

The Artist Formerly, and Again, Known as Rodriguez: A Life Beyond Imagination

By Bryan D. Palmer

Searching for Sugar Man

Director, Malik Bendjelloul, 86 minutes, (2012),
PG-13

A SHY MAN dressed in black, guitar slung over his shoulder, walks the meanest streets of one of the meanest cities in the United States. Imagine this man, making his way to a waterside bar of questionable repute. Let us, for accuracy's sake, call it "The Sewer." He performs for a pittance, his audience a routinized, if motley, crew of down-on-their-luck, up-on-their-illusions, out-with-conventionality types. They sit in crumpled shirts, spinning tall tales, and "drinking the detergents/That cannot remove their hurts."

Hailed by a select few as a poet of the people, a prophet in unpropitious times, this man sings of what he has lived:

*The inner city birthed me
The local pusher nursed me
Cousins make it in the street
They marry every trick they meet.*

His wallet has been picked by his handlers (perhaps unbeknownst to him). He grows troubled as his heart becomes little more than "a crooked hotel full of rumors:"

*A dime, a dollar they're all the same
When a man comes to bust your game
The turn key comes, his face a grin
Locks the cell I'm in again.*

Then imagine a night like any other, as "the local diddy bop pimp comes in." He slides, limp-postured, into the crowd, *Next to a girl that has never been chased
The bartender wipes a smile off his face
The delegates cross the floor,
Curtsy and promenade through the doors.
And slowly the evening begins.*

Yet again, this man puts on a show, his back to barstools and tavern tables slimy with spilled beer, littered with soggy coast-



Sixto Diaz Rodriguez in the 1960s.

ers and ashtrays piled high with the discards of the day. Amidst the dull din of countless unrelated and often incoherent conversations, his eyes shielded by trademark ebony sun glasses, his soft voice slices seamlessly through the smoke and mirrors and haze of just another 11 PM gig:

*Yeah, every night it's the same old thing
Getting high, getting drunk, getting horny
At the Inn-Between, again.*

Having completed what he regarded as his final soliloquy, this man then supposedly raises a gun to his head, pulls the lethal trigger, and ends it all. Or, arguably even more grotesquely, calmly drenches himself with gasoline, lights a match to his shirt cuff, and burns to death on what has passed for his stage. "But thanks for your time,/Then you can thank me for mine,/And after that, forget it."

As memory has faded in his homeland and even his neighborhood ("So I set sail in a teardrop and escaped beneath the door-sill"), the bar where he died long torn down, he becomes, astonishingly, a figure of legend halfway around the world.

In a place where he had never walked, myths of his dramatic demise circulate freely, wildly innocent of any connection to his truths. His bootlegged music echoes in the ears of youthful rebels, his haunting lyrics seared into the consciousness of a generation. "We made love to your music," says an apostle in awe, "we made war to your music."

Imagine this man being able to converse with this kind of reverence, to look back on such an unbelievable turn of events, asking himself, "how many times can you wake up in this comic book and plant flowers?"

An Imagining?

This man actually lived, born in 1942, ostensibly on Michigan Avenue, a few blocks from the center of downtown Detroit, and what was then the city's most impressive skyscraper, the 430-foot tall One Woodward Avenue:

*Born in the troubled city
In Rock and Roll, USA
In the shadow of the tallest building
I vowed I would break away.*

Sixto Diaz Rodriguez, sometimes called Jesús Rodriguez or confused with him (apparently a brother), aka Rod Riguez, was the sixth son of a hard-luck first-generation Mexican American family. Rodriguez never managed to succeed in his bid to get free of Detroit.

He is now destined, in part because of an unusually evocative documentary, "Searching for Sugar Man," directed by Swedish filmmaker Malik Bendjelloul, to be forever known simply as Rodriguez. He is bigger than the imaginings.

History's Hand

If you are heading to downtown Detroit via Windsor and the Ambassador Bridge, and you are prone to make a wrong turn, as I am, you could easily find yourself lost in the Motor City's southwest (the designation is both geographically and symbolically apt).

This happened to me a few years ago, Pulling off the Fisher Freeway, I was astounded to find myself in a small world I had no idea existed. Signs proclaiming "Mercado" and "Taverno" abounded; there were taco trailers dispensing dinners; colorful murals splashed across brick walls, some of them with a decidedly class-struggle content; and old factory buildings announced their product to be tortillas not tires.

