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Grass Master

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A new documentary looks, somewhat uncritically, at the life of poet and activist John Sinclair

By John Adamian

[20 to Life](#)[The Life and Times of John Sinclair](#)

Ahh, hippies, they make such easy targets. Their idealism often seems so muddle-headed and drug-induced. The hippie dream tends not to age well. That's the feeling you get with *20 to Life: The Life and Times of John Sinclair*, a new over-loving documentary about the activist, writer and founder of the White Panther Party.

In the film Sinclair is billed as a "poet, revolutionary and political prisoner." But Sinclair's not much of a poet (he's much more compelling as a revolutionary), and director Steve Gebhardt overstuffs this film with boring footage of Sinclair doing "spoken word" performances and "musical readings" with the backing of jazz and blues bands. Among his claims to fame, Sinclair got busted in Michigan for having a few joints. He was called the leader of a drug ring, and he spent a few years in jail at the start of the 1970s. He was lucky enough to have a few high-profile friends, and after the likes of John Lennon and Yoko Ono and Allen Ginsberg showed up at a benefit concert to agitate, Sinclair was released from prison after serving about two years of a 9.5-year sentence for marijuana possession (Sinclair had other arrests, and the title relates to sentencing guidelines at the time). Sinclair also had ties to jazz icon Sun Ra and the Detroit proto-punks the MC5. If nothing else, one wishes the film included more performances by them and fewer from Sinclair.

Sinclair is a likeable old guy, a frazzle-headed old revolutionary hippie. He was radicalized when

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he saw Malcolm X speak at his college in the early '60s. He took an interesting approach, for a young white guy: he decided he was black, as his brother describes it. This was a transformation spurred by Sinclair's experience of listening to African-American music on the radio as a boy.

In the Motor City, Sinclair formed the Detroit Artists Workshop, later known as Trans Love Energy. Sinclair and his friends witnessed the fiery riots of 1967. They feared for their lives because of the violence of the police. In solidarity with Black Panthers, Sinclair founded the White Panther party, complete with a 10-point plan, one of which was to bring about a "total assault on the culture, by any means necessary including rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets," said Sinclair.

He became a vocal critic of our marijuana laws. Despite ties to Michigan, we see Sinclair take off for New Orleans, and by film's end, he's living in Amsterdam, smoking weed with impunity. When you consider how many people were locked up over a few joints, it's clear that the activism had a purpose. If at times Sinclair seems like the caricature of a gone-to-seed hippie, performing his Beatnik poetry and pontificating about the glories of vice, one realizes that, given the state of dissent today, Sinclair and the self-satisfied activism of the '60s are far better than the pervasive do-nothingness that we see everywhere now.

As Lennon said at the concert to free Sinclair, "Apathy isn't it. OK, so flower power didn't work, so, so what? We start again."

Perhaps we could learn a thing or two about shaping our future from Sinclair. "If you want to change things," he says, "you have got to take the shit into your hands."

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