

Discovering hippies and teen rebellion when 'Searching for Sugar Man'

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'You know then,' said Stephen Segerman.

It was last Sunday morning and I'd spent the weekend googling recent developments in the story of Rodriguez, the construction worker who woke up one morning to discover he was actually a pop star in a parallel universe called Mzansi. I checked his appearances on big-time American TV talk shows, scanned emotional fan mail on his website and watched several clips of foreign audiences erupting in standing ovations after screenings of Searching for Sugar Man, Malik Bendjelloul's magical documentary about Rodriguez's life, death and miraculous resurrection.

Somewhere along the line, it struck me that Rodriguez's global triumph is actually a huge compliment to people like me — white South Africans born in the baby boom, raised on the apartheid moonbase and converted in the Sixties to the cause of long hair and teen rebellion. The rest of you would not get it, so I ran my idea past Segerman, who laughed and said: "You know then," thereby identifying himself as an ex-hippie of exactly my own persuasion.

As the whole world is now aware, Segerman is the psychedelic music enthusiast who set out in the 1990s to unravel the mystery of the missing Sugar Man. Rodriguez was supposed to be dead, but Segerman and Craig Bartholomew found him living in poverty in Detroit's ruined downtown and brought him back to South Africa, where he stood dazed and dumbfounded in an outpouring of love from thousands of fans who had waited decades to see his face.

This scene (shot at the Bellville Velodrome in 1998) is the high point of Bendjelloul's documentary. It is the scene that keeps punters going back to see the movie again and again, the scene that makes everyone cry. And therefore, by extension, the scene that has transformed Rodriguez's life out of all recognition and turned Segerman into a local hero.

Strangers accost him on Cape Town streets; his record shop has become a minor tourist attraction.

"I only go in for two hours a day because it's just too crazy," he said. "Tourists flocking in from everywhere, wanting to buy the DVD and have it signed. This morning, we also had e.tv and a journalist from South Korea who was very excited because he was the first Korean to get here and scoop the story."

And what a story it has become. Last January, Searching for Sugar Man was accepted for screening at the Sundance Film Festival. Segerman was there and, as he tells it, Sony Pictures Classics put in an offer before the festival even opened, based on positive word of mouth from festival insiders. The producers decided to hold out for something better.

Creating a buzz

At the first official screening, Segerman and the Searching team sat in the front row, chewing their fingernails. The audience laughed in the right places and fell silent in others, but nothing prepared them for what happened when the movie ended: the entire auditorium came to its feet, crying and shouting and so on.

"I was looking back over my shoulder, trying to figure what on earth this meant for us," says Segerman. "It scared the crap out of me."

On the strength of that first reaction, Sony doubled its offer and Searching started to roll. In the next several months, it won awards at almost every festival in which it was entered, thereby earning a run at art-house cinemas in big American cities. Those art-house screenings created a media buzz that led to appearances on 60 Minutes and The Letterman Show, which in turn caused reissues of Rodriguez's forgotten recordings to rise into the top 10 on amazon.com's list of most-ordered CDs.

New musical interest fed back into the movie and by the end of 2012, Searching was showing to enthusiastic crowds in 10 countries (including South Africa, where it is reportedly the highest-grossing documentary in history). Then it was nominated for an Oscar and the circus escalated to an entirely new level. "It's amazing," said Segerman, who is also co-webmaster of sugarman.org, the official Rodriguez website. "It just keeps gaining momentum."

Segerman mentions that he grew up in the Jo'burg suburb of Emmarentia. Myself, I hail from Linden, which is right next door. Turns out, he also misspent his youth at the so-called Lemon Squeezer, where an avant-garde Catholic priest staged Friday night rock 'n roll sessions. Back then, Segerman and I were teenage rebels who thought that smoking dope and defying high-school haircut regulations made us allies of the oppressed black masses. These days, as noted, we share the equally curious view that Searching's triumph is also our own. After all, we were there at the very beginning, back in 1971, when a local record label issued Cold Fact, Rodriguez's debut album. We got it; Americans did not. Among us, Cold Fact became an instant cult hit. In the United States, it sank like a stone.

Fashionably leftish politics

Why? Segerman schemes we just had better taste, but I suspect it was a bit more complicated than that. Rodriguez was writing literate protest songs for college-educated white Americans whose fashionably leftish politics disguised a subtle and possibly unconscious form of racism. They expected Mexicans to be gardeners, maids or mariachi players. Poets were required to be tormented and pale, in the manner of Byron. They just did not know what to make of a Mexican Bob Dylan.

We, on the other hand, were too ignorant to be prejudiced, so we opened our hearts to Rodriguez and our judgement has at last been vindicated. "It's taken decades," said Segerman, "but now that Americans are finally listening to the music, they're totally ashamed of themselves". Whereas we — and here I use the royal "we", as in we old white hippies — at last have a movie we can be proud of. More or less.

As far as I am concerned, Searching is a bit too eager to impute that Rodriguez liberated white youth from Calvinist convention, thereby playing a leading role in the demise of apartheid. American TV talk show host Jeff Probst, for instance, got the impression that Rodriguez was second only to Mandela as a freedom fighter. The results, as displayed on YouTube, are inadvertently funny.

