

1. **Steve Gebhardt, a documentarist of musicians like John Lennon that have been icons for whole generations and of militant, activist musicians like John Sinclair whose music has embodied the spirit of rebellion in the US for the past 40 years. Why do you think it is important for people to be exposed to a life story of a musician through a documentary? What can a documentary as an art form contribute that is different than the artist's own music or a simply a music video?**

John Sinclair's story is "my story." He came from a place in the Midwest familiar to me. The inspirations of his youth were mine as well. The music he heard on the radio as a youth I heard as well and had a similar impact upon my brain. We expressed that effect ourselves in different ways but in the end the job had been done and that was that. Casting Brad Pitt as John Sinclair isn't high on the agenda of Hollywood. They've never been able to portray the concept of recreational substances (pot, reefer, weed) without getting it wrong. This film evolved into the present version due to the absurd reality of making a documentary film which celebrates hedonism in a conservative Midwestern city.

The art form aspect is what evolved from this period between 1991 and now. The production was actually completed 2 weeks ago when we made the masters reflecting recent editing which technically replaced some music selections with others but while that was the purpose that reopened the show to scrutiny by the editor. When we made masters of what we intended to be complete in May, 2004 there was every intention to be done. When you open the Pandora's box of editorial choice to change a tune then why not change the visual effects. Given we were there anyhow, let's start at the beginning and see what we can improve? This film seems to end the film era and emerge with digital video. But why not? We've used every imaginable media source in creating this work. Tom Hayes has sculpted this amazing tapestry sometime out of scraps. What excites me is that it escaped the look of film and somehow becomes a bit like the boxes of Joseph Cornell. A collection of disparate parts inside a compartmentalized frame.

2. **Please talk about your long standing work with John Lennon and Yoko Ono and what that association has meant for you in terms of familiarity with that particular music world.**

My association with John & Yoko was a result of Jonas Mekas recommending me to shoot film for them which wasn't too "avant garde" or something I interpreted as staying in focus, on exposure and steady. That was me. I called my partner Bob Fries in Cincinnati and he drove to New York right away. We were going to shoot a couple of films for John & Yoko. Who wouldn't drop everything? That began a 3-year ride that was without a doubt the most exciting thing I ever did. It is true that I had begun shooting *Escalator Over the Hill* a month earlier and had met Don Cherry, Jack Bruce and a host of famous musicians already. It's also true that the Anthology Film Archives where I was the manager was frequented by famous filmmakers and artists on a daily basis. So what? I admired Yoko's work for a few years by then. Lennon was my favorite Beatle. Look, I'm from Ohio and in New York to make films and what an opportunity. Jonas brought me there because I'd brought him to Cincinnati as well as all of the avant garde film and music movement. Jonas hooked me up with Carla Bley & Mike Mantler. He hooked me up with John & Yoko. Jonas told me about Phillip Glass and I went to his concerts. Jonas introduced me to Harry Smith. I had come to New York at just that moment and went for it.

3. Please talk about the process making "20 to life". In the literature it says that the project started in 1991 and was completed in 2004. 13 years a long time to complete a project. What made this particular documentary so challenging?

We began "Twenty to Life" in 1991 at a time when I was working on the Bill Monroe film. These were shot on 16mm film at that time and transferred to video for editing purposes. Non-linear editing had just begun and the digital revolution was about to happen.

John Sinclair had advocated for the release of "Ten for Two" from the time it was withdrawn by John & Yoko from circulation. Neither Sinclair or I had any sense of the wrath being unleashed on Lennon by the FBI. Lennon had told me that he was being spied on from across the street (Bank Street) and was paranoid. I thought who'd watch Lennon, he just sits in his bedroom and plays his guitar. Then it got weird. I was sent to find another apartment for them. The village wasn't the answer. The Dakota was and that was that. As the grip of the government tightened our activities at Yoko changed. John & Yoko went to California in the summer of

1972 and I got hired to shoot the Rolling Stones in Texas during their "Exile On Main Street" tour. I assembled the same crew we'd used on "Ten for Two" but this time the audio was recorded by Record Plant. They had 2 16-track recorders in their truck. We had worked with them on the "Concert for Bangla Desh" at Madison Square Garden. We each recorded the show but our tapes ended up being the concert masters since the Record Plant recorder fell off their truck. I advanced the crew by going to Kansas City and observing the show there then flying to Dallas where I met my crew. Most of us were shooting with cameras using 1,200 ft. magazines which shot for 33 minutes on a load. We shot with 5 cameras and staggered the loads so that we'd always have 4 cameras running and generally all 5 were on. The lighting was designed for the show not a film. There are differences but we went with what we were given and were able to replicate the experience of a Stones concert. Not like television which pumps light on everything but we wanted the montage to be strong. We never showed the audience but rather shot tight close-ups of the band. Later I blew up these 16mm

I'd met Tom Hayes at Ohio Arts Council panel meetings earlier and hired him as one of the shooters on Monroe. We have similar ideas about the world. He & his assistant Monte Zukowski volunteered to begin shooting this film on Sinclair. With this funded film on Monroe happening I had cache with film professionals then until I was able to get grants to fund the production. I had little idea how hard it would be.

