

The Resurrection of Sixto Rodriguez

Richard Pithouse

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Searching for Sugarman, Malik Bendjelloul's film about the reception of Sixto Rodriguez in South Africa, continues to accumulate awards, critical acclaim and commercial success as its momentum gathers in the lead up to the Academy Awards at the end of next month. It is carrying Rodriguez, seventy years old and partially blind, onto the stages of the Royal Albert Hall and Carnegie Hall, festivals like Glastonbury, Coachella and Primavera and into the pages of the world's great newspapers. Next month he'll be playing Cape Town and Johannesburg again.

The film is exquisite and the story that it weaves between Cape Town and Detroit is remarkable and moving. There's always something slightly magical about how an intense engagement with a particular situation can find an entirely unexpected resonance across space and time. And the enthusiasm of the South African fans who, to their astonishment, found Rodriguez alive and living the life of a poor man in the ruins of downtown Detroit and were then able to bring him to a rapturous welcome in Cape Town is infectious.

The story at the heart of the film, the redemptive return of a hero, is an ancient one. But this particular telling of that story draws its power from the kind of man that the hero proves to be. In his first single, *I'll Slip Away*, released in 1967 under a version of his name mangled by a record company that thought it commercially expedient to disguise his Mexican origins, he declared that "You can keep your symbols of success" and "I'm not choosing to be like them." And from the beginning Rodriguez tried to make his way and to define success on his own terms. At an event to market himself to the record industry suits in Los Angeles in 1970 he gave the stage to the Brown Berets, militant Chicano activists. These kinds of choices may keep one's soul intact but they don't do much for one's career.

The man that we see in the film has carried his burdens with dignity and remained true to himself. After he was dropped by his record company following the commercial failure of his first two albums he worked as a labourer, studied philosophy, ran for mayor in a campaign centred on opposition to police brutality and raised three daughters. When he was first brought to Cape Town he made a quiet personal choice not to sleep in a hotel bed because someone else would have to make it for him.

His daughters' eyes glisten with love as they explain how their father, described as 'not much more than a homeless person', and 'doing the work that no one else would do', offered them all the meaning and beauty that he had found in the world – art, music, literature and politics.

One of the great pieces of art that he introduced to his daughters, affirming that they had the same right as all others to stand before it, was Diego Rivera's series of murals painted in the court at the entrance to the Detroit Institute of Arts in the early 1930s. The murals, marking one of the points where the visions of Marxism and capitalism have intersected, present a heroic image of workers at the Ford Motor Company in Detroit in a celebration of the discipline and productive power of industrialisation. The paintings show a world that is strong and enduring - the workers' bodies are almost machine like - but industrialisation, and the working class culture that it enabled in Detroit, including, thirty years later, all the glories of Motown, proved to be an ephemeral moment rather than the beginning of a brave new world.

Today much of Detroit is in ruins. It only feels like a city of the future in so far as it evokes a post-apocalyptic science fiction film. Hundred of thousands of people have fled the city, many homes are abandoned and some of the people that have stayed are digging through the asphalt to grow food. When Rodriguez finally appears in the film he, like many others in the city, is burning wood for heat. Capitalism threw up a great city and then abandoned it when more money could be made elsewhere. Attempts to revitalise the city with casinos and a stadium have, as in our own cities, only functioned to make some people very rich on the back of public subsidies offered in the name of the general interest.

But Detroit was already in crisis when Rodriguez first began to make a name singing in its brothels, biker bars and other dives. In 1967 the city burnt for five days amidst a riot that left 43 people dead and 2 000 buildings destroyed before it was put down by the army. In May the following year an uprising by students and workers in Paris ignited a global youth rebellion that had begun with writers in Prague and then, after it came to a head in Paris, exploded into Chicago, Mexico City and Kingston. The raging anger and uncompromising defiance of the moment can still be heard in *Kick Out the Jams* recorded by MC5, a forerunner of the punk movement, in Detroit later that year. Rodriguez's *Cold Fact*, recorded the following year, was more of a warm and psychedelic take on folk driven by seductive melody and hypnotic rhythm. The album's political position was staked out in its lyrics rather than its sound. It's confident assertion that "This system's gonna fall soon, to an angry young tune" proved not to be "a concrete cold fact" but it certainly captured the spirit of a moment. And unlike Rivera's image of the worker as the essential subject of capitalism *Cold Fact* carried a much wider range of concerns ranging from the boredom of housewives, to conscription, the pope's view on contraception and the desire for a life of meaning and sensual pleasure.

As Bendjelloul's film shows many of the people that were drawn to Rodriguez's music in South Africa were, amidst the austere Calvinism of apartheid, primarily attracted to its sense of a life lived more freely and with less regard for the stifling constraints of convention. But, as Darryl Accone observed in the best article written in 1998, the year that Rodriguez first came to South Africa, others were radicalised by his music. And while the world has moved on since Rodriguez first offered his music from within the ferment of late 60s and early 70s some of his lyrics - like "Politicians using, people they're abusing" - don't sound very different to some of what is said on the increasingly riotous streets of South Africa today.

Searching for Sugarman does have its flaws. Black Rodriguez fans, and there were and are many, are left out of the story and the film, and some of its reception, exaggerates the extent to which the half a million people that bought Cold Fact during apartheid were moved to critical consciousness and action. People who were opposed to apartheid did listen to Rodriguez, and people were brought to a broader social consciousness through his music, but, as with other political musicians, like Bob Marley, plenty of people also just hummed along to the songs without taking their meaning seriously. And Australia, where Rodriguez developed a small but committed working class following and toured in 1979 and again in 1981, when he shared the stage with Midnight Oil, now often seen as the best rock band to have come out of Australia but then still a largely underground phenomenon, has been written out of the story.

It's been said that the film presents Rodriguez as an almost spectral figure. Some of its shots do take on a ghostly air at the point where myth materialises into a man seen in full colour and sharp focus. Here in South Africa, where, as the film shows, it was widely believed that Rodriguez had shot himself on stage - and perhaps tellingly some versions of that rumour placed the stage in Moscow - the idea of Rodriguez as a ghost made flesh has an obvious resonance. From the '70s until his first arrival in Cape Town in the salad days of our democracy he had been the mysterious and other worldly soundtrack to hundreds of thousands of people's lives as they came of age, went to war, negotiated their relationship to society, fell in love and made their own way in the world. His arrival on our shores was a return from an imagined death.

But his arrival on the world stage - from the ruins of the city that was once the bold industrial heart of American capitalism, and as an American of Mexican and indigenous dissent, late in his life with his vision dimming and a body sculpted by years of work as the sort of labourer that would never have made it into the grand vision of Rivera's mural - is also a sort of resurrection. A resurrection of vital life, of a poet, from amidst the detritus of a world in which capital devastates some places and some people as it throws up the next brave new world, and its new buildings, on the next frontier.

Last year Rodriguez told a journalist in London that when his two albums seemed to have sunk without a ripple "I was ready for the world, but I don't think the world was ready for me." One is led to wonder, along with the other questions that Rodriguez posed back in 1969, how we can take full measure of the weight of a society and a world that remains unwilling to offer the same welcome to all.

Pithouse teaches politics at Rhodes University.