

Documenting A Life

Local filmmaker Steve Gebhardt's documentary on John Sinclair finds a life on DVD

INTERVIEW BY STEVEN ROSEN

Steve Gebhardt's first introduction to John Sinclair — the subject of his just-released DVD documentary from MVDvisual, *20 to Life* — came during University of Cincinnati's 1968 Spring Arts Festival.

An event barely remembered today (and which ought to be revived as either a university or citywide event), the annual Spring Arts Festival brought avant-garde artists to Cincinnati. Gebhardt, who had graduated with a Master's degree from UC and was teaching a film class, was involved in organizing it.

The 1968 event brought, among others, Jazz flutist Charles Lloyd, multimedia artist Nam June Paik, topless cellist Charlotte Moorman, anarchic Rock musicians The Fugs, Hermann Nitsch's Orgy Mystery Theatre and filmmaker Jonas Mekas to town. Sinclair came down from Detroit with the "revolutionary Rock band" he managed, MC5, for an appearance at the Black Dome Rock club.

Sinclair and his noisily ecstatic, raucous Rock band did make an impression on Gebhardt, now 70 and living in an apartment/workspace on Liberty Hill just north of Over-the-Rhine. But it was not enough to cause him to drop everything and join Sinclair's White Panther Party in Ann Arbor, Mich., which took the maxim of "rebellion (and sex), drugs and Rock & Roll" (and free Jazz and Blues and other forms of African-American roots music, as well) about as far as anyone at the time. Besides, as Gebhardt recalls, "I was mainly interested in opera."

A couple of years later, in 1971, Gebhardt was in New York working for Yoko Ono and John Lennon as their personal filmmaker. He had filmed several of her conceptual-art films and was working on a feature-length music video to promote Lennon's new album at the time, *Imagine*.

Relatively new to America, Lennon had fallen in love with it — especially its radical, anti-war, countercultural politics. And he took a special interest in Sinclair, who by that time was doing 10 years in prison for giving an undercover cop two marijuana joints. While they were finishing *Imagine*, Lennon told Gebhardt to pack hurriedly for Ann Arbor — he was going to play a massive benefit on Sinclair's behalf with Stevie Wonder, Bob Seger, Allen Ginsberg, Phil Ochs, Archie Shepp, Roswell Rudd, Jerry Rubin and others. As many as 20,000 attended the now-famous show, and three days later Sinclair was free.

Lennon wanted Gebhardt to film it.

"It was a trial balloon for shooting concerts that John would perform on tour," Gebhardt says.

Eventually a film produced by Lennon and Ono and directed by Gebhardt did come of it — *Ten for Two*. But you probably never saw it. It played for one week in 1973 in London and was pulled from release. Lennon, targeted by the Nixon Administration for deportation because of his political activism, decided not to make things worse by distributing it in America.

But during the editing process, Sinclair and Gebhardt became friends. And, long after Lennon was murdered in 1980, they began hoping maybe Ono would allow the film to get a release. (Gebhardt and Sinclair did give a special screening in the late 1980s here, sponsored by Cincinnati Film Society, after Gebhardt had moved back to Cincinnati. It was Sinclair's private print.)

By 1991, they stopped hoping and decided on doing something else.

"I said, 'John, it's been 20 years since we did *Ten for Two* and it's obvious it isn't going to be released,' Gebhardt says. "Why don't we do your life story instead?"

By then, Sinclair had been through a fair amount of changes. He had turned his love of music, always a constant, into an attempted career as a post-modern Beat poet, dramatically reciting tales of roots culture to musical accompaniment.

"Life has been tough for him to make it; that's part of the film," Gebhardt says.

20 to Life: The Life and Times of John Sinclair has also had a tough time getting to release. Gebhardt started out shooting on film and switched to digital video in order to afford to complete this project. It includes archival footage as well as original-to-the-

project interviews and performances.

