

## JOHN SINCLAIR – 20 To Life: The Life and Times of John Sinclair (MVD Visual)

John Sinclair has led an interesting and unconventional life. Political and cultural activist, manager of the MC5 and the Up, founder of Trans-Love Energies, Chairman of the White Panther Party, record producer, broadcaster, poet and performing artist—he's packed a lot of living into his 66 years.

Steve Gebhardt actually started this documentary film in 1971, when he worked for John Lennon and Yoko Ono as their personal filmmaker. Sinclair was serving a ten-year jail sentence at the time for selling two joints to an undercover cop, and Lennon and Ono appeared at a huge benefit concert in Ann Arbor demanding his release. Gebhardt shot the concert, and three days later, amazingly, Sinclair was released. A completed film, *Ten For Two*, screened in England a couple of years later, but was quickly pulled from the market, and never played in the USA as by then Lennon was under threat of deportation and didn't need extra heat from the Nixon administration. Twenty years later Gebhardt decided to resurrect the old footage and use it as the springboard for a new work focused entirely on the life of Sinclair.

The film documents Sinclair's small-town Michigan upbringing, his cultural awakening upon first hearing and then immersing himself in jazz, blues and R&B, and his eventual emergence as an activist in first Detroit and then Ann Arbor. All of these phases are illustrated with plenty of interesting archival and interview footage. His involvement with the MC5 is also covered, and there is some genuinely exciting home movie footage of the band in action at the Grande Ballroom, although this will already be familiar to MC5 fans from previous DVD releases.

Sinclair's 1969 arrest is naturally the pivotal event of the film. Facing a possible 20 years to life (hence the film's title) Sinclair decided to stand trial rather than cop a plea, thereby challenging the constitutionality of Michigan's marijuana laws. Sinclair clearly reveled in the intense media spotlight this brought him, but the ploy backfired when he was handed a 10-year sentence. He served more than two years before being released after an intensive publicity campaign. Excerpts of the famous concert at which Lennon appeared are featured here, including Lennon and Ono's performance, and parts of the Up and Commander Cody.

Although Sinclair's activism continued after his release, he led a somewhat quieter life until his re-emergence in the 1990s as a poet and performer,



reading his Ginsberg-inspired verse in front of a live blues band. Sinclair's blues- and jazz-backed poetry readings are interspersed throughout the film fairly effectively, but by the end become somewhat tiresome and repetitive.

Comfortable with his role as an avuncular elder statesman of the '60s radical movement, Sinclair's wildest days are clearly behind him, and the film seems to run out of material and ideas towards the end, with predictable scenes of him spending time with his family, puffing on a Camberwell Carrot-sized spliff, or reading yet another one of his interminable poems celebrating the black musicians who first inspired him. (MS)

## STUART SUTCLIFFE – The Lost Beatle (Iambic Productions)

Stuart Sutcliffe, the Beatles' first bassist and John Lennon's best friend, helped shape the style and image of the early Beatles, even assisting Lennon in giving the band its iconic name. While a member of the fledgling group, he performed in the seedy clubs of the Reeperbahn in Hamburg, Germany, where the Beatles honed their craft. Leaving the band on the edge of success, Sutcliffe remained in Hamburg to be with his fiancée, Astrid Kirchherr to pursue his passion for painting. Suffering from debilitating headaches, Stuart died of a brain hemorrhage in 1962 at only 21 years of age.

*Stuart Sutcliffe: The Lost Beatle* seeks to reveal more about this intriguing young man, focusing on his artistic talent as well as his influence on the Beatles' early development. The film succeeds in some respects, but, unfortunately, the filmmakers' willingness to present uncorroborated, scurrilous allegations as fact undermine veracity.

