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John Sinclair is profiled in *20 to Life*.
(Photo/Leni Sinclair)

20 to Life: The Life & Times of John Sinclair

★★★★

by **Eric Waggoner**
8/4/2004

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Along with 2002's *MC5: A True Testimonial*, Steve Gebhardt's *20 to Life: The Life & Times of John Sinclair* provides a sorely missed piece in American cultural history. But *20 to Life* has a helluva lot more ground to cover, since in addition to being the MC5's manager and Svengali, John Sinclair was present, either centrally or tangentially, at numerous major countercultural events. The nascent "Drug War," the Midwestern poetry scene, the radio promotion of avant-jazz, urban hipster culture, the underground/alternative press and the community arts boom of the early 1970s: John Sinclair played a greater or lesser part in every one.

Thankfully, Gebhardt's film treats its subject with the serious intent (as well as the frequently playful tone) that it deserves. Moving deftly between archival footage and present-day interviews with Sinclair's close associates — most notably Wayne Kramer, first wife Leni and White Panther Party Minister of Defense/fellow Drug War casualty Pun Plamondon — *20 to Life* does a yeoman's job of summarizing Sinclair's high-profile public record. More remarkably, it places those major events in the broader context of his lifelong commitment to artistic and personal freedom. Sinclair was always a savvy, if perhaps overly optimistic, revolutionary. He wanted *Kick Out the Jams* to sell a million copies, he states here, so the WPP could buy radio stations with the money, thereby disseminating the revolutionary message over America's airwaves. ("It's very important to remember that we were all on acid," he instructs an assembled crowd elsewhere in the film.) His long evolution from middle-class college student to elder libertarian statesman — and, in its closing minutes, predictably overjoyed resident of Amsterdam — serves as the film's major arc.

The White Panther Party, the Detroit riots, and the infamous "ten-for-two" sentence and the subsequent "Free John" movement are all examined in some detail, and in this regard Gebhardt's film is a valuable historical document. But the impact of that history on Sinclair and his home and family is the primary subject; footage of his release into his wife and daughter's arms after two years in prison is especially powerful and moving. Like Terry Zwigoff's *Crumb*, a documentary it very much resembles in tone and structure, *20 to Life* takes a damn-near mythological public figure and manages to humanize him, without indulging in hagiography or lessening his significance. Highly recommended.

See *20 to Life: The Life and Times of John Sinclair* and *Kick Out the Jams!* The MC5 Live at the *Tenny Street Roadhouse* (22361 West Village Drive, Dearborn) on Thursday, Aug. 5. The first screening will begin at 8:30 p.m. and the second at 11 p.m. Call 313-278-3677 for further information.

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