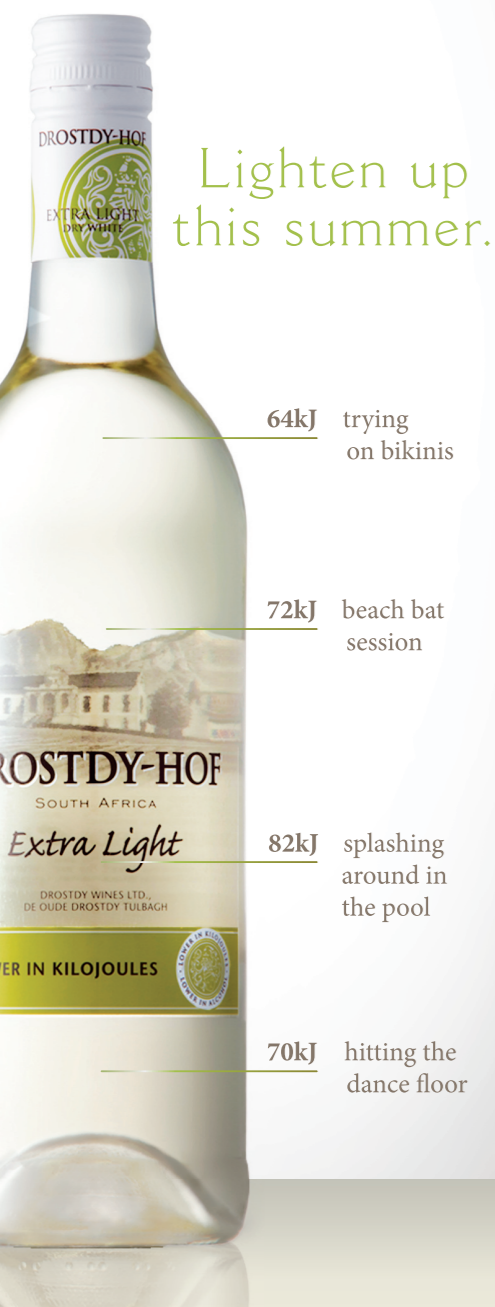
Four years of music school go by. I sell up and move to Amsterdam. There, I continue my search for Rodriguez, but to no avail. How can it be that someone so well known in South Africa can be so unknown everywhere else?

**I move back to South Africa just in time for the country's first general elections.** I take a job at Look & Listen in Hillbrow. It is a dangerous time. A bomb goes off a few blocks from the store. One night, while pricing stock, I come across the newly released Rodriguez CD, *Coming from Reality*. I drop everything to read the liner notes. But there is no new information on the singer – or his rumoured death. The words fill a page, however, which is more information than I have seen up to this point. They have been written by one Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman, a music junkie, it turns out, as obsessed with the Rodriguez puzzle as I am. 'Are there any musicologist detectives out there?' he asks. It's like he is talking to me.

**In 1995, I make a list of articles I would like to write.** It includes, 'Find out what happened to Rodriguez'. The plan to track him down involves following the money trail – and when I discover that there is no money trail (the money is still



Extra Light



Lighten up  
this summer.

64kJ trying  
on bikinis

72kJ beach bat  
session

82kJ splashing  
around in  
the pool

70kJ hitting the  
dance floor

Low in alcohol. Low in kilojoules.  
Only 288kJ per 100ml.

Normally, only die-hard cineastes sit through the credits. But today the entire theatre does. I can hear a pin drop. Then, with a slow groundswell, people get up on their feet and begin to applaud.

With contact made, I think this is the end of the story. But the money-men get involved, and next thing we know it Rodriguez, like Lazarus, has risen from the dead and is touring South Africa, performing to disbelieving and ecstatic audiences. Aside from telling my story at dinner parties, I put it all behind me.

**Maryland, 2008.** It is one of those days when you can cut the humidity with a knife. The phone rings. It's a Swedish filmmaker, Malik Bendjelloul. He has tracked me down to talk about a documentary he is making about Rodriguez. How has he found me? I have no idea. As far as anyone knows, I had simply disappeared into the ether. In fact, for a short while Malik and Sugar had set up a website called 'Searching for Bartholomew'.

In a follow-up piece to 'Searching for Rodriguez', *Directions* magazine referred to me as 'bloodhound Bartholomew'. But if I am the bloodhound, Malik Bendjelloul is the terrier. Malik has fallen in love with the story and nothing will stop him from telling it. He simply will not give up. But I am sceptical: I think the story is old and dog-eared, and I am weary of filmmakers with grandiose plans and no money. But just as deception (when I was trying to follow the money trail) had been the red flag to my inner bull, the lack of funding is the red flag to Malik. He lets nothing stand in his way. No money for animation? No problem. No cash for sound design?

No problem. In fact, with support all but dried up, and no food to speak of, Malik composes, edits and animates from his kitchen table. And finally, with a finished film on his laptop and the echo of slamming doors still reverberating in his head, he manages to get *Man on Wire* producer Simon Chinn on the line. Malik promises to tell him the greatest story he'll ever hear in under a minute. Simon comes on board.

**Park City, Utah, is a sleepy ski village.** But for a couple of weeks each year it is home to the Sundance Film Festival. *Searching for Sugar Man* is opening the festival, and we are on tenterhooks. What if it fails? What if we wake up to discover we were dreaming? I am quite sure that no one in the audience has ever heard of Rodriguez. In fact, a percentage of Americans struggle to point out South Africa on the map. Ten minutes become 20, and then 80, and finally, as the last lonely credit fades to black, I realise that no one has walked out. Normally, only die-hard cineastes sit through the credits. But today the entire theatre does. I can hear a pin drop. Then, with a slow groundswell, people get up on their feet and begin to applaud. The film is a resounding success, winning accolades at Sundance, Moscow and Los Angeles before it is even released. 'Climb up on my music,' wrote Rodriguez, 'and from there jump off with me.' ❖

## Where is he now?

*Rodriguez is starting to perform regularly in the States and at music festivals around the world. He still plays relatively small venues, but – because of the huge success of the film – that's all about to change.*

*In August, CNN aired a feature story on him, and he appeared as a guest on David Letterman's The Late Show. He is planning a tour to Australia next year.*

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANÉL VAN DER MERWE, COURTESY OF RODRIGUEZ, SUPPLIED

**SEARCHING FOR SUGAR MAN** opened at Cinema Nouveau on 31 August. It is absolutely compulsory viewing for all South Africans over 20.