

[Home Page](#)

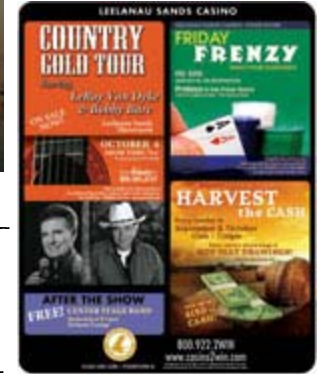
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- [Features](#)
- [Letters](#)
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- [Other Opinions](#)
- [Region Watch](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Art](#)
- [Dining](#)
- [Modern Rock](#)
- [Other Music](#)

Listings

- [Classifieds](#)
- [Personals](#)
- [Hot Dates](#)
- [Nightlife](#)

Other Links

- [Movies](#)
- [TV](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Stock Market](#)
- [Sports Scores](#)

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[view archived features](#)

The Legendary John Sinclair

Rick Coates

If you lived in southeastern Michigan during the mid-'60s to the early '70s, you witnessed a lot. From the Detroit Riots to peace and social change protests to major music festivals. Throw in Motown and the Detroit area rock music scene, and that corner of the United States seemed to be at the center of it all. And if you could put one individual in the center of all of that, it would have been John Sinclair.

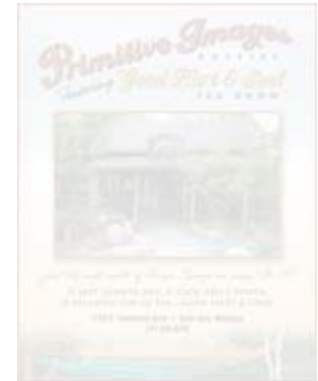
Whether you agree with his views or not, you've got to admit that Sinclair made a cultural impact. During that window, he played a major editorial role in the "Fifth Estate" Detroit's underground newspaper. He managed proto-punk rockers the MC5, founded the White Panthers, spent 29 months in prison for selling two marijuana joints to an undercover police officer, had a song written about him by John Lennon, had a major concert in his honor to free him from his prison sentence, oversaw the Ann Arbor Jazz and Blues Festivals, wrote the book "Guitar Army" and led protest rallies against the war and marches for the legalization of marijuana.

Now his life has been captured on film by famed documentary filmmaker Steve Gebhardt (Ladies and Gentleman: The Rolling Stones; Imagine.) The documentary film "20 to Life" was released last month in Europe and will make its US debut on October 2nd (Sinclair's 66th birthday) in Flint, where Sinclair grew up. He and Gebhardt will come to Traverse City two days later for a public viewing of the film, a Q&A session with the audience, and a concert at the Inside Out Gallery.

Work on the documentary began in 1991 and took 16 years to complete because of the complexities of Sinclair's life. John Sinclair's life has included a wide range of work; the titles of poet, performing artist, bandleader, music journalist, radio broadcaster, record producer, educator, archivist, cultural and political activist, founder of the Detroit Artists Workshop, chairman of the White Panther Party, and manager of the MC5 only touch the surface of his career path.

"20 to Life" evolved out of another documentary, Ten for Two: The John Sinclair Freedom Rally, in which the famed concert at Crisler Arena in Ann Arbor (featuring John Lennon, Bob Seger, Stevie Wonder) was filmed on December 10th, 1971. Gebhardt was one of the cameramen on that project.

"After 20 years it became clear to us both that Ten for Two was not going to be released, and we felt that it was necessary to tell his story, so we began work on the film," said Gebhardt. "We worked on the project sporadically and



put it through an unusually detailed editorial scrutiny. We went to great lengths to make sure it was carefully assembled."

Sinclair himself is pleased with the film, and feels that it accurately portrays him and is very detailed, with the exception of his life in Detroit from 1975-1991. Sinclair has fond memories of his Detroit days, when at times he was leading the political protests.

"Detroit was a great place to be, I don't believe that there is any best place or best thing," said Sinclair. "But that was a great time and it was good to be in Detroit."

But was it really all good? There must have been some regrets, or things Sinclair would have done differently.

"As for regrets. I wouldn't given that policewoman the 2 joints," said Sinclair. "As for changing something, I would have approved charging more than \$3 for the John Sinclair Freedom Rally."

