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Review: *Searching for Sugar Man*

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on August 17, 2012 - 9:30am in [Reviews](#) | [New Releases](#)



"Sugar man you're the answer/That makes my questions disappear"
--Sixto Rodriguez

For two South Africans, the song lyrics they had heard for years, like the ones above, only prompted more questions. Who was this musician who wrote lyrics about a drug addict's love for his dealer? Were the rumors about his committing suicide onstage true, or was he still alive? Their curiosity led them on a years-long journey across continents, documented in the visually stunning albeit flawed film *Searching for Sugar Man*, which opens in Austin today.

Swedish director [Malick Bendjelloul's](#) Sundance award-winning documentary discusses [Sixto Rodriguez's](#) musical beginnings playing in dive bars in Detroit, where he was discovered (playing guitar and singing with his back turned to the audience) and subsequently signed to a two-album contract with Sussex and A&R Records.

Even though Rodriguez's first album, *Cold Feet*, received a rare four-star review from *Billboard*, sales were low. His second album performed poorly financially as well. Two weeks before Christmas, Rodriguez was dropped from his label. It seemed as though the story of the long-haired, dark sunglasses-wearing folk artist was over. However, unbeknownst to Rodriguez, it was just the beginning.

Several years after Rodriguez was dropped from his label, bootleg copies of his albums landed in Cape Town, South Africa. Album sales soared based on word of mouth and his songs became social and political anthems of the anti-apartheid movement. Interviewees said Rodriguez became the voice of the country's white liberals in the mid-1970s. The song "The Establishment Blues" is said to have brought the term "anti-establishment," and the belief's connected with the term, into the lexicon and hearts of the country's youth.

Sixto Rodriguez was unaware of his monumental success in South Africa. But it's at this point in *Searching for Sugar Man* where what the interviewees say and what actually happened to Rodriguez doesn't align. The documentary has been edited to create mystery where mystery doesn't exist.

What *Searching for Sugar Man* doesn't tell the viewer is that the interviewees already knew what had happened to Rodriguez by the time they were interviewed by Bendjelloul. That fact should have been made apparent from the beginning of the movie. Also, the movie fails to mention (and I understand this could have been due to time constraints) that by the mid-1970s Rodriguez's music was also gaining airplay in New Zealand and Australia.

Musicologists have compared Rodriguez's hauntingly bittersweet guitar chords, rough vocals and blue collar political lyrics to Bob Dylan. However, I believe Rodriguez's lyrics are more honest, and his James Taylor-esque croon is more heartfelt than anything Dylan has done. One thing Dylan does have on Rodriguez is greater commercial and financial success -- that is, he did before the release of *Searching for Sugar Man*.

Despite pulling the historical and factual wool over my eyes, *Searching for Sugar Man* is still an engaging and intimate look at an enigmatic man and the music that keeps him alive.

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I'm so excited about this

Submitted by Rachel on September 1, 2012 - 6:57pm.

I'm so excited about this movie. The trailer is what really got my hooked at first, and now all the great reviews like this one have me more stoked! I feel like I'm going to need to pick up Rodriguez's album too haha it just sounds so great!

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