



## Searching For Sugarman Discussion Guide

Director: Malik Bendjelloul

Year: 2011

Time: 86 min

**You might know this director from:**

SEARCHING FOR SUGARMAN is Malik Bendjelloul's first feature-length documentary film.

## 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 he 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 political and racial injustices. But because South Africa had become so isolated, the people there had no way of acquiring any information about Rodriguez, not even his real name. South Africans called him “Sugarman” and believed he had 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 a dilapidated neighborhood of Detroit where Rodriguez was doing hard manual labor without any knowledge of his popularity in South Africa. It wasn’t until he went to South Africa himself and walked out onto the stage of a sold-out auditorium that Rodriguez 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 listen to his music.

This Academy Award-winning documentary takes viewers on a surprising journey from one side of the world to another to remind us that, sometimes, the greatest heroes are the unlikely people living right next door.

## FILM THEMES

From construction worker to celebrity, *SEARCHING FOR SUGARMAN* is a modern-day Cinderella story that revives our hope in people and perhaps in our own dreams. A feel good story indeed. But listen to Rodriguez's lyrics and you will know: there's more than meets the eye.

### 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 embrace, but that doesn't mean they are wrong or unimportant. In fact, the opposite is likely more true. Art is a mirror of society. Even if we don't like what we see, it has a way of reflecting our concerns, criticizing our motivations, and presenting new perspectives on the issues and decisions we face.

### THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

Music, like most of the arts, has become an enormous industry largely controlled by corporations who can do anything from change a musician's original message to pocketing most of the money an album generates. Major record companies pay radio stations thousands of dollars to play their records, which 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 a handful of 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 perhaps 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 the degree in which society is influenced by media. Constantly shaping our values, beliefs, and desires, the media can even determine a generation's taste in music. In the early 70s, American society was more biased toward white singer-songwriters than to working class Latinos.

### CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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 cultural experiences made them richer than any amount of money or possessions 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.”**

Sixto “Sugarman” Rodriguez



## FILM FACTS:

- Director Malik Bendjelloul ran out of money and finished shooting the film on his iPhone, using an app that cost US \$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 actually 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." Much of its footage was used by Bendjelloul in SEARCHING FOR SUGARMAN.
- On May 9, 2013, Rodriguez received an honorary doctorate, a Doctor of Humane Letters, 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.
- 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.
- 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.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to 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.
4. Open your mind to people of different cultures and backgrounds. As Rodriguez's daughter, Eva, 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."

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**