



# SEARCH NO MORE

Long believed dead, the now 70-year-old Rodriguez is alive and kicking and about to play Edinburgh. Allan Brown chats to the documentary maker who found Sugarman

**L**ike Robinson Crusoe in reverse, Sixto Rodriguez spent many decades oblivious to the fact that the world wished urgently to get in touch. In the early 70s, the young Latino songwriter (above) released a brace of albums. They sounded a bit like Bob Dylan, but with soul. His record label requested he change his name, to Rod Riguez. He refused. The albums went nowhere; their creator returned to construction work. And there he stayed – until a barely-credible chain of happenstance and good karma wrought one of the most remarkable resurrections in music history. Today, Rodriguez has been rediscovered and refurbished. Formal introductions have been made between audiences and his small but beautifully formed body of work. His four decades' obscurity have earned him what must feel like a ticker-tape parade, a daydream of rediscovery, captured in this summer's unexpected hit documentary *Searching For Sugarman*; tracing its subjects' ascension from the dive bars of Detroit to stadium shows on several continents, by way of Sundance and Letterman.

Malik Bendjelloul's film is a compelling tale of mystery and amazement, as fans and collaborators ponder why Rodriguez's career dive-bombed, then oversee a triumphant return. Two factors helped: the growth in the early 70s of an urban myth claiming that, tortured by failure, Rodriguez had blown his brains out on stage; and, later, by his randomly bizarre national hero status in South Africa, a country made receptive by apartheid to his thoughtful and politically engaged music. A Rodriguez devotee in the film estimates the albums, *Cold Fact* and *Coming To Reality*, have sold a combined half-million copies there, wholly by word of mouth.

'Even today, I don't think Rodriguez truly appreciates how weird his story has been, he is utterly humble, unaffected,' says Bendjelloul. 'He's

very happy about it but it isn't where his mind lives. He focuses on his music and his family, he's amazingly modest, he has lived in the same house for nearly half a century. The money he's made in recent years he has given away to family and friends. He's delighted to be back but he isn't phased by it.'

If the Rodriguez story wasn't unlikely enough, it's echoed to some extent in that of Bendjelloul. The 35-year-old was a director and producer for Swedish television but tired of knocking out news features. He threw it up and set out on a search for 'one big, amazing story'. He headed, on a whim, for South Africa and encountered the owner of a record store in Johannesburg. A Rodriguez obsessive, he had set up a website begging for information. After years, one of Rodriguez's daughters got to hear of it. Her father wasn't dead, she revealed, but where he'd always been; earning an honest crust in Michigan, having run unsuccessfully for mayor (his name was misspelt on the ballot).

In the documentary, Rodriguez himself, 70 now, does not appear until his acolytes have traced him, opening a window in his home, in a scene that reinforces how hidden he had been, behind blinds of rumour and misapprehension: 'I did not want to make a conventional rock biography, with the subject popping up everywhere, explaining their story,' says Bendjelloul. 'In a way, the film isn't about Rodriguez, it's about the fans who went searching for a dead man, and about South Africa's search for its soul.'

Bendjelloul is searching too, for a follow-up, another story such heart-stirring intensity: 'It'll be tough,' he concedes 'but, then, it's a big world.'

**Searching For Sugarman is out on DVD on Thu 27 Dec.  
Rodriguez plays the Usher Hall, Edinburgh on Sun 25 Nov.**