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DVD Review

review by Joe Milliken, Message Arts & Entertainment



"20 To Life" The Life & Times Of
John Sinclair

To say that Michigan-native John Sinclair was simply an activist, is really only scratching the surface of one of the most creative and outspoken American characters of the Indeed Sinclair wore many hats; musician and band leader, poet and journalist, radio broadcaster, manager and producer, educator, archivist and activist.

This cultural icon was also the founder of the Detroit Artists Workshop, the manager of Michigan rockers the MC5 and the Chairman of the White Panther Party. Quite an interesting resume indeed.

Directed and produced by Steve Gebhardt, (Ladies & Gentlemen, The Rolling Stones, Bill Monroe: Father Of Bluegrass) 20 To Life documents the trials, tribulations and triumphs of an American cultural figure whose adventures have become an important fixture representing activism in the late 60's.

Sinclair was an early victim of the 60's "war on drugs" who faced 20 years to life in prison for giving two joints to an undercover policewoman, and subsequently mounted an historic challenge against Michigan's marijuana laws. Sinclair would serve 29 months in prison before his legal victory on appeal changed the laws.

The "John Sinclair Freedom Rally" spearheaded his "campaign" and included such supporters as John and Yoko Ono, Bob Segar, Stevie Wonder and Allen Ginsberg. Sinclair would subsequently be released from prison just three days after the historic event.

The elements, interviews and music of this story are uniquely outlined by the director, which includes footage of the MC5, Lennon and Commander Cody and His Lost Planet.

Although this documentary is primarily coming straight from the source (through interviews) by Sinclair and his family, friends and associates, it doesn't quite seem to add any further insight into the legacy of this cultural warrior.