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RODRIGUEZ
Royal Festival Hall
London

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THE only chance offered to journalists to speak to Rodriguez on his recent trip to the UK was at a round-table discussion before his show at the Royal Festival Hall. No one-to-one interviews allowed (at least that's what we were told), and perhaps that's not surprising. He's not in the greatest shape these days — his eyesight is going and, after decades spent working in construction, he has increasing difficulty walking — but perhaps he's also a little sick of telling the press about his extraordinary return to fame.

In July this year, a super low-budget documentary (apparently a lot was filmed on an iPhone) opened the Sundance Film Festival and subsequently went on to have a cinema release around the world. *Searching For Sugar Man* tells the story of how Sixto Rodriguez — a Detroit-based Latino American singer-songwriter who recorded two albums in the early seventies, both of which flopped in the US — had become a huge star in South Africa, unbeknownst to him. His songs of freedom, especially those on debut album *Cold Fact*, had resonated with white liberals at the height of apartheid, to the extent, the film suggests, that Rodriguez's record sales were comparable to Elvis's.

It gets weirder. In South Africa, people thought Rodriguez was dead, possibly as a result of setting himself on fire while performing, and the only reason they found out that he was still alive was after two fans, Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman and Craig Bartholomew Strydom, decided to ensure royalty cheques were making their way to Rodriguez's family. It was the mid-nineties, and they got the shock of their lives when they found about their hero was still around.

The film ends with ecstatic scenes of Rodriguez playing to 5,000 fans in Cape Town, many of whom refused to believe he would actually appear until the very moment he stepped on stage to perform 'I Wonder' from *Cold Fact*, his most-loved song in South Africa.

Searching For Sugar Man, which is out on DVD this month, is a superb, joyous film, but it leaves some things unclear. A cursory look on the internet reveals that Rodriguez's music was

appreciated in Australia, too, and in fact he had gone there in 1979 to play. In 1981, after touring with Midnight Oil (!), a live album was released in the country. Its title? *Rodriguez Alive*. And, yes, you wonder how South African fans had not known.

The narrative of *Searching For Sugar Man*, it would seem, is simplified. Clearly, Rodriguez has had a habit of popping up at different times over the last 30 years. To music nerds in the UK, he hit radars in 2003 when DJ David Holmes remixed the song 'Sugar Man' for his album *Come Get It Got*, and then in 2008 and 2009, the excellent US-based label Light In The



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Attic reissued Rodriguez's two albums, instantly placing his music within reach of *Pitchfork* readers and the like. He was even interviewed by *The Telegraph* in 2009, under the headline, "Sixto Rodriguez interview: the rock'n'roll Lord Lucan." Three years later, as the film spreads across America in particular, he's still getting the same headlines, like he just crawled out from under a rock last week.

In August 2012, it was announced that Rodriguez would play a one-off show at the Royal Festival Hall in London. Soon after, he was booked in for a staggering extra three nights at the far-bigger Roundhouse in Camden,

as well as a UK tour, and if all the above sounds confusing to you, imagine how Rodriguez — a most gentle soul — is feeling. By our count, this is his fourth Lazarus-like return, but this time round it's really gone into overdrive.

And so we get to the gig at the Festival Hall, which was the first one on sale, but ended up becoming the third of the four London dates, and it's almost impossible to work out whether the people here have been familiar with Rodriguez for years, or saw the film a few months ago and impulse-bought a ticket.

It doesn't matter. Of course you hear South African fans screaming

Rodriguez's name, and he's more than happy to acknowledge their presence. His band for tonight is Bristol's Phantom Limb, and while they have little of the effortless swing of the original players on Rodriguez's albums (Dennis Coffey and other Motown session guys), they nonetheless provide entirely adequate backing.

For a 70-year-old, Rodriguez's voice is still stunning, and perhaps many years of not using it to sing has helped it endure. In the film, though, he says he never stopped playing guitar, and the revelation of this show is just what a subtle and clever player he's become.

"I wonder how many times you had sex," he sings in 'I Wonder', prompting a mass singalong, and at the song's end he says, deadpan: "I wonder, but I don't really want to know."

He proves to be an uncommonly witty and righteous man. During a later break between songs, he takes off his jacket and a woman wolf-whistles at piercing volume. "I know it's all bullshit," Rodriguez responds, "but keep it coming, baby."