“He was the voice of freedom in a very hard society,” declares Mr Probst, turning to a South African in the audience for confirmation. “Yes,” says the South African, a silver-haired one top of more or less my age. “Basically, he sang freedom, and that is what we wanted.” Jeff turns back to the camera. “It was music that transformed a country,” he says. “Music that changed a society.”

Eish! That is exactly what I thought when I was 17 and constantly goofed on the whacky tobacco. It just is not true. Nor is it true that listening to Rodriguez made you an outlaw in apartheid South Africa. To be sure, my parents did not like Rodriguez, but then they did not like any of the music I listened to. If they had taken an interest, I am sure they would have shared the SABC’s dim view of certain Rodriguez tracks. One of these was Sugar Man, an utterly ravishing song about the dark glamour of drug addiction. Another was I Wonder, in which the singer interrogates a lover about her sexual history — “I wonder how many times you’ve been had”, and so on.

These songs and some others were deemed unsuitable for airplay on state radio, but otherwise apartheid’s repressive machinery did not really care. Rodriguez’s albums were openly displayed in shop windows. Owning them was perfectly legal and in no sense placed you on the same side as Nelson Mandela. On the contrary: the ANC was a puritanical revolutionary movement whose military wing punished dope smokers with whippings. The ANC was also allied to the Soviet Union and Cuba, where bell-bottoms, long hair and antigovernment insolence were crushed on sight.

Enormous distance

I must stress that these quibbles are not necessarily shared by Segerman. (This could be because he lives in Cape Town, where the climate is more conducive to a Zen-like view.) On the other hand, Segerman and I are as one in denouncing cheeky youngsters who question the central premise of Searching for Sugar Man — the idea that Rodriguez could have remained ignorant of the fact that he was a superstar in South Africa, while we remained ignorant of his continued survival. This youth cannot grasp the enormous distance that once separated us from the United States.

Segerman and I could not nip down to the corner shop to buy the New York Times or Rolling Stone. We could not type “Rodriguez” into Google and instantly establish his standing. In 1971, we had to rely on our ears and our ears placed Rodriguez in a pantheon that included Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Leonard Cohen. It did not seem odd that Rodriguez was invisible in the local media, because other gods were invisible too; we thought all good music came from “the underground” and that Rodriguez was just more underground than most.

When he disappeared for good (after the release of his second album in 1973), some said he had joined a leftwing terrorist group and had gone into hiding. He was also said to have died of a drug overdose, gone to prison or blown his head off in a fit of existential despair. In 1973, all these outcomes seemed credible.

Only they were not. As it turns out, Rodriguez was alive, working as a labourer on construction sites to feed his family, living in a house he bought for \$50 when the US government wrote off its housing stock in Detroit’s dying downtown. As one does, he gave up his dream of pop stardom when it began to seem juvenile. In its place came the

more prosaic dream of becoming a municipal politician and using his influence to stem the decline of Henry Ford's once glorious motor city. In time, that dream died too and there was just the slog of brutal manual labour. Rodriguez was well educated and widely read, but otherwise he was a genuine member of the underclass, too poor to afford a car or even a telephone.

And then one day, two South Africans rang his doorbell and Sixto Rodriguez's life turned into a fairy-tale. He was the ugly amphibian, transformed into a prince by the kiss of a princess. He was also Cinderella and even Arthur, the boy who drew the sword from the stone and discovered he was really a king. Do we all harbour a primordial yearning for this sort of salvation? Is that that why Bendjelloul's film has touched so many so deeply?

At Segerman's suggestion, I logged on to Sugarman.org to read messages posted overnight by fans. There were 42 of them, from six countries. Two or three came from Americans irked by the fact that they had only just heard of Rodriguez. The rest were love letters. I mean, listen to this:

"Just seen your movie," said Keith in Colorado. "I had to fight back tears."

"Watching this documentary changed my life," said Clothilde in Paris.

"My boyfriend and I watched the documentary this evening," said Lauren in New Jersey. "I spent half of it crying."

"Such a great and beautiful story," said Rebecca in Los Angeles. "Thank you for making me happy."

And so on. This sort of adulation could easily go to a man's head, but Segerman said Rodriguez was "the same humble guy as ever", interested mostly in securing his three daughters' futures. He cares less about his himself and continues to live in the same blighted inner-city neighbourhood depicted in the movie.

"I live under my means," he told a journalist the other day. "It seems a good discipline because you never can tell."

Ah, yes. There's a man whose poverty consciousness runs deep in the bones. In truth, Rodriguez must be fairly rich by now. His upcoming tour of New Zealand is sold out already. He has been booked to appear at Glastonbury, the giant British summer festival, and Coachella, its American equivalent. Exact figures are unobtainable, but Segerman has heard that Rodriguez's reissued albums (*Cold Fact* and *Coming from Reality*) have sold about 200 000 copies in the past year or so. And the *Searching* documentary has grossed R54-million, a number that might double if the film wins an Oscar on February 24.

The Sugar Man is 70 now and increasingly frail. When he takes the stage this weekend for the first of nine South African shows, someone will escort him into the spotlight and position him in front of the microphone; Rodriguez has glaucoma and his eyesight is failing. But the voice is still there and the songs are still immortal. A year ago, that statement would have been contentious, but now I think we can take it as read. We old whitehippies got it right: Sixto Rodriguez is, at last, an authentic American legend.