After his release from prison just three days after the concert, he spent time getting involved with the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival. Eventually New Orleans came calling, and he moved in 1991 to host a radio show on jazz and blues; he also became editor of the "Living Blues Magazine." Sinclair grew up with an appreciation of jazz and blues and his brief journey into the world of rock and roll was enough for him.

"I have avoided pop music like the plague since 1973. It is music made by millionaires with whom I have no emotional connection whatsoever," said Sinclair. "I grew up listening to blues & R&B in the 1950s, the same tradition which produced the MC5; plus they were also listening to jazz and were called 'the avant-rock MC-5,' when I first met their music."

During the '60s, music served as one of the primary vehicles for social and political change. Sinclair was at the sound beat of it all. He recalls how the youth were energized and inspired by the music in those days to make social and political change, something he feels is currently missing from today.

"As I mentioned before, I have long given up listening to the pop music of today," said Sinclair. "If I were to give one piece of advice for the youth of today or ask that they take one thing away from this documentary, it would be to turn off their TV sets and do something creative for the first time in 40 years."

Gebhardt agrees.

"We have had four showings to date overseas; the film has been viewed by a cross-section of the public, and has been very well received. We are estactic about the response," said Gebhardt. "I would hope that the younger generation in the United States would watch this film and get some sense of the reality of the world we live in today." For that world we live in today, Sinclair has chosen Amsterdam. He moved there a few years ago.

"To paraphrase Lenny Bruce when he was asked 'why use narcotics': 'why not?' I thought if I had to starve in America and get evicted from my house, why couldn't I starve in Amsterdam instead, where they don't care if you get high and nobody is armed."

Sinclair has long been a proponent for the legalization of drugs in this country. At one time he was the Michigan Chapter president of NORML, the group that has been lobbying for legal use of marijuana. His vocal support of drugs made him a target of, as they called it back in those days, "The Man," and he became the first public iconic martyr of the war on drugs. When Sinclair comes to Traverse City, he will be in the hometown of both his good friend and co-founder of the White Panthers Pun Plamondon and former Governor Milliken, who signed in the drug laws that resulted in Sinclair's stiff prison sentence.

In addition to touring in support of the documentary "20 to Life", Sinclair is also promoting the republishing of his 1971 book "Guitar Army: Rock & Revolution With the MC5 and the White Panther Party." The book was the manual for social and cultural revolt, and proclaimed that "Rock and Roll is a Weapon for Cultural Revolution." Much of the

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book was written while Sinclair was in prison. The revised edition includes two-dozen previously unpublished photos and recent writings from Sinclair. It also includes a bonus CD that contains rare recordings of MC5 and other Detroit-area revolutionary bands, statements from Black Panther leader Bobby Seale on the White Panthers, and recordings of the original White Panther rallies.

"In my day we were trying to reflect on our circumstances through rock and roll. I don't think young people have that type of reflection today," said Sinclair. "I wrote 'Guitar Army' for kids. It really isn't a book; it is essentially a collection of columns from underground newspapers."

As for "20 to Life", Gebhardt and his team have done an excellent job capturing the real-life story of this legendary poet-provocateur and American cultural warrior whose exploits have reverberated throughout the international underground for 40 years. The story is told by Sinclair and his family, friends and associates through the years, and is highlighted by a series of electrifying performances by Sinclair's contemporary blues and jazz ensembles.

The soundtrack was supervised by Sinclair himself and features music by the MC-5, John Lennon, Chuck Berry, Howlin' Wolf, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, Allen Ginsberg, Sly & the Family Stone, Thelonious Monk, Charles Neville, the Wild Magnolias and the Re-Birth Brass Band.

"20 to Life" will be shown at the Inside Out Gallery in Traverse City Thursday October 4. Doors will open at 6 pm and introductory comments will be given by filmmaker Steve Gebhardt at 7 pm. The screening will take place from 7:30 to 9:00 pm and a Q&A with the audience and Sinclair and Gebhardt will take place from 9:00 to 9:30. An after party and jam session hosted by Sinclair will begin at 10:00 pm. For more information check out www.johnsinclair.us.

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