



## Listening to Sugar Man

Folk music of Sixto Rodriguez

### SUGAR MAN (1970)

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  
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

Silver magic ships you carry  
Jumpers, coke, sweet Mary Jane  
Sugar man you're the answer  
That makes my questions disappear  
Sugar man 'cos I'm weary  
Of those double games I hear  
Sugar man, Sugar man, Sugar man, Sugar man,  
Sugar man, Sugar man, Sugar man  
Sugar man, won't you hurry  
'Cos I'm tired of these scenes  
For the blue coin won't you bring back  
All those colors to my dreams

Silver magic ships you carry  
Jumpers, coke, sweet Mary Jane  
Sugar man met a false friend  
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### Historical and cultural context

Folk musician Sixto Rodriguez (aka Rodriguez, Jesus Rodriguez, and Sugar Man) is the sixth son of Mexican immigrants who moved to the American midwest for work in the 1920s. Many of Rodriguez's songs, including "Cause" (the last song he ever recorded before being dropped from his record label in December

### CAUSE (1971)

Cause I lost my job two weeks before Christmas  
And I talked to Jesus at the sewer  
And the Pope said it was none of his God-damned business  
While the rain drank champagne

My Estonian Archangel came and got me wasted  
Cause the sweetest kiss I ever got is the one I've never tasted  
Oh but they'll take their bonus pay to Molly McDonald,  
Neon ladies, beauty is that which obeys, is bought or borrowed

Cause my heart's become a crooked hotel full of rumours  
But it's I who pays the rent for these fingered-face out-of-tuners  
and I make 16 solid half hour friendships every evening

Cause your queen of hearts who is half a stone  
And likes to laugh alone is always threatening you with leaving  
Oh but they play those token games on Willy Thompson  
And give a medal to replace the son of Mrs. Annie Johnson

Cause they told me everybody's got to pay their dues  
And I explained that I had overpaid them  
So overdued I went to the company store  
and the clerk there said that they had just been invaded  
So I set sail in a teardrop and escaped beneath the doorsill

Cause the smell of her perfume echoes in my head still  
Cause I see my people trying to drown the sun  
In weekends of whiskey sours  
Cause how many times can you wake up in this comic book  
and plant flowers?

1971), reflect the struggles of the marginalized inner-city poor who often used alcohol and other drugs to cope with harsh conditions.

Until recently Rodriguez was largely unknown, except in South Africa and a few neighbouring nations where people were inspired by his lyrics. Even Rodriguez himself was unaware of his fans and the sale of more than 500,000 of his records. He worked for decades for low wages as a labourer and advocate for the poor in Detroit, Michigan, raising a family in a run-down house he bought for \$50 in a government auction in the 1970s, and graduating from university with a degree in philosophy in the 1980s.

Rodriguez learned of his overseas fame and influence in the late 1990s, after his daughter stumbled upon an online request from South African fans for information about the thought-to-be-dead singer. (A rumor had been swirling that Rodriguez had set himself on fire on stage.) The fans' quest for answers about Rodriguez led to the creation of the 2012 award-winning film "Searching for Sugar Man" and, ultimately, the reintroduction of a musical poet to the world.

These days Rodriguez tours the world, playing his music and making money from his work. But he gives most of his money away to his family, and others who need it. And he still lives in the house he bought for \$50. Why? Perhaps his song "Rich Folks Hoax" offers a clue:

*The poor create the rich hoax  
And only late breast-fed fools believe it  
So don't tell me about your success  
Nor your recipes for my happiness  
Smoke in bed  
I never could digest  
Those illusions you claim to have*

## Instructional strategies

1. Invite the class to listen to or read "Sugar Man" ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWhWmSIGGVk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWhWmSIGGVk)) and "Cause" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5715UPtJq8>). (The printed lyrics are available on a [student handout](#).) Then facilitate an open discussion about the lyrics. You might use the following questions:
  - a. What do you think about these songs? What did you find interesting? Surprising? Not interesting?
  - b. In what ways do these songs seem similar? Different?
  - c. What does Rodriguez suggest about why people use alcohol or other drugs? Do you agree? Why or why not?
  - d. Rodriguez was an immigrant and his people used alcohol and drugs to cope with the stress and the challenges of living in a new society. Are there other ways to cope with difficult situations? What do you suggest could be done to help immigrants (and their families) experience less hardship?
  - e. Imagine that your family has immigrated to a new country. How would you feel? (Note: Students will probably talk about the excitement of being in a new place. While acknowledging that, try to draw their attention to the challenges a student may experience while he/she is learning a new language, coping with a new culture, making new friends and trying to feel he/she belongs to a place/group of people.) How can we help immigrant students cope better or struggle less?
  - f. What are other reasons might people have for using alcohol or other drugs?
2. Invite students to select a modern song of their choice that makes reference to alcohol or other drug use and compare and contrast it with "Sugar Man" or "Cause."

3. Have students write a song or other artistic creation—drawing, painting, making a collage, writing a story—that somehow explores why people use psychoactive substances (e.g., coffee, cola, tea, chocolate, alcohol, tobacco, cannabis). Encourage students to demonstrate real insight into the factors that drive use in their communities. Those who are interested may also be encouraged to explain what they’ve put into their work and why, how they feel about what they’ve created.
4. Invite students to consider what they might have thought or done if they’d learned that someone else had profited handsomely from the sale of their work. Ask them to dig deep to understand why they would react that way and to consider what their reactions might say about what they value.

## Drug Literacy

### Big ideas

- Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives

### Competencies

- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs
- Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks and harms related to drugs

## Links to Curriculum

### First Peoples’ principles of learning

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning is embedded in memory, history and story

## English Language Arts 9

### Big ideas

- Language and story can be a source of creativity and joy
- Exploring stories and other texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and the world
- Questioning what we hear, read and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens

### Competencies

- Apply appropriate strategies to comprehend written, oral and visual texts, guide inquiry, and extend thinking
- Think critically, creatively and reflectively to explore ideas within, between and beyond texts
- Recognize and identify the role of personal, social and cultural contexts, values and perspectives in texts
- Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text and world
- Respond to text in personal, creative and critical ways