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20 to Life: The Life and Times of John Sinclair

Director: Steve Gebhardt

Cast: With appearances by John Lennon & Yoko Ono, Allen Ginsberg, MC-5, Up, Ed Sanders

(2007) Rated: Unrated

US DVD release date: 30 October 2007 (MVD)

by **Stuart Henderson**

John Sinclair is a relic from another time.

He's an artifact—a living, breathing, pot-fuming trinket from that drawer full of oddities that was the late '60s. A Detroit-based Beat kid by the early '60s, Sinclair had graduated to pot and protest by mid-decade, positioning himself at the centre of the Motor City's radical scene before gaining national prominence as manager for the flash-in-the-pan rock band the MC-5.

Always enamored of black America-- a kind of superficial, but reverent, obsession with black "authenticity" coloured his worldview—he would establish the revolutionary White Panthers in solidarity with the much more famous Black Panther Party, whom he worshipped. He would then find his celebrity underlined when he was jailed for possession of two measly joints of marijuana for what was, at least at first, supposed to be 20 years-to-life in the penitentiary.

Suddenly re-cast as a political prisoner, it was widely believed among radicals on the hip left that he had really been imprisoned because of his outspoken politics, a campaign raged to free Sinclair from Jacksonville prison. As years passed, many great heroes of the age came to his aid, culminating in a massive concert and benefit headlined by John Lennon and Yoko Ono in late 1971. In no way as a result of this agitation and protest, he would eventually be released after some thirty months behind bars.

There is a film to be made about John Sinclair, but this rambling bit of hagiography sure isn't it.

An amateurish documentary like this has only one real purpose, nostalgia. There is no lesson here, moral or otherwise, nor is there anything of an examination of the spirit of the man at the center of it all. Indeed, even the times in which he was influential (a brief period from about 1966-1971) aren't given more than a cursory contextualization. As a record of Detroit's radical scene it is perhaps useful, but if you know anything of the history of the Artist Workshop, the MC-5 or the White Panthers before coming in, you won't be much enlightened on your way out. Sadly, this is yet another film on the 1960s with nothing new to offer, no fresh perspectives, no real insight. It's just a bland, even pathetic, requiem for an idealized youth.

Why do so many films, books, and record albums which set out to explore that turbulent period wind up telling the same old tired stories? Why do they so often present a celebratory vision of a man (or, occasionally, woman) at the centre of some vibrant movement, which, inevitably, inexorably, falls apart by 1975? *20 to Life* operates as a tribute to John Sinclair, a man whom the filmmaker clearly admires, and as a result offers no critical distance. This is perhaps why we feel so uncomfortable watching the final 40 minutes of the film (the section covering the 30-odd years since Sinclair's release and, let's face it, the moment when he ceased to be relevant in any meaningful way). Moving from city to city, eventually finding a home in an Amsterdam coffee house (where, in what amounts to the climax of the film, we see him sitting around smoking legal pot for the first time), Sinclair winds up looking like a guy who used to be pretty cool, but now seems kind of lame. I mean this is a man whose whole struggle is happily reduced here to some celebratory toking on an absurdly huge joint.

And so, as we watch this aged hippie, his wild white hair shooting clownlike in all directions, spouting mediocre "Beat" poetry with his blues and free jazz bands, pulling on doobies the size a baby's arm, and clinging to a vague don't-tread-on-me ideology, we, well, cringe. He's constantly talking, this "cultural warrior", this "poet-provocateur", but he isn't saying much of anything. Is this what the film is supposed to be about? Is this the legacy of the radical left? One shudders to think.

RATING: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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