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April 22

## Radical 1960s activist will appear in Portland

By [Tom Atwell](#)  
Staff Writer

John Sinclair, a self-described radical activist from the 1960s who has been the subject of a John Lennon song and a documentary film, will make two appearances in Portland on Saturday.



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John Sinclair, former leader of the White Panthers, is shown in a 1971 photo. He now considers himself more of a cultural radical – broadcaster, poet, writer and musician.

The Associated Press

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### IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** “20 to Life” screening, followed by Q&A with John Sinclair

**WHEN:** 5 p.m. Saturday.

**WHERE:** Space Gallery, 538 Congress St., Portland. Free.

**INFO:** [www.space538.org](http://www.space538.org)

**WHAT ELSE:** Concert with Sinclair reading and music by the Free Radicals, an improvising ensemble of jazz musicians, 9 p.m. Saturday, North Star Music Cafe, 228 Congress St., Portland. \$8.

[www.northstarmusiccafe.com](http://www.northstarmusiccafe.com)

He will attend a showing of "20 to Life," a documentary about his life, and answer questions at 5 p.m. at Space Gallery, 538 Congress St.

At 9 p.m. at North Star Cafe, 225 Congress St., Sinclair will read selections from his work, backed up by the

Maine-based jazz group the Free Radicals. The movie screening is free, and the concert costs \$8.

More recently, Sinclair has been hosting a weekly radio show in Amsterdam, where he lives much of the time.

His most recent book is "It's All Good, a John Sinclair Reader," and his most recent CD is "Detroit Life," which was released last year and will be available at the concert.

He's going to London in May to record a single with his band, the Dirty Strangers.

Sinclair said he is coming to Portland "because they invited me. That's the best reason."

But he also has two close Portland connections: In his youth in Detroit, he was good friends with Paul Lichter