

THE MEN BEHIND THE SEARCH FOR SUGAR MAN

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PHOTOS BY MABU VINYL

ON JANUARY 27TH, 1999 THE FIRST SA ROCK DIGEST NEWSLETTER WAS EMAILED TO A GRAND TOTAL OF 15 PEOPLE, INCLUDING ITS COMPILERS STEPHEN SEGERMAN AND BRIAN CURRIN.

It was back in the day when the internet was still in its infancy – no fancy fonts or graphics, bells or whistles. The project was fuelled by a love of mostly old South African rock music, and the story behind it is inextricably interwoven with the search by these two men for a musician widely believed to be dead. As it turned out, this musician was very much alive and is now the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary.

"It all started with Rodriguez, that's how I met Brian," says Stephen, Sugar to his friends. "If it wasn't for that, neither of us would be where we are today," they agree.

Sixteen years ago Sugar set up a message board called "The Great Rodriguez Hunt", with the intention of finding any information about the mysterious US musician. Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Brian Currin had recently discovered this marvellous new invention we now all take for granted, when it was still called "the information super-highway" – modems were dial-up, downloads took days and social networking was done in chat rooms.

"For my birthday in February 1997 all I wanted was a computer. I knew the internet would be the way I could embrace my love of music and find more information about it," says Brian. "Until then I had relied on magazines – many of which were from overseas and difficult to get – and physically going in to record shops to find out about new releases."

Besides unearthing a treasure trove of information about his favourite bands, Brian was thrilled to discover he wasn't alone in the world. There were likeminded fans out there just as avid as him, and by submitting information to international band sites from a South African perspective he immersed himself in the online music community.

While he found almost everything he was looking for, there was one artist conspicuous in his absence: Rodriguez. "'Cold Fact' is one of my top 10 all time favourite albums, but I couldn't find a thing about him on the internet," recalls Brian. "So I set up my first website – Vagabond Of The Website World, the name is a play on the Thin Lizzy song – which was a music trivia site. There was one page dedicated to Rodriguez."

In August that year, Brian's constant trawling in cyberspace yielded a result when he discovered Sugar's newly launched message board. In September he posted: "I can't believe I actually found a Rodriguez website! I've been looking for months and I almost thought of doing



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
WILLEM MOLLER, RODRIGUEZ, BRIAN CURRIN, STEPHEN 'SUGAR' SEGERMAN

“IT WAS A SURPLUS OF ABOUT 400 OF THESE THAT SPAWNED MABU VINYL.”

one myself (hat!). What a musician and what an album Cold Fact is – absolutely brilliant."

Sugar replied to Brian's message and the seed of a long-standing friendship and working relationship was sown. Brian created a new website called Climb Up On The Music (another song title) and together with The Great Rodriguez Hunt they respectively combined the factual and emotional sides of the story.

Another significant post on the board was that of Eva Alice Rodriguez Koller, who said "Rodriguez is my father! I'm serious. He recently received an article from a journalist there who told him of the following. I went on line to try to find out more info and was shocked to see he has his own site. Truly amazing. Do you really what (sic) to know about my father? Sometimes the fantasy is better left alive. It is as unbelievable to me as it is to you."

A late night call from the elusive singer to Sugar followed, a tour was planned and South Africa opened her arms to the man whose music had been the soundtrack to their darkest and brightest years. All of which is covered in Searching For Sugar Man, the "little" film with a massive heart which was shot in Cape Town and Detroit on a minimal budget and edited, yes, on a laptop.

It premiered at the Sundance Festival a year ago and it hasn't stopped winning awards since. The cherry on the top is its 2013 Oscar nod for best documentary.

But after the dust had settled, Brian and Sugar had fulfilled their quest to find Rodriguez and brought him to

South Africa, they were left with the burning question: now what?

Their friendship was firm and they enjoyed working together through their common passion for music, and South African music in particular. Being at somewhat of a loose end, they decided to set up an online South African rock encyclopaedia (rock.co.za) which covers the history of local rock music from the 1950s until the early 2000s.

As such, and with an internal search feature, it remains a powerful and comprehensive research resource, and is still updated regularly – as in every three or four days – with news and press releases, a wildly diverse range of new MP3s, links to places to buy classic South African music and of course articles about Rodriguez and Searching For Sugar Man. "We've embraced social media with sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Soundcloud," says Brian.

But we're jumping ahead of ourselves here. It was late 1998, Brian and Sugar were still "suits", and they had a new website packed with information about South African music. "Brian's a smart guy," says Sugar. "He suggested we start a newsletter... just something basic with links that would direct traffic back to our site."

And so SA Rock Digest was born. "Welcome..." it said. "This is a discussion forum for anything about South African rock music – past, present and future. Read it, digest it, enjoy it, add your comments and tell your friends..." And that's exactly what people did. From the 15 readers of the first email, by the time SA Rock Digest sang its swan song in 2004 it was reaching close to 6000 subscribers.

"We don't know exactly when it took off. It might have been because of Barney Simon, or Benji Moodie... there was quite a substantial number of influential subscribers in the early days," says Brian. "In the heyday of the



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
BRIAN CURRIN, RODRIGUEZ, REGAN, ALEC MCCRINDLE, EVA RODRIGUEZ, STEPHEN 'SUGAR' SEGERMAN

“SOUTH AFRICA OPENED HER ARMS TO THE MAN WHOSE MUSIC HAD BEEN THE SOUNDTRACK TO THEIR DARKEST AND BRIGHTEST YEARS.”

newsletter it became a mouthpiece for both fans and musicians. It was quite amazing: fans would write in and ask questions, we'd include them in the email, and a week later the musician him or herself would answer. It was a great way for everyone to communicate before we had the platforms we do now."

While SA Rock Digest focused primarily on "old" music, it wasn't long before new bands like Springbok Nude Girls and Just Jinger were knocking on the virtual door offering CDs to give away and requesting reviews. "Sud-

denly we were 'players' in the industry," laughs Brian.

Sugar's fond memory is the weekly sampling of new CDs from the record labels. "During that time I built up a music collection of more than a 1000 albums – all for free!" he says.

It was a surplus of about 400 of these that spawned Mabu Vinyl, the most gorgeous second hand record and CD shop in Cape Town, which began on a trestle table on a pavement in Kloof Street. Since the worldwide release of Searching For Sugar Man, it's become a tourist

attraction and in case you're wondering, Sugar has stock of about 20 000 records in his basement.

It's been an extraordinary journey for these two ordinary music fans, who did what they did as a hobby, for the love of music, and no money. As for the future? There are plans – top secret plans – but they will have something to do with music, is all they'll tell us.

"As long as we love music, and as long as we can help we will continue working together," Brian concludes.

After Rodriguez had been "found", The Great Rodriguez Hunt and Climb Up On The Music became redundant. The content, however, including all the message forum archives, remains intact at sugarman.org

sarockdigest.com has links to rock.co.za as well as archives of every issue of SA Rock Digest from 1999-2004.

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