I had made this film Ten for Two in Ann Arbor during 1971-1972 for Joko Films as a "test" run for a concert tour John Lennon hoped to do. When Sinclair was released from prison and we were then sent footage of that release the test became a story with vivid closure.

We were naïve to think that making a film like this would go unnoticed. We had made films like "Fly," "Up Your Legs Forever" and were working on completing the film "Imagine" when we all went off to Michigan for the John Sinclair Freedom Rally. I had moved to New York but a year earlier. I knew Jerry Rubin from Cincinnati. We had gone to high school together; we had a mutual friend who was the afternoon newspaper film critic. His "yippie" persona amused me. Now Jerry has John & Yoko's ear and is politicizing their activities. John & Yoko had a long

history of supporting left-leaning causes in the U.K. and around Europe and John's activist spirit no doubt triggered his bust in London. He was not unfamiliar with repercussions from the police. I don't think Lennon was shocked by the reaction of the Nixon people but once the whole Watergate thing was done we knew they'd stop at nothing to exercise their vision. The interesting thing is the same family of thugs runs the American war machine today. "The wiretapping of citizens without a warrant" that Pun Plamondon talks about is happening again today.

I knew these filmmakers in Ann Arbor who ran the Ann Arbor Film Festival at that time. George Manupelli was a filmmaker who was a great cameraman. He had an army of support people who fleshed out our crew which consisted of my partner Bob Fries and some guys who were "running" our business in Cincinnati. We also had a recording truck outfitted with a 16-track recorder and mixing board which had just mixed "Escalator Over the Hill," the 3-record set, in our studio in Cincinnati. We also had the confidence that we could do anything. This was a very active period for all of us involved. We worked all day every day and often well into the night.

4. **20 to life. The Life and Times of John Sinclair. Why did you choose that title? Please talk about how that particular episode and experience in John Sinclair's life became paradigmatic of his all body work. What were the challenges in capturing and conveying the relationship between John Sinclair's music and politics over a 40 year span?**

"Twenty to Life" followed "Ten for Two" by twenty years and represented our intention to tell the story of John Sinclair. There was a different motive in 1971 when we shot "Ten for Two." But later it seemed unless we did it that nobody would. We began by shooting John in the van on Detroit freeways and Leni in a park near her house setting the traditional talking head format we'd use to get the story on the screen. This went on and on and because I was working on Bill Monroe as well with a more pressing completion on hand there was no need to rush. We needed to gather the narrative. We filmed "Bye ya," that first shoot and then poems at a public radio station in Cincinnati with Ed Moss. John's poetry was becoming a filmic device in contrast to the traditional "story of his life." Now we were looking at fleshing out the story as well as discovering more connections to

his life through this verse. After some years we had shot John performing in every imaginable venue. We had all of the narrative we thought we could use. Then we needed to edit the whole thing into a film. We had gone to New Orleans in 2001 to shoot John record a blues cd. He had a manager who agreed to underwrite the shoot but there were financing issues. Another year passed and a miracle happened when John had found a man to release that cd on an established label. He also agreed to fund the completion of the film as well as Sinclair's release tour from New Orleans to Chicago on the train. First we shot Sinclair in Detroit covering details in the narrative we felt needed clarification then went off on this train ride. This gave me an opportunity to contextualize Sinclair's love of the blues in situ. We had assembled a large archive of pictures and hours of 16mm film shot by Leni Sinclair while she & John were married. They were involved in publishing from their beginning and the creation of the Artists Workshop in Detroit. They kept it all. We assembled from every source we could locate pieces to apply to bring the narrative to life. That's the high point of Hayes' work merging all that funky imagery into a fluid composition.

5. The title of the documentary alludes to the beginning of one of the many domestic "wars" the US has engaged in during the last 40 years, the "war on drugs". Please comment on the importance of that war for the American population, keeping in mind that in Europe it has never reached that level of repression.

There is a strong desire in the America to regulate pleasure. Marijuana was legal until 1936 and in my opinion took the hit after prohibition legalized alcohol a few years earlier. There is a strong desire to regulate everything. This has historically been the job of older men. The war on drugs is meant to criminalize what has become a huge clandestine industry. Classing marijuana as a drug is their way of being totally unrealistic. Ignoring marijuana would be sensible but for the fact that it makes people feel good and we can't have that. We build more & more jails to house all of these prisoners for non-violent "crimes."