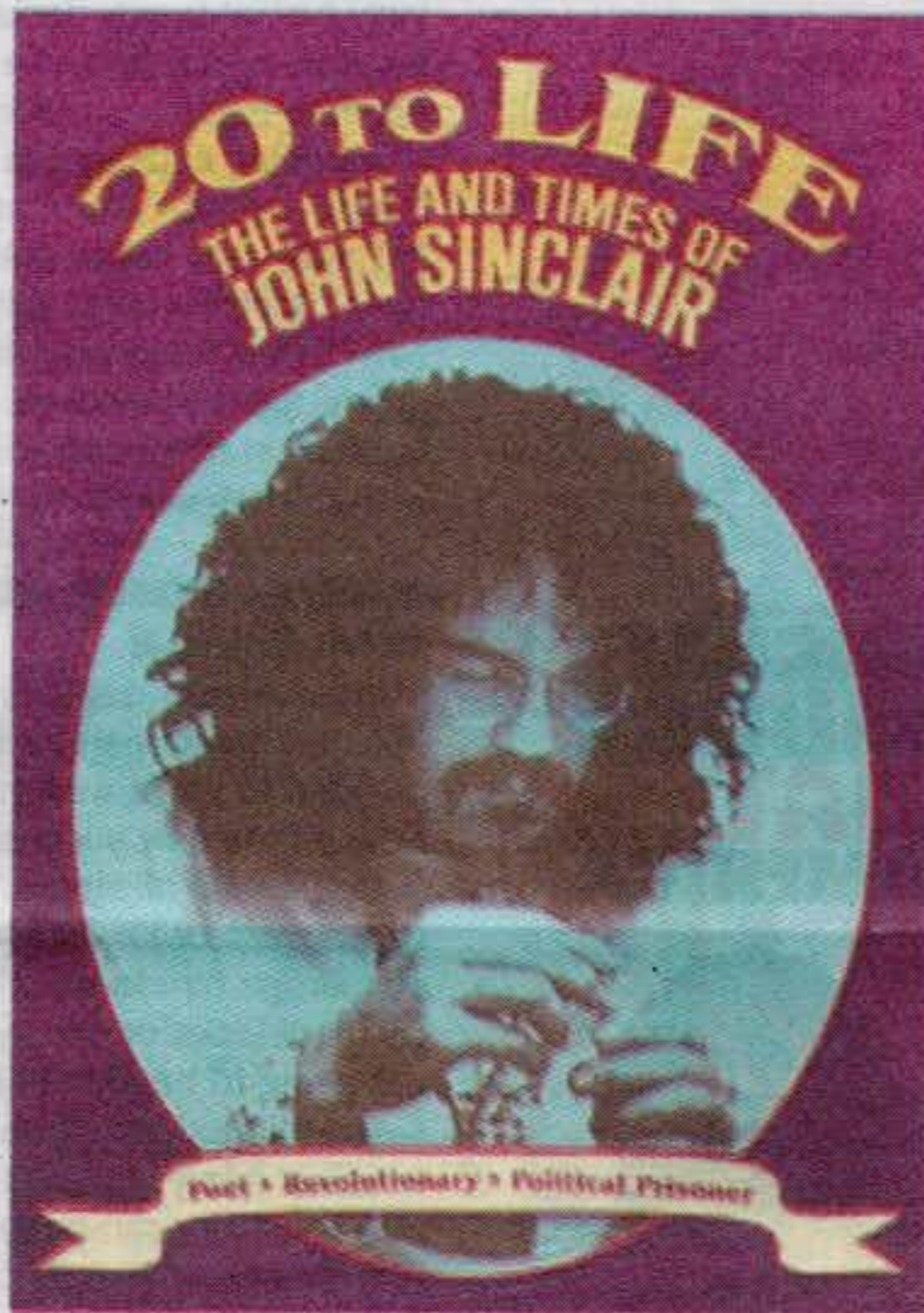
Unlike other films that Gebhardt has made since starting on this — such as *Bill Monroe: Father of Bluegrass Music* and *Zaha Hadid and Her Museum* — *20 to Life* couldn't count on institutional support.

"It's hard to get *bona fide* grants on a film about a marijuana user," Gebhardt says. "And since that's a central issue, I decided it was my obligation to include that point in my film."

