



MUSIC OF THE SEVENTIES



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The Swedish/British documentary **Searching for Sugar Man**, directed by Malik Bendjelloul, has been a recent sensation on the local film circuit. It tells the story of the Mexican-American singer/songwriter known simply as Rodriguez whose early 1970s album **Cold fact** was enormously popular in South Africa throughout the '70s and the '80s.

Apparently, **Cold fact** sold in the region of 50,000 copies (nobody seems to know the exact number), which is huge in the context of the South African music industry. Thirty years ago this LP was ubiquitous in South African record collections, although this was not the case in Rodriguez's native United States of America where only a handful of copies were ever sold.

What makes this story particularly disturbing, and poignant at the same time, is that for decades Rodriguez had no idea about his phenomenal fame in this country. Furthermore, he never received any royalties and was eventually forced to retire from the music business, living in almost total obscurity and poverty in grimy Detroit.

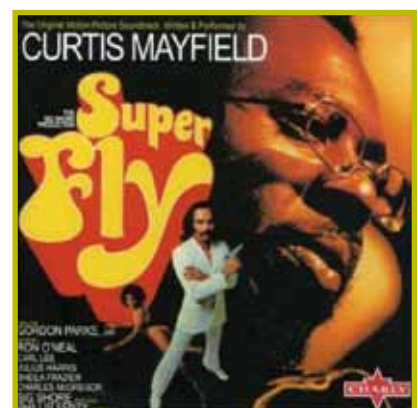
But, **Cold fact** was just one of the many fine seventies LPs that seemed to find their way into, what seemed to me, all my friends' record collections at that time. This was a golden era for recorded popular music when the 'long-playing record', and not the seven-single, dominated. Socially and politically conscious singer/songwriters like Bob Dylan, Marvin Gaye and Joni Mitchell sold millions of recordings not only internationally, but also in this country, even though these were the years of boycotts and cultural isolation.

Albums such as **What's going on** by Marvin Gaye, **Superfly** by Curtis Mayfield and **Dark side of the moon** by Pink Floyd contained superb music, but also strong statements about society and politics. The works of these artists from this period have, for the most part, stood the test of time and continue to influence not only the generation who grew up with this music back in the day, but also a new breed of young musicians such as Aimee Mann, Leslie Feist and Amos Lee.

At this point, I must tell you about a fantastic book about the Seventies and the music it spawned, called **Young hearts run free** by Dave Haslam. In it Haslam points out that the decade is often completely misrepresented by the media and

mainstream music journals. He says: '... the image of the decade is dominated by a selection of the most anodyne, obvious symbols: the BeeGees, flares, platform shoes and Abba. In recent years the portrayal of the decade as a parade of disastrous fashion set in a mindless boogie wonderland has been relentless'. (Dave Haslam, **Young hearts run free: the real story of the 1970s**, 2007.)

The very concept of the decades is neat and safe, but does it mean anything to speak of 'The Seventies' or 'The Eighties'? It has been suggested, for instance, that the kinds of ideas (that is, feminism), social movements (that is, Hippies) and even icons (that is, John Lennon and Jim



Morrison) that seem quintessentially 'The Sixties', are, in actual fact, more accurately from the period 1964-1976. As my colleague Robert Moulton points out, this period has been called the Permissive Age when counter-culture ideas from the Sixties took root and flourished.

My impression is that we all, from historians and journalists to teachers and librarians, love to categorise and compartmentalise the past. The result, more often than not, is a kind of history-by-numbers with lashings of nostalgia and sentimentality. While it might be good for fancy-dress parties, nostalgia trivialises and distorts.

In **Wild hearts run free** Haslam describes what he calls the 'Abbafication' of the Seventies: 'The Abbafication process has distorted our view of history; it's not just about the music, it's about how our lives are valued and represented. Abbafication has been so successful that some of us who grew up in the 1970s are likely to doubt the validity of our own memories: like some poor soul suffering from Alzheimers, it's as though our society is in danger of losing touch with our past.'

My own adolescent memories of this era in South Africa are filled with images of

racism and aggression, and, of course, sexual and political repression. I remember a general sense of frustration and pessimism. After all, this was the time of apartheid, the Soweto uprising, boycotts and civil war. And, internationally there was the oil crisis, the Vietnam and Mid-East wars, hijackings, terrorism, strikes . . . 'The Seventies' was a heavy, dark time not easily explained away with nostalgia. In this atmosphere the songs by Rodriguez on **Cold fact** like *Inner city blues* and *Sugar Man*, which dealt with taboo subjects like sex, drugs and politics, found receptive ears in South Africa.

The popular music from these years uniquely reflected this tumultuous time and there was, in fact, an explosion of creativity which is reflected in a proliferation of different musical styles and genres. While this era is most often associated with disco music and glam, it was, in fact, rock music in all its multifarious forms (folk-rock, heavy metal, hard rock, prog-rock, et cetera) that played first fiddle. Other genres such as reggae music, Latin, funk, afrobeat and even experimental music also all had large and devoted followings.

The success of the film **Saturday night fever** and the attendant soundtrack by



The BeeGees in 1977 helped hugely in popularising disco music worldwide. This was actually a gritty little gem of a film dealing with the tribulations of a young man who visits the local discotheque on weekends. It has also given us one of the most enduring and clichéd images of the seventies - white be-suited John Travolta, one arm pointing skywards, strutting his stuff on the dance-floor.

Unfortunately, disco was, for the most part, monotonous, boring and, ultimately, tawdry. It also heralded a new era of over-blown commercialism in music when synthesisers and electronic machines began to be used more and more.

Listening to **Cold fact** now after all these years, I'm struck by how fresh and adventurous the music still sounds. It's a far cry from the over-produced uniformity of the vast majority of contemporary pop and rock. It also seems incredible to me that the album has passed by Americans unnoticed for so long and that Rodriguez is only now receiving some belated recognition worldwide.

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