Sister Pauline Sutcliffe uses her interview to once again claim that John, in a jealous rage, beat Stuart repeatedly, kicking him in the head, which she attributes as the cause of his death. No evidence is provided by Pauline to support this sensational charge other than references to much maligned (and discredited) biographers—and a false claim of having direct quotes from Lennon concerning the altercation in one of her books. Prior to the third (yes, *third*) book she has written about her brother, Pauline attributed Stuart's brain hemorrhage to either an attack by thugs in Liverpool (from which John had rescued Stuart) or excessive amphetamine use.

For whatever reason, the filmmakers opted not to explore the other more plausible causes of Stuart's medical condition and only leave open the most lurid possibility, even though it is disputed by Astrid as "rubbish." The filmmakers even manipulate the audience by playing Lennon's song "Jealous Guy" with its refrain, "I didn't mean to hurt you" as the film draws to a close. The use of "Jealous Guy" in this context is an insult to the viewer and to the memories of both Sutcliffe and Lennon. Another discredited rumor trotted out is that John and Stuart were lovers. One wonders if Astrid and Klaus Voorman would have ever participated in this project if they had known what the filmmaker's true agenda was.

The documentary is not without redeeming features. Astrid Kirchherr's photographs and Klaus Voorman's illustrations help paint a full picture of Stuart's life and the Beatles' wild Hamburg days. An actor reciting from letters and diaries provides the



fifth Beatle's own account of the pivotal events (excepting the salacious bits already referenced) depicted in the documentary. Several important figures in Sutcliffe's life are interviewed, and his importance within the Expressionist movement is established through analysis by art historian Donald Kuspit. Ultimately, Sutcliffe is portrayed as a romantic, tragic figure.

However, the film's attributes do not offset its lack of balance and reliance on rumor and controversy, reducing it to a hatchet job on Lennon's character rather than the affectionate tribute to Sutcliffe that it should have been. Even with its historical inaccuracies, *Backbeat* is a much better way to learn more about Sutcliffe. (Alison Hayes)

## JOHNNY THUNDERS: Who's Been Talking – In Concert (MVD)

File this DVD, advertised as "rare live footage from his last ever recorded concert," under very pleasant surprises: The ex-Dolls axe-man and main valve of the Heartbreakers gave notoriously uneven live performances, but this set from Osaka, Japan, circa 1991, cooks. If he hits a vocal clam here and there, it never gets in the way of what Thunders at his best always delivered: unadorned '50s- and '60s-rooted rock 'n' roll, fun posing and enlarged heart-on-sleeve influence pedaling (kinda like Springsteen, I guess, but unmarred by the Boss' gravity).

Supported by rhythm guitar, bass, drums, sax and zaftig blonde back-up singer Alison Gordy (she resembles a punk Peggy Lee), Thunders busts through just under two dozen tunes in an hour and a half, knocking pages from every stage of his career songbook. There's Dolls ("Personality Crisis"), Heartbreakers (a ripping "Born to Lose," "I Wanna Be Loved," "Too Much Junkie Business" with "Pills" fragments included), solo-era material ("So Alone," "Pipeline") and various odds and ends. The latter includes a bit of blues, semi-frequent riffing on the theme from *Bonanza*, a Sid Vicious tribute (the ballad "Sad Vacation"), "new stuff" like "Society (Makes Me Sad)" and oldies—among them a well-worn but still cool medley of "Louie Louie" and "Hang On Sloop" with JT imploring, "Sloop, let your cleavage hang down on me." And "(I'm Not Your) Steppin' Stone" works its way into the show-opening Heartbreakers tune "In Cold Blood."

It's a noisy, guitar-y show, but it's not without dynamics. I groaned when I first saw a sax in the lineup, but James Heath is a asset to the performance—not just relieving Thunders of front-line duty but infusing more melody into the proceedings and, in the manner of Mink DeVille, making prominent that connection to pre-Beatles soul-pop (and girl-group sounds) that's so essential to Thunders' style.

Special features? Just a bio and a set list (be forewarned: the songs listed on the back of the clamshell don't all turn up in the show), but if this is your meat, then, as Frank Zappa observed, *Who's Been Talking?* is a tasty little sucker. (Gene Sculatti)