Mexican migrants made their way north to the vegetable fields that traverse southwestern Ontario and southern Michigan, as early as the 1910s. Soon they were working in the sprawling auto plants of the Ford Motor Company which, by the end of the 1920s, had become the largest employer of Mexican labor in the U.S. midwest.

Establishing residences in Detroit, these migrants settled in Corktown, an old Irish Catholic and working-class enclave dating to the 1850s. Gradually, they spread throughout

Bryan D. Palmer, editor of *Labour/Le Travail*, is a Canada Research Chair at Trent University. He is the author of *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928 (2007)* and of the forthcoming *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934*.

the city's southwestern district, concentrated along a corridor that came to be known as *La Bagley*.

Before the onslaught of the Great Depression, when racist attacks on Mexican workers intensified, 15,000 of these people considered Detroit home. By the mid-1930s, however, the enforcement of an exodus engineered under the designation "repatriation" wrote *finis* to a good deal of the robust inner-city Latino life that had been developing throughout sections of southwestern Detroit. The number of Mexicans living in Detroit dropped to a mere 1,200. [Elena Herrada's account of "Los Repatriados" appeared in *ATC 100* and appears at <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/1061> — ed.]

The defense industry "boom" of the early 1940s and a post-World War II revival of Michigan's sugar beet industry combined to reboot the migration of Mexicans to Detroit. As of 1943, 4,000-6,000 Mexicans crowded into an increasingly concentrated area, many living amidst the kinship networks long established in the Bagley-Vernor Street boundaries of southwest Detroit.

As wartime labor needs relaxed, however, the possibility of unionized jobs in the high-paying Fordist assembly-line sector was constricting. Government-orchestrated *bracero* programs were required to keep Mexican migrant streams flowing. There was little inducement for a Mexican American population to set down roots when available wages came largely from seasonal field work sustained by state programs that defined harvesting labor as "temporary."

La Bagley was a locale of resettlement and revival that struggled against the odds. Given a boost by a 1960s jump in migration, and sliced in half by freeway expansion, Detroit's Mexican residential neighborhoods concentrated in what a 1980s promotional designation would dub "Mexicantown." Previous immigrant institutions, such as the Lithuanian Hall, were appropriated and became Unidos Hall.

Mexicantown began to flourish in the 1990s, with the generalized revival of Latino migration. Detroit was something of an anomaly in what Mike Davis has called "magical urbanism," the modern Latino reinvention of America. By 2000, Detroit exhibited "the most threadbare private-sector economy of any major central city" in the United States, and it bucked a national trend that saw Spanish-surnamed people achieve unprecedented influence in most of the country's metropolitan centers.

That said, even the deindustrializing Motor City was not immune from the phenomenal impact of migrations from Mexico in particular and Central-South America in general: as the overall population of the city plummeted, thousands of Latinos came to

Detroit, revitalizing a longstanding Mexican American community. Over the course of the 1990s Mexicantown's Spanish-speaking population grew by 70%, to just under 50,000.

Rodriguez's parents were part of the initial 1920s wave of migration to Michigan, one that would establish the first vigorous, visibly Mexican American neighborhoods along and adjacent to Bagley Street. They adapted to American society in ways slightly different than would be the norm in California, Texas, and other conduits of the demographic drift from south to north.

Racism against Mexican Americans was undeniable, of course, but it was, especially for early newcomers, less bellicose in places like Detroit and Chicago than in San Diego, San Antonio or Phoenix. Lighter-skinned Latinos might appear as but another segment of the already highly diverse immigrant, Catholic working class. Even today, the situation is somewhat different than in the Southwest. In 2005 the Michigan Border Patrol arrested 1800 people without documents; the comparable figure in San Diego was supposedly an astounding 120,000.

"Good Only for Pick and Shovel"

A Spanish jazz age pop tune, "*El Enganchado*" or "The Hooked One," bemoaned the extent to which Mexican workers at Chicago's Inland Steel were moulded into proletarians in the 1920s:

*I came under contract from Morelia.
To earn dollars was my dream, ...
But here they say I'm a camel
And good only for pick and shovel.*

This lament of degradation was deepened by a sense that, for the second generation of Mexican Americans, the mills of the assimilation gods were grinding slowly but surely:

*Many Mexicans don't care to speak
The language their mothers taught them
And go about saying they are Spanish
And denying their country's flag ...
My kids speak perfect English
And have no use for Spanish,
They call me "fadder" ...
And are crazy about the Charleston.*

"I am tired of all this nonsense," sang the Inland Steel Mexican worker, "I'm going back to Michoacan."

