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20 TO LIFE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOHN SINCLAIR

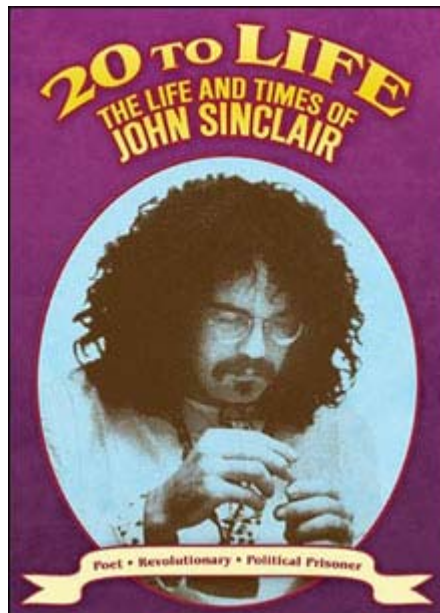
MVD



By **JEFF TAMARKIN**

October 8, 2007 3:59:19 PM

John Sinclair was the poster boy for the radicalization of American youth in the '60s. Looking like a character out of a *Furry Freak Brothers* comic, he co-founded the White Panther Party, managed the proto-punk MC5 and, most notoriously, became a victim of the Nixon government's war on hippies. Convicted of handing over two joints to an undercover narc in 1969, Sinclair was sentenced to up to 10 years in prison. It took the intervention of John Lennon, who in 1971 headlined a benefit concert to spread awareness of his ludicrous situation, for the threat of lengthy incarceration to disappear: three days later, Sinclair was sprung, after 29 months in the clink. Steve Gebhardt's documentary follows his trajectory from jazz/R&B-loving young Michiganite "surrounded by whiteness" to countercultural hero to, now, sharp-minded graybeard who spends much of his time maniacally reciting blues poetry over the backing of improvising musicians and playing his beloved jazz and blues on the radio. Gebhardt intercuts vintage footage with contemporary interviews (MC5's Wayne Kramer; Sinclair's ex-wife, Leni) and a running commentary from Sinclair, who alternately revisits his old haunts in Detroit and Ann Arbor and tours blues landmarks of the South as he recalls his exploits. Sinclair emerged from the '60s with his ideals intact. He eventually left Michigan for New Orleans (he now resides in Amsterdam), but his message and mission remain intact and timely.



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