

Feedback...

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NICK DRAKE VS SUGAR MAN

I was thinking about Nick Drake while recently watching the utterly superb *Searching For Sugar Man* documentary. Both Nick and Rodriguez were making music at exactly the same time – right around 1969-71. Both created superb music (Nick three albums, Rodriguez only two). Both were critically acclaimed (Nick Drake by fellow musicians, producers and intelligent critics; Rodriguez by much of white South Africa). Yet both sold poorly, made little money, ran out of creative steam, lost enthusiasm, lapsed into obscurity. But here the similarities end. Nick was thin-skinned, a well-loved but pampered English schoolboy, quite upper-class, the product of Empire (he was born in Burma to colonial parents). Rodriguez was on the social scrapheap from the beginning. Half-Mexican, quarter-Anglo and a quarter Native American, blue collar, Detroit born and bred, Detroit being one of the most impoverished and violent cities in the US. It's where Michael Moore started out filming the underbelly of American capitalism and all the misery this entails and creates.

Nick didn't handle so-called failure well. He retreated into himself, became reclusive, anti-social, isolated, depressed, perhaps even suicidal. His death was probably an accident, but it was caused by a mental state that needed the anti-depressants that killed him. Guitar purists still hail him as a genius. Famously, no-one can play his songs as he did with their bizarre and intricate guitar tunings. Nick was crushed by the lack of recognition. Rodriguez, on the other hand, had had a lifetime to get used to it. He was tough, resigned, resilient, and didn't even mind doing manual labour, knowing he was greater than it and thus never lost his artistic self-esteem and authenticity because of it. I love the pride he gave his daughters while raising them (apparently without a mother), introducing them to art, music, books, ideas, instilling a sense of culture and confidence in them, and refusing himself to be bitter, being almost Zen-like in his



Rodriguez: survived with dignity intact

acceptance of life and fate. Over the long term this attitude became his ally; when success finally arrived he was already humble in the face of it, taking it in the same stride he had taken failure. He is not just a survivor. He has survived with dignity, which is what his listeners in South Africa had heard in him all along. Amid all the lies, repression and corruption of apartheid, Rodriguez was the sound of truth to them, an article of faith.

In this sense the film is deeply emotional, almost religious. Rodriguez as holy pilgrim, Christ-like. Banished and forsaken, lost in the wilderness for years, then resurrected and triumphant in return. Christ riding the donkey into Jerusalem, Rodriguez riding the jet plane into Cape Town. Palm leaves, concert halls, the crying multitudes, the saviour come home. There onstage the humble pilgrim as Messiah. Yes, miracles always happen in South Africa, the land of Mandela, World Cup rugby triumph and Rodriguez. Someday they will even put Rodriguez on a South African banknote.

Poor Nick. I wish he had had even half the strength and character of Rodriguez. All that precious future music lost!

Jeff Sievert, Nara, Japan

NOT SO SWEET

Thanks for the Rodriguez article in your July issue. Having seen *Searching For Sugar Man*, I was delighted to see him on the Coachella bill and couldn't think of a better setting to witness the undead anti-hero perform live. Wymond Miles' comments about his lack of interest in rehearsals unfortunately explain a lot, however. His set was a disorganised shambles. Songs started and stopped. He instructed the band to cease playing, leaving them redundant onstage. Vocals were mumbled. Such a disappointment. What's next for Sugar Man? I hope he's got it together for the UK gigs. Dede' Arneaux, Ayrshire

BANG ON, BUCKLEY

So I come into work at Bang On!, the little club that Terry Dunne opened next to Tramps when he expanded the latter back in 1992 and Jeff Buckley is just finishing his soundcheck. Since doors don't open for an hour, we shoot a couple of games of pool on the table that Terry had moved over from Tramps. Minor chit-chat, nothing major. I think he beat me two out of three, much to my chagrin as at the time I fancied myself quite the pool player. He hands me a list with a

few names printed on the back of one of the Bang On! promotional cards. His guestlist.

When Jeff comes on, there are about 10 people in the club, including Baker the soundman, Paul Kiernan, the little prick of a bartender, house manager Terry O'Neill, me and a few punters.

He sings a few songs in that achingly beautiful voice, accompanied only by his own electric guitar, and then comes the extra special payoff: "Hallelujah". I had never heard the song before, but will never forget it. Just magnificent, one of the most dazzling performances I have ever witnessed. Terry O and I just looked at each other in total amazement. Never seen anything like it before or since.

A couple of years after Jeff died tragically, I was cleaning out my drawers and came across Jeff's handwritten guestlist. Apparently, after getting home that night I tossed it in a drawer and never thought about it again. It's one of my prized possessions, and a reminder that I was actually there, that it wasn't a dream, and that on that October night, I witnessed true greatness!!

Dan Rohan, The Bronx, New York