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The documentary 'Searching for Sugar Man' is about a 1970s musician known as Rodriguez whose career gets lost in a dominant culture.

An Audience at Last

Encouragement for those who feel they are outsiders

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

My favorite documentary of 2012 (which also won the Oscar for Best Documentary) has been justly lauded for its wonderful music and its unique and moving underdog story. I loved all of those things too. But for those who care to notice, the film also contains some important wisdom about outsider voices, and some important encouragement for those who feel themselves to be outsiders.

If you don't know anything about this movie and are willing to trust me on this, my best advice is to watch it first and read my comments later. It's best enjoyed as I enjoyed it the first time--genuinely in suspense as the film unfolds a decades-long inquiry into what happened to a Mexican-American singer who recorded two absolutely excellent albums in 1970 and 1971 and then disap-

peared into obscurity when nobody bought them. Still, even if you read this appreciation or otherwise think you know the story from news accounts, you will nevertheless find surprises in this heartfelt film.

Director Malik Bendjelloul wisely opens the film with the admiring recollections of the men who produced those two albums, all of whom worked with some of the biggest names in Motown history and all of whom rank those albums among the very best ones they ever produced. Their enthusiasm for the artist who made them, the enigmatic Sixto Rodriguez, is palpable, and they narrate with genuine wonder their experiences in watching him perform in smoke-filled clubs with his back to the audience. All are baffled as to why those brilliant albums, marked by Rodriguez's poetic, stirring lyrics, didn't find an audience. One certainly can't fault their

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
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production; the albums (again available) hold up very well 40 years later. These men build up a sense of intrigue about this artist who you've never heard of.

What happened next could only have happened in the world before the Internet. Somehow a bootleg copy of Rodriguez's first album, "Cold Fact," found its way to South Africa, where it became hugely popular before the end of apartheid. In that repressive era, Rodriguez's skillful and soulful lyrics introduced a generation of young Afrikaners to the concepts of being "anti-establishment," of questioning authority and reflect-

ing on the meaning of personal freedom.

"Cold Fact" eventually sold an estimated half-million copies in that small country and was one of three albums one would find in any young Afrikaners' collection (along with the Beatles' "Abbey Road" and Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water").

Strangely, though, no one in South Africa knew anything about Rodriguez himself. Rumors spread that he had killed himself on stage in some dramatic fashion, by shooting himself or setting himself on fire. Eventually,

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