He certainly does. One highlight is Sinclair's appearance at Amsterdam's Cannabis Cup, where he was honored as High Priest in 1998. But *20 to Life* also gives Sinclair a fine stage as a spoken-word poet, appearing with his Blues Scholars band as well as at Cincinnati's Hyatt Regency with Ed Moss' Society Jazz Orchestra. And Sinclair revisits Detroit to movingly observe the ghostly abandonment that is so much a part of its post-industrial landscape.

As *20 to Life* finally gets released and tries to reclaim Sinclair's legacy from *Ten for Two*, Gebhardt has another "lost" film he wishes would be rediscovered. In 1972, he filmed the Rolling Stones on tour at their peak, promoting then-new *Exile on Main Street* album. Released as *Ladies and Gentlemen: The Rolling Stones* in a quadraphonic-stereo mix, the film subsequently disappeared from legitimate distribution.

"I'm sure they were thinking at the time, 'What can we do to make it unique,'" Gebhardt says. "But they made it so unique you can't play the film easily. But it (*Exile*) is their best work — no question about it. And it sounds good when the film is played right." ©



30 DAYS OF NIGHT — a graphic novel, which is one of choice this year, 30 Days of Night is the vampire-friendly work where they experience 30 nights at a time. And on a small-town sheriff (Josh Holloway) and his estranged wife (Melissa McBride) prospect of trying to save them from the vampire so-vaguely Eastern European (Huston). Fresh off his in *Candy*, director David Slade new life into this horror (Rated R.)

ACROSS THE UNIVERSE — Something needs to change the world, or at least here. This sentimental musical uses songs to tell a trite story the 1960s. We've been told far more coherent film (and ate songs) — Milos Forman. The actors (Jim Sturgess) are the central couple) and the most part here, but it's pointless exercise. The film to use Beatles-songs to tell a painfully obvious story. (PG-13.)

THE ASSASSINATION BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD (Grade: C) To say a story that predates the story of *The Assassination of the Coward Robert Ford*, skillfully performed and it's shallow and empty. Tom Casey Affleck, Sam Shepard, strong, but great performance, mately dull, one-note character isn't a bias against high *Unforgiven* was a slow burn had a compelling arc. As blank. — Rodger Pille (R)

★ BECOMING JANE — In the steps of Shakespeare's Sarah Williams and Jane Julian Jarrold have conjured a drama about the origins of the most love stories by re-imagining the relationship with Scottish lawyer American Anne Hathaway. A sibly outrageous pick for she does a surprisingly good job of doubt frustrate Brits, but McAvoy as LeFroy, who of single movie in which he Haddon (Rated PG.)

★ THE BOURNE ULTIMATUM (B+) The antithesis of typical thrillers, *The Bourne Ultimatum* is just as smart and restrained. The sequences that are both While not as emotionally Liman's series-starting *The Ultimatum* is just as smart Paul Greengrass' *The Bourne Ultimatum* again employing the director's techniques (handheld camera, compact plotting) and the technology has changed and bad and how convoluted issues affect us all). And it's muted as the identity- Jason Gargano (Rated R.)

★ THE BRAVE ONE (Jodie Foster) is an NPR becomes the victim of that leads to the death of rise of fear in her psyche a new identity, a stranger the predatory element of been made of *The Brave One* *Death Wish* and *Taxi Driver* fashioned a cunning mix into the soul of the vigilante we see the bloody price (Rated R.)

★ DAN IN REAL LIFE — Writer/director Peter Hecht Steve Carell to bring a *Dan in Real Life* that remains in most studio projects a midst of heartache. At first *Life* seems like a retreat. But that film spent far more the family dynamic where his sights on Dan's dilemma Dan, proves once again when it comes to human the gag-driven hijinks that escape. — tts (Rated PG-13)

THE DARJEELING LIMBO — Oh-so-precious-trust-fund doesn't so much make it a cast to work from slapstick result in self-congratulatory dramatic expression. Owen Schwartzman and Adrien Pius honor of playing three