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20 to Life: Life and Times of John Sinclair

John Sinclair

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by Richie Unterberger

Review

As a poet, manager, and general revolutionary rabble-rouser, John Sinclair was a notable part of the 1960s counterculture in Michigan, at first in Detroit and later in Ann Arbor. He attained a national visibility via his management of the MC5 and a much-publicized marijuana bust that gave him a lengthy prison sentence, shortened in large part through the attention John Lennon and Yoko Ono brought to its injustice. This 90-minute documentary does an adequate job of covering Sinclair's colorful life, focusing largely though not exclusively on his activities in the '60s and early '70s, though the film doesn't seem quite as exciting as Sinclair's activities themselves were. Sinclair (who co-produced the movie) is interviewed and seen performing frequently, discussing events ranging from his childhood through his post-prison moves to New Orleans and Amsterdam, where he concentrated more on poetry and radio than politics. A host of close associates contribute comments as well, including his first wife Leni Sinclair, his brother David Sinclair, members of the Detroit Artists Workshop (which Sinclair was crucial to helping establish), and the MC5's Wayne Kramer. Vintage film clips include scenes, musical and otherwise, of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Allen Ginsberg, the MC5, Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen, and other musicians and cultural figures, though some of these appearances are fleeting. Interspersed throughout the interviews and '60s/'70s footage are clips (all post-'70s, from the looks of things) of Sinclair performing his poetry live with blues and jazz musical backing, which can get a little distracting at times, though not often. Some of the passages from before and after Sinclair's most notorious years are a little cursory or mundane, with some facets of his story -- his break with the MC5, for instance, or his authorship of the book *Guitar Army* while in prison -- discussed hardly or not at all. However, the central part of the film, dealing with his major role as an organizer of the counterculture in Michigan and his harassment by the authorities for drug use and other supposedly subversive actions, is quite interesting. Perhaps it would have been better to make this period even more the focus of this documentary, as these are by far its most effective segments in regards to both subject matter and cinematic construction.



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Artist

[John Sinclair](#)

Album

20 to Life: Life and Times of John Sinclair

Rating

★★★★☆

Release Date

Oct 9, 2007

Label

MVD

Type

Video

Genre

Rock

AMG Album ID

R 1184517

Corrections to this Entry?

Releases

Year	Type	Label	Catalog #
2007	DVD	MVD	4613

