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Tribute to '60s radical is pure poetry

Moore among hundreds at Sinclair documentary

By Doug Pullen / [Flint Journal](#)

FLINT - One provocateur from Davison paid tribute to another Tuesday night as Oscar-winning filmmaker Michael Moore attended the U.S. premiere of "[Twenty to Life: The Life and Times of John Sinclair](#)" at the Flint Institute of Arts.

The sold-out affair was as much a birthday party and homecoming for the graying 1960s radical-turned-poet and unrepentant pot smoker, whose eventful life is chronicled in director Steve Gebhardt's 86-minute film.

The premiere, which drew about 300 people, doubled as a fundraiser for the Flint Creative Alliance, a collective of young artists and musicians that is close to Sinclair's heart.

"John Sinclair was a real inspiration to a lot of young people in Davison to stand up for what they believed," said Moore, who drove more than 200 miles from his home near Traverse City to attend the event, even though Sinclair will show the film there Thursday at the Inside Out Gallery, part of a 12-city tour to promote the film, due Oct. 30 on DVD.

"I wanted to be here. This is essentially the first screening of it in the U.S. There are not many people from Davison High School who can say that," noted Moore, who graduated from the school in 1972, 13 years after Sinclair.

He described "Twenty to Life" as "a wonderful documentary and an accurate portrayal of the times in which we live."

The director of "Roger & Me" and "Fahrenheit 9/11" didn't speak to the audience, but Moore was part of a crowd of about 50 people who serenaded Sinclair with "Happy Birthday" (he turned 66 Tuesday) in the FIA lobby after the screening and question-and-answer session.

Moore also spent time with Sinclair and a small group of friends in a nearby board room before the show. Moore joked that he was the only one in the room who had never smoked pot. A birthday cake bearing the image of a large marijuana leaf, courtesy of local investigative journalist Pat Clawson, sat on a table nearby.

The famous filmmaker wasn't the only one who drew inspiration from the movie, a 16-year "labor of love," as Sinclair put it, which chronicles his evolution from a straitlaced kid in Davison to '60s radical (and [MC5](#) manager) in Detroit and Ann Arbor to his current status as a poet and spoken-word performer living in Amsterdam.

The title of the film is a play on words referring to the sentence Sinclair faced after a 1969 pot bust.

He eventually was sentenced to 10 years in prison for possessing two joints, which caught the attention of former Beatle John Lennon, who headlined a 1971 Ann Arbor rally to support the activist and wrote a song "[John Sinclair](#)." Sinclair was freed three days later.

Flint native Marisa R. Adamo was in town visiting from Portland, Ore. She had heard of Sinclair before but didn't realize what a big role he played in the counterculture movement of the '60s and '70s.

"I want to [Google him](#) and read more about him. I want to tell everybody about him," Adamo said.

The film may have stirred her dormant activist nature. "I feel re-energized, like I want to get back into it. I'm motivated and inspired," said Adamo, an insurance claims specialist. "What a history lesson."

Others in attendance included Sinclair's daughter, Celia; first wife, Leni; fellow White Panther Party founder Pun Plamondon; Flint native and jazz keyboardist Lyman Woodard; members of Glowb, a group that backs Sinclair whenever he performs in Flint; and trombonist Sherm Mitchell, the dean of Flint jazz, whom Sinclair credited for exposing him to jazz at an early age.

The crowd sat rapt through most of the film. They laughed at the contradictory image of the pot-loving Sinclair leaning on a Davison schools' "Drug Free School Zone" sign in one segment. They applauded when musician Bill Lynn said he avoided serving in Vietnam "because of my feet - they were in Canada with the rest of my body."

They also cheered the final sequence, when the older, balding and bearded Sinclair performed "Ain't Nobody's Business," a poem about defiance that could be his anthem today.

Sinclair took questions from the audience after the film, praising Mitchell as "where I got my early education in jazz," lamenting the impending destruction of Tiger Stadium (which he dubbed "the shrine of truth and beauty") and telling a young questioner seeking legal advice after a pot conviction to "get a really good lawyer."

He also explained why he gave up being a "political revolutionary" in 1975.

"After we got rid of Nixon and ended the war in Vietnam, the mass movement we were a part of just stopped," he said.

Asked if he'd return to political activism, Sinclair replied in a voice both gruff and bemused: "I'm a poet. A poet in today's world is a political statement. To be literate in today's world is a political statement."

Event organizer [Chris Kotarski](#) called the night a "tremendous success" and the biggest fund-raiser in his organization's young history.

"The main thing was making John happy," Kotarski said. "I knew if only 25 of his closest friends showed up, he'd be happy as hell."

Mission accomplished. Sinclair was all smiles as he posed for pictures and answered more questions outside the FIA entrance after the screening before performing at Churchill's with Kotarski's band, Glowb.

"This was a big thrill, beyond my wildest dreams," said the beaming birthday boy. "Those kids did a beautiful job. " I'm as happy as I can be."