The government can't seem to do anything now. Because there is such polarity between sides any resultant laws are so riddled with add on "pork" that what remains is so compromised that it doesn't work. It isn't getting any better anywhere. It's still illegal

on the books most everywhere and local policing authorities can crack down on whim.

6. In your long activity as a documentarian you have focused on the life of such diverse musicians as John Lennon, the Rolling Stones, Bill Monroe (the father of bluegrass music), John Sinclair, the blues poet, you have been associated with Philip Glass and with jazz poets, all very different types of musical expression covering a long expanse of time. What do you think music has represented for these two or three generations covered in that time span?

Music has informed my life. Before I made films I studied architecture however I was listening all of the time. As with Sinclair and Lennon we each were infected by the blues and jazz and black popular music which preceded rock. In my case I grew up in a house where opera and classical music were heard. My parents were artists. Painters who studied in Paris and lived in Cincinnati. We have a long (for America that is) tradition of a summer opera and symphony orchestra. While I was growing up I'd attend the opera 3 or 4 times each summer. I had season tickets to the symphony where I saw Glenn Gould twice as well as every other pianist & violin virtuoso touring in the early 60's. I just saw Faust 3 days ago. But back to musicians. It's artists in general. People who maybe do things a different way. It seems that I had something in common with them more than I did with accountants maybe.

7. Rock, bluegrass and blues, three very different musical styles that have been the object of your documentaries. What were some of the challenges in capturing the spirit of each?

And Free Jazz in "Escalator Over the Hill." I was impressed by Raoul Coutard the great cinematographer for Godard & Truffaut. I want to bring his way of seeing to my work. Only live events are hard to anticipate sometimes. Stylistic conventions aside my ambition is to present a means to enjoy music and performers similar to a walk in an exciting place if you take the time to look at the whole thing carefully.

8. Connected to the previous questions, what are the changes you see in the way music reaches people today compared to the 1960s and 70s? What have been the major factors impacting people's experience of music (particularly the younger generations) due to developments in the music industry and technology, not to mention the overall phenomenon of globalization?

The present state of music only confuses me. Anything you want to do is much easier than it was a decade ago. If we use the model of the Golden Age of Greece then thing started going downhill once the peak had been reached. It was the trip uphill that was the great part. Today we have been educated by Billie Holiday's voice and Mick Jagger's version of Robert Johnson's "Love In Vain." Those hang on the wall of the Ufizzi of music, our minds. I don't know what's happened except to say we're now living in a musical Tower of Babel. It may take a modern day Palladio to rewrite a 1955 Vitruvian honking sax line to get us moving forward again.

9. John Sinclair stands as an example of an artist who seeks to unite his art and his politics. Do you think that goal is harder to achieve today than it was in the 60's and 70's?

Absolutely. We have been conditioned to play the part of a consumer. We live in a totally material world and not a very safe one either. It's like passing just and effective laws. Can't happen. Imagine if we had to eat a diet of food created by politicians? Ugh.

10. What do you think is the importance of showing documentaries like 20 to Life in terms of contributing to the debate on the relation between political activism and art,? Do you see any important differences in the terms of the debate in the US and in Europe?

We won't know until we do. We made this film to show to people who otherwise are informed by the system. There is no idea of truth in that scheme. There doesn't appear to be any movement afoot in the USA to actually change things. Complaining yes. But none of the politicians have the nerve to espouse a radical point of view. They wouldn't be elected first of all. Secondly they would be discredited by all the others.

11. The cast list in this documentary reads like a "Who's Who?" of 60's and 70's artists and iconic figures. What have been the responses in the cities in the US where the documentaries were shown? What kind of audiences did the documentary attract? What were the parts of the documentary that were the most resonant with them? Has the documentary been shown in Europe? What were the audiences and responses there like? Did they differ from those in the United States?

We are just beginning to screen to audiences outside our own cities and audiences familiar with Sinclair much less the politics covered in the film. I'm curious to see how today's young people

react to the sixties in the American Midwest. It was real life not theoretical.

12. John Sinclair has had numerous tours in Italy and last year was recognized with the Matteo Salvatore, an important award. Why do you think that it is important to take documentaries like this on John Sinclair to European audiences and Italian audiences in particular? Do you think they can have a positive impact at this time in history when the issue of Italy as part of the “alliance of the willing” has serious weaknesses at the level of the people if not at the level of politicians?

John Sinclair’s film affords the viewer with a story of a unique and complex individual who was the poster child for social change. It’s a refreshing approach to protest. If any of us hope to cause change whether on globalization or global warming or electing political candidates then this film deserves a close watching. That is regardless of being an Italian or from the Gaza Strip.