



Searching For Sugarman Discussion Guide

Director: Malik Bendjelloul

Year: 2011

Time: 86 min

You might know this director from:

This is the first feature-length film from Malik Bendjelloul.

FILM SUMMARY

SEARCHING FOR SUGARMAN is the story of a musician named Rodriguez. This mysterious “street poet” of Detroit recorded two albums in 1970 and 1971 and then disappeared. His music remained relatively unheard and unknown, except in South Africa where Rodriguez became a legend. His albums landed in South Africa during the apartheid, giving people the courage and voice they needed to protest against the apartheid. But because South Africa was so isolated, they had no way of knowing anything about Rodriguez, not even his real name. South Africans called him “Sugarman,” and believed he’d died after setting himself aflame on stage.

Swedish filmmaker, Malik Bendjelloul, began to search for the truth about Rodriguez’s death, which eventually lead him to discover that Rodriguez was not even dead. He was living in a dilapidated neighborhood of Detroit, doing hard manual labor, without any clue about his popularity in South Africa. It wasn’t until Sugarman went to South Africa himself and walked out onto the stage of a sold-out auditorium that he began to realize what an impact his music had made. Finally, the strong “voice” of South Africa came face to face with the only country who had ever been willing to hear his music.

FILM THEMES

From construction worker to celebrity – **SEARCHING FOR SUGARMAN** is a modern-day Cinderella story that revives our hope in people, and maybe in our own dreams. But beneath the surface, there are many questions begging to be asked. Use these themes in your discussion.

THE ROLE OF ARTISTS

It takes a lot of courage to create art in a society where everything is judged on its ability to be commercialized. Artists often express ideas or truths that the world isn't ready to accept, but that doesn't mean they're wrong or unimportant. In fact, maybe the opposite is true. Art is a mirror of society, reflecting its concerns, criticizing its motivations, and offering solutions to contemporary issues.

THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

Music, like most of the arts, has become another industry, controlled by corporations who can do anything from change a musician's true message into something that will sell, to pocketing most of the money it generates. Major record companies pay radio stations thousands of dollars to play their records. This is why independent music is rarely heard on commercial radio. Virtually all the pop and rock songs on the radio have been paid for by just a few big record companies. They also control which albums get into retail stores, product placement, advertising, concert schedules, and price points.

SUB-CULTURES AND RACES

Rodriguez recorded his first two albums during the height of white hippie America, which could not appreciate the subversive message of a construction worker born to Mexican parents. Hence the likes of Bob Dylan thrived and became a commercially established icon. This reveals how much society is influenced by the media that shapes peoples' values, beliefs, and decisions, even their music decisions.

THE BENEFITS OF CULTURE

Nowadays we are trained to foster economic prosperity, but rarely are we encouraged to foster a rich cultural consciousness. This is the opposite of Rodriguez, who, despite his class position, took his daughters to museums, concert halls, and up to rooftops where they could get the best views of the city. It is possible that these experiences made them richer than any amount of money or possession could have.

“I was ready for the world but I don't think the world was ready for me.”

Sixto “Sugarman” Rodriguez

“I wonder about the love you can't find. And I wonder about the loneliness that's mine. I wonder how much going have you got. And I wonder about your friends that are not. I wonder I wonder, wonder I do.”

Rodriguez,

FILM FACTS:

- Director Malik Bendjelloul ran out of money and finished shooting the film on his iPhone, using an app that cost USD 1.99.
- Bendjelloul was promised a grant from the Swedish Film Institute, but three years later, when he was 90% done with the film, they withdrew the grant because they didn't think the film was good enough for the cinema screen.
- Australia discovered Rodriguez's music first. He toured there in both 1979 and 1981.
- The first South Africans to fall in love with Rodriguez's music were the army soldiers during the guerilla border wars. Some of the soldiers were musicians too. They were swapping cassettes, and Rodriguez's music spread quickly.
- A TV documentary was made of Rodriguez's 1998 tour through South Africa, called "Dead Men Don't Tour."
- On May 9, 2013, Rodriguez received an honorary doctorate, a Doctor of Humane Letters degree, from his alma mater, Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.
- Rodriguez was born in Detroit, Michigan. He was named Sixto (pronounced "Six-toe") because he was the sixth child in his family.
- Despite his recent successes, Rodriguez still has no car, no computer, and no television. All the money he's making, he gives away to those who supported him before he was famous.
- To make a minimum monthly wage in 2013, a musician had to sell 1,706 track downloads on iTunes, or 232,000 streams on Spotify.
- In February 2013, SEARCHING FOR SUGARMAN won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature at the 85th Academy Awards.
- SEARCHING FOR SUGARMAN is Director Malik Bendjelloul's first feature-length film. In an interview, he said he doesn't know how he can possibly follow it up.
- "Cold Fact" and "Coming From Reality" were re-released by Light In The Attic Records, and they are paying royalties to Clarence Avant, the former Sussex label executive, who still owns the rights to Rodriguez's music. For the first time, Rodriguez is receiving royalties on his music.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film so that others can be inspired and strengthened by Rodriguez's story.
2. Support your local musicians and artists. Give their voices a chance to be heard.
3. Purchase music directly from musicians whenever possible, because they receive a negligible amount from download sources like iTunes, and even less from streaming sources like Spotify. Exercise your power as a conscious consumer:
4. Open your mind to people of different cultures and backgrounds. As Eva Rodriguez says in the film, "Just because people are poor or have little doesn't mean their dreams aren't big, or their souls aren't rich."