Rodriguez grew up in this wolverine state snarl of coerced proletarianization and generational acculturation. It was anything but easy. His mother died when Rodriguez was only three. Unable on his own to properly care for a large family, his father placed young Sixto in an orphanage.

By this time the number of Mexican Americans in Detroit was shrinking. Immigration restrictions were tightening and access to auto industry jobs, more open two decades earlier, was largely blocked.

Latinos carried the all-too-visible marks of a resulting stranglehold of class degradation on their bodies. They did the roughest and least-well remunerated labor, a good deal of it without the protections and securities of the newly-established mass-production trade unions.

Assimilation came with a price tag marked super-exploitation. It is astounding, in the mainstream journalistic comment on Rodriguez generated by "Searching for Sugar Man," to see repeated references to his Mexican American background as "middle class" or "lower middle class." It is as though laboring life has been excised from a sanitized, ethnically cleansed "American Dream."

The Charleston was no longer in fashion by the time Rodriguez was ready to do his particular dance, but he garnered a sense of Mexican melodies and rhythms from his father. He was also drawn, in the 1950s, to the fast pace of Canadian American country singer, Hank Snow. A decade later he had come to regard Mick Jagger as "king."

Taking up the guitar at age 16 (he claims it changed his life), Rodriguez's music evolved over the course of the 1960s. It was a blend of Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Donovan, with a whiff of the protest folk of Dave Von Ronk and a touch of psychedelic San Francisco thrown into the mix, at times anticipating Tom Waits.

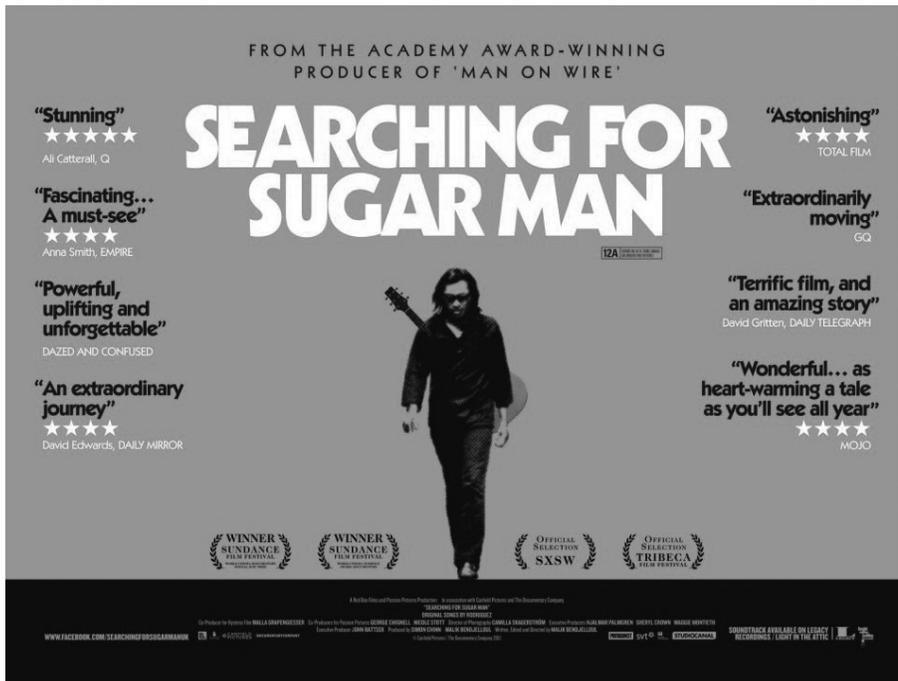
But the sound, as well as the substance, was uniquely Rodriguez. He produced a single on an obscure label in 1967, followed by two albums with the shortlived Sussex Records, owned by future Motown mogul Clarence Avant: "Cold Fact" (1970) and "Coming from Reality" (1971).

Rodriguez's Radicalism

The 1960s clearly formed Rodriguez, not only musically but politically. "When I was writing those songs," he told one journalist when referring to his albums of the early 1970s, "it seemed like a revolution was coming in America. Young men were burning their draft cards, the cities were ablaze with anger." This was the moment of 1967-1969.

In Detroit this 1960s conjures up images of rebellion in the streets (1967: 43 dead; 7200 arrested, 80% Black; 2500 stores looted and burned out; and upwards of \$80 million in property damage), wildcat strikes (1968: Dodge Main), and the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (1969).

Across America protest was endemic, with mobilizations against the Vietnam War resulting in hundreds of thousands marching in the streets, chanting slogans of searing repudiation. Demands for change were loud and long. Many of them came from Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). To the extent that SDS can be regarded as a surrogate for the student revolt of these



years, it was born and died a stone's throw away from Detroit. Launched from the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan in 1960, SDS penned its manifesto, "The Port Huron Statement" (1962), in Detroit's upstate backyard. When SDS imploded in 1968-1969, its death notice was delivered at the Weatherman faction's Flint War Council, a mere 60 miles of freeway from the Motor City.

This was the 1968 meal of militancy on which Rodriguez clearly dined. He also had aesthetic predecessors. The early Dylan of "Masters of War" (1963) and Barry Maguire's apocalyptic "Eve of Destruction" (1965) are self-acknowledged influences on Rodriguez:

*I wonder about the tears in children's eyes
And I wonder about the soldier that dies
I wonder will this hatred ever end
I wonder and worry my friend
I wonder I wonder wonder don't you?*

But the unmistakable condemnation of the entire edifice of capitalist political economy is the razor's edge of Rodriguez, most evident in "This Is Not a Song, It's An Outburst: Or, The Establishment Blues:"

*The mayor hides the crime rate
Council woman hesitates
Public gets irate but forget the vote date ...
Garbage ain't collected, women ain't protected
Politicians using people, they've been abusing
The mafia's getting bigger, like pollution in the river
And you tell me that this is where it's at.
Woke up this morning with an ache in my head
Splashed on my clothes as I spilled out of bed
Opened the window to listen to the news*

But all I heard was the Establishment's blues.

Rodriguez is never far from the fundamental dispossession that marks him, not just as Mexican American, but as a worker. In "Cause," for instance, he opens with class resentment: "Cause I lost my job two weeks before Christmas/And I talked to Jésus at 'The Sewer.'" Rodriguez then closes with acknowledgement of the psychic costs of racialized oppression, but this is in fact a rare reference in his overall oeuvre: "Cause I see my people trying to drown the sun/In weekends of whiskey sour."

Rodriguez fused this anti-capitalist sensibility, in which class place was preeminent, with recognition of the youthful rebelliousness of the 1960s. He assailed patriarchal authority and the sterile promise of the suburbs, revelling in the countercultural possibilities of the moment. "Inner City Blues" admonishes parents to loosen their restrictive grip on the young:

*Met a girl from Dearborn, early six o'clock
this morn
A cold fact
Asked about her bag, suburbia's such a drag
Won't go back
'Cos Papa don't allow no new ideas here
And now he sees the news, but the picture's not too clear.*

"I Wonder" gestured to a generation emerging out of the confines of sexual repression and double standards, recognizing new found freedoms: "I wonder how many times you've had sex/I wonder do you know who'll be next."

In what has become his signature piece "Sugar Man," Rodriguez provides an intriguingly challenging commentary on drugs: "Sugar man, won't you hurry

*'Cos I'm tired of these scenes
For a blue coin won't you bring back
All those colors to my dreams
Silver magic ships you carry
Jumpers, coke, sweet Mary Jane*

This acknowledged drug's attractions. But it did so by recognizing, as well, what drugs stifled: "Sugar man you're the answer/That makes my questions disappear." Questions, of course, were fundamental to Rodriguez and his purpose. He was not unaware of the ways in which "turning on/tuning out" could benefit — economically and politically — the most retrograde social forces, feeding the appetite of apathy:

*While the Mafia provides your drugs,
Your government will provide the shrugs,
And your national guard will supply the slugs,
So they all sit satisfied.*

Busy Being Born Is Sadly Dying

Rodriguez failed not only to make it big. He did not even make it small. The albums died. The claim is that Rodriguez never received a penny in royalties. Sussex Records dropped him from their failing label. Few in the United States, including some musicians who contributed to the studio-makings of his recordings, remembered him when asked directly about his music.

To be sure, there were those who championed his talents and recalled his promise, but they were discordant notes in a chorus of amnesia. What explains this?

Rodriguez's premature artistic death was no doubt accelerated by a musical industry less interested in his radical and often complicating message, than in the medium of his money-making capacity.

Certainly, he was the victim of the commonplace practices of the recording industry at the time. These placed naïve artists at the mercy of the many voracious sharks who bilked musicians shamelessly.

Rodriguez eerily foresaw all of this in what is arguably his artistic masterpiece, "Crucify Your Mind:"

*Was it a huntsman or a player
That made you pay the cost
That now assumes relaxed positions
And prostitutes your loss?*

His lyrics perhaps spoke directly to those who would, over the years, rationalize acts of unconscionable self-interest:

*So con, convince your mirror
As you've always done before
Giving substance to shadows
Giving substance ever more.*

If Rodriguez was capable of pointing an accusatory finger, he did not exempt himself from responsibilities in what would be his musical unmaking:

*Were you tortured by your own thirst
In those pleasures that you seek
That made you Tom the curious*

That makes you James the weak?

Always a mysterious figure at best, Rodriguez was clearly a loner reticent to demand rights and entitlements from those who seemed to be helping him. He was likely content to be creating and recording his songs, rather than attending scrupulously to contracts and charting careful career moves.

More importantly, neither Black nor white, in a Detroit where the music scene was ordered by these racial binaries, Rodriguez had no support networks to call upon to protect his interests. He was the prototype of an outsider. This was a product of how class and race intersected in this particular historical moment, and also in this specific place, the Detroit of Bob Seeger-type working-class rockers and African-American Motown.

Rodriguez, simply put, lacked the resources to adequately contend with the well-heeled hucksters he necessarily depended on, and with whom he met and conducted what passed for “business” in seedy bars or at the corners of dimly lit streets.

As a Mexican American, Rodriguez was invariably socially constructed as an “easy mark” by those more than happy to write him off in all manner of racist and class ways. Quick money was obviously there to be effortlessly had. There were those willing and able to do a grab and run. Rodriguez, reliant on his own meager devices, would be left standing still.

Too Much, Too Late

But there was more to Rodriguez’s failure to crack the big time than this. His music was too much, too late by a few years.

Even before the socially explosive happenings of 1967-1968, Dylan, an astute weathervane if ever there was one, had already consciously discarded much of his protest voice (which always masked outrage in the kind of ambiguities Rodriguez never relied on), clinging tenaciously and adroitly to his commercial capacities. Apparently you did need a Weatherman to know which the wind blows, especially when a hard rain was gonna fall.

It was an era where everything was moving so fast. Uncompromising in both its politics and its tone, Rodriguez’s music was forged in the crucible of 1968’s certainties of wrongs, and even if he often shied away from clear statements on rights, he pointed unerringly in their direction. As a receptive 1960s waned, Rodriguez’s stock necessarily nose-dived; a more sceptical and reticent 1970s unravelled the tight knots of a previous youthful, political intransigence.

The countercultural alternative, meanwhile, was spiralling downward, the tragic 1969 Rolling Stones’ Altamont Speedway concert an orgy of violence and chaotic



Rodriguez today.

lack of judgment culminating in death and demoralization.

As a metaphor, Altamont seemed to spell the sad end of “Woodstock Nation,” with its message of “peace and love.” Over the course of 1969-1970 musical figures such as the Rolling Stones’ Brian Jones, Alan Wilson of Canned Heat, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and the Doors’ Jim Morrison all died in circumstances in which drug overdoses were either confirmed or suspected. Too many “bad trips” shredded the promise of alternative, leaving the counterculture in nihilistic tatters. Disco was around the corner.

Rodriguez provided an anthem to this denouement, but poised as it was on the cusp of recognition of drugs’ attractions and acknowledgement of the fundamental illusion of such “magic ships,” it was not exactly welcomed by either countercultural rebels or the law and order brigade:

*Sugar man met a false friend
On a lonely dusty road
Lost my heart when I found it
It had turned to dead black coal*

As the utopianism of the counterculture soured, emptying it of so much radical content, what was often left was little more than a vacuous individualism. Rodriguez exposed the inadequacies of this trajectory, on political and personal levels, in “Street Boy”:

*There’s one last word then I’ll conclude
Before you pick up and put on your attitude
Bet you’ll never find or ever meet
Any street boy who’s ever beat the streets*

If the countercultural dilemma might have been enough to sink Rodriguez, his insistence on hanging his anti-capitalist, pro-working class lyrics on a hook that was an uncomfortable fit for so many, may well have sealed his fate. Neither the emerging politics of the far left (Maoist, Trotskyist,

socialist-feminist), let alone the surviving Old Left, trapped aesthetically in the limitations of the radical folksong paradigm, would be drawn to Rodriguez in the 1970s:

*And there’s the militant with his store-bought soul
There’s someone here who’s almost a virgin
I’ve been told
And there’s Linda glass-made who speaks of the past
Who genuflects, salutes, signs the cross and stands at half-mast.*

Rodriguez seemed to have run his short and seemingly reversing course. Indeed, for the next three decades — throughout much of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s — he was largely confined to the pick and shovel brigade of the dispossessed.

“Searching for Sugar Man,” exercising some dramatic license, fails to acknowledge that Rodriguez did take some time off as a wage worker to tour in Australia/New Zealand with the band Midnight Oil, but this does not (in spite of some cynical reviews) detract from the main points that should be taken from the film.

The Working-Class Reality

As “Searching for Sugar Man” makes all too clear, Rodriguez lived a hard, laboring life over the course of these years of seeming obscurity. He worked for a time during the 1970s in the most taxing of jobs at the decrepit hub of Chrysler’s Motor City empire, Dodge Main, but the antiquated 67-acre factory on the Detroit-Hamtramck border was eventually closed.

He also served a stint in the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant, notorious for its dangerous work conditions. Both of these awful and alienating production purgatories were nurseries of working-class uprisings, sites that had spawned the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. They gave rise

to defiant acts of sabotage and other creative kinds of “counter-planning on the shop floor” chronicled in Bill Watson’s famous article in *Radical America* (1971, reprinted online at <http://www.prole.info/texts/counterplanning.html> —ed.).

Rodriguez ended up in demolition work, inhaling dust and absorbing grime, backbreaking toil on the lowest rung of the non-unionized construction industry. This was the kind of work that no one, in a Detroit not quite yet decimated by the later collapse of the auto industry, wanted. As he told one interviewer, he wasn’t part of any glitzy “rock and roll” Detroit scene: he was strictly “blue collar.”

But unlike those who cannot quite fathom that wage labor is not necessarily either a waste or a tragic descent into oblivion, Rodriguez insists that just because his years of tough, dirty work in Detroit seemed to make him invisible, he was never lost. “I knew exactly where I was,” he stated knowingly. He even ran for municipal office, standing repeatedly as a candidate for both mayor and city councilman. This effort at electoral intervention proved futile: on one ballot he received less than 150 votes, and the officialdom managed to misspell his name.

Rodriguez’s daughters, who figure prominently (and clearly lovingly) in “Searching for Sugar Man,” are adamant that their father’s life is indeed rich in many ways, but this has nothing to do with acquisitive individualism. Rather, Rodriguez’s ultimate resource and the source of his calm contentment, is the unshakeable conviction that he has always been on the side of the poor, that his roots are in the working class, and that his values have been formed by this experience.

The working class that Rodriguez embraces and symbolizes looks rather different in “Searching for Sugar Man” than conventional wisdoms suggest. Against the grain of popular culture stereotypes, as well as learned depictions prominent in much contemporary critical theory, for instance, this class is not fractured and fragmented by racial and ethnic division. Instead it is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic formation. Mexicantown is now 50% Latino, 25% African American, 20% white and 5% Arab.

Rodriguez’s wife and the mother of his daughters is of European and Native American ancestry. (Most of Detroit’s Native American people live in southwest Detroit.) This makes Rodriguez’s children white, aboriginal and Mexican or, to put it differently, quintessentially “American.”

Rodriguez has spoken movingly about his respect for the richness of Native American cultures. As he exited the music scene in 1974 he spent a summer living and travelling with aboriginal people. Rodriguez helped organize pow-wows throughout Michigan, including at Wayne State University where

he was studying philosophy. Rodriguez also ventured into Canada, where he spent time at Grand Bend near the Kettle and Stoney Point First Nations lands, site of the 1995 occupation of Ipperwash Provincial Park that culminated in the Ontario Provincial Police murder of Native activist Dudley George.

Two of Rodriguez’s white co-workers talk of their relationship with him, their astonishment that he is a musician of mythical stature in other parts of the world, their regard for his work and for his fundamental humanity. Not only are they articulate and proud of their friendship with Rodriguez, their running commentary on his good fortune is generous and genuine, always happy, and sometimes quite hilarious.

“Searching for Sugar Man” provides, in passing, a rare glimpse of the archetypal workplace conversationalist, the kind of guy who punctuates the 9-to-5 grind with a touch of the stand-up comedian.

There is no hint of jealousy or antagonism or petty carping in any of this, let alone racial chauvinism. Instead, what is conveyed is a sense of class comradeship, of respect for a fellow worker, of heart-felt joy at his good fortune, however late arriving. This multi-racial, multi-ethnic working-class *élan*, visible in so many Detroit watering holes at shift changes and on Friday nights, is a welcome reminder that not all workers conform to Archie Bunker-like caricatures.

Globalization from the Bottom Up

How do we know all this? The answer takes us into realms of discovery and recovery that illuminate subterranean currents of globalization, a kind of cultural combined and uneven development leading towards the making of “Searching for Sugar Man.”

Rodriguez’s forgotten album “Cold Fact” found its way to South Africa in the early 1970s. The isolations and repressive containments of the apartheid regime boomeranged culturally, nurturing already-existing strains of rebelliousness among white youth and making it possible for an underground mythology to envelop an artist whom no one knew and who had dropped off the radar screen of the global music scene.

Precisely because albums like “Cold Fact” were banned from the heavily censored public airways (the film shows a South African government employee in the archives of “avoid stamped” material handling a record where deep scratches have been made in the lead “Sugar Man” track, making it impossible to play the song), Rodriguez became a cult figure. He personified drugs, sex and rock-and-roll, with an unmistakable oppositional undercurrent.

As a Mexican American he occupied uniquely accessible ground in the racially charged atmosphere of a South Africa in which conflict seemed invariably ordered along a black-white axis. To his disaffected

audiences in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban and other centers where apartheid seemed to have less and less purchase on the political sensibilities of the young, Rodriguez served as a surrogate for the challenge of a different socio-cultural-political order. He was as important as Elvis had been in the late 1950s, the Beatles in the 1960s, or Neil Young in the 1970s.

Difficult though it may be to appreciate, Rodriguez’s reputation as a songwriter in South Africa climbed to almost unimaginable heights. He was compared favorably to Bob Dylan and Simon & Garfunkel. According to some he was “bigger than the Rolling Stones.” “Cold Fact” had as much of a South African impact as “Abbey Road” or “Exile on Main Street” did in the rest of the English-speaking world.

Rodriguez’s aura soared all the more because nothing was known of him and little, apparently, could be discovered that cast light on his doings, even his whereabouts. It was thought that he must be dead or in jail. Then the stories circulated of how this had happened, all involving increasingly wild speculation about his self-destructive farewell, drugs, criminal behavior, and the like. “Imaginations,” in Rodriguez’s words, were “working overtime.”

Consider having grown up on a diet of songs like “Street Fighting Man,” “Jumping Jack Flash,” and “Sympathy for the Devil” and not knowing, or being able to find out, who the Rolling Stones were or what became of them. The mystique would have been overpowering. Ignorance wasn’t bliss, but it kept the songs alive, more so, perhaps, than if Rodriguez had been an open book, capable of being read in the marketplace of cultural productions. Rodriguez was never made familiar; and the strange could not truly die.

Post-1970 South African anti-apartheid white youth kept buying his music, and someone was making lots of money. None of this largesse filtered back to Rodriguez.

“Searching for Sugar Man” provides no adequate explanations of what happened to the piles of *kruggerrands* that accumulated on the basis of sales of Rodriguez’s albums, most being pirated variants. But some of this commercial bonanza, in the early-to-mid 1970s, undoubtedly involved Sussex releases marketed through supposedly legitimate channels. During this period Sussex was bought by A & M Records, at the time one of the largest, if not the largest, independent record companies in the world.

Meanwhile the dedicated throngs who bought Rodriguez, and listened to him intently, aged. The songs seemed hard-wired into their sense of themselves, a “soundtrack to their lives.” There were those who had tattoos of the “Cold Fact” album cover

continued on page 44

sketched into their upper arms.

Eventually, in the late 1990s a journalist, Craig Bartholemew, and an ex-soldier, jewelry store owner and hard-core Rodriguez fan, Stephen "Sugar Man" Segerman, began a methodical South African attempt to track down the phantom singer-songwriter.

Lyrics were searched for clues, leading them, via Dearborn, to suspicions of a Detroit connection. They launched a website, complete with a milk cartoon drawing of a "lost" Rodriguez.

In the age of the internet, it was perhaps inevitable that someone would connect with someone who knew Rodriguez, who was reclusive, had no inclinations to be plugged into computers, and preferred to live without a phone. His daughter Eva was of a different generation and contrary habits.

One day, surfing the net, Eva happened on to something called "The Great Rodriguez Hunt." Incredulous at her father's influence in faraway South Africa, and shocked by the sensational stories of his suicidal end, she put Rodriguez in touch with Stephen Segerman, the unofficial head of the search party on a quest to find the illusive and inspirational creator of "Cold Fact."

This led to a series of hugely successful concerts in South Africa in March 1998, memorialized in a TV documentary aired in July 2001 entitled "Dead Men Don't Tour." The crowds were ecstatic, their icon gracious: "Thanks for keeping me alive," he bowed in closing.

Rodriguez was resurrected. Light in the Attic Records re-released his albums, starting in 2008-09, paying him royalties on sales for the first time in his life. Adding to this world beat mix, the "Searching for Sugar Man" film came about because Swedish

director Bendjelloul decided to go on a six-month global backpacking walk-about in search of the story to end all stories, to sink his cinematic teeth into.

The myth-complex surrounding Rodriguez in South Africa seemed too good to be true, "a fairy tale" already scripted. Bendjelloul spent four years on the film, scrounging funding where he could, financing production in part by self sacrifice.

In conjunction with the Bartholemew-Segerman detective hunt and the Light in the Attic promotions, "Searching for Sugar Man" has finally made Rodriguez widely known outside of South Africa and Australia, where he also has a longstanding and committed following.

Sugar Man's Sweet Kiss

Rodriguez has taken all of this in his peculiarly lanky and awkward stride. He is over 70 years of age, is failing in health and somewhat frail, but buoyant in spirit and anything but embittered.

A man of few spoken words, Rodriguez lets his songs be his critical voice. As he answered his exploiters in "Like Janis:"

*And you measure for wealth by the things
you can hold*

*And you measure for love by the sweet
things you're told*

*And you live in the past or a dream that
you're in*

And your selfishness is your cardinal sin.

And he reminded them, in "Crucify Your Mind," of the persistence that characterizes those who will settle for nothing less than a full accounting of the many crimes against the poor:

Soon you know I'll leave you

And I'll never look behind

'Cos I was born for the purpose

That crucifies your mind

When asked about the Rip Van Winkle-like nature of his story, Rodriguez replies, obviously bemused: "Yes, I suppose it does have a magical twist to it. But I was never asleep."

As a "musical political" he's content to be doing what he can to address inequality, poverty, and the governance and greed of the rich. With an intuitive understanding of hegemony, he distrusts "current truths," appreciating where, how, and why so many of them are fashioned. It is surprisingly refreshing that Rodriguez's songs seem almost timeless, but then the deep reservoir of working-class experience on which he draws is characterized by fundamental continuities. "The issues are as urgent today as when I first wrote those songs," he insists.

We need so much that we do not have in the struggle against a decayed capitalism. A great deal has yet to be built. It is crucial to use all that the resources of our past can rally to our cause. Even metaphors are of an inestimable service, which is what a poet like Rodriguez provides: "This system's gonna fall soon, to an angry young tune/And that's a concrete cold fact."

Rodriguez offers no blueprints of how to organize resistance, as he would be the first to acknowledge. But he does reveal to us the dream of what can be, largely by framing this necessarily imaginative construction within grittily realist revelations that expose the utter unacceptability of what is.

"Cause the sweetest kiss I ever got is the one I've never tasted," Rodriguez sings. "Searching for Sugar Man" gives anyone interested in social justice and a better world a precious gift, a very sweet, lingering kiss, one whose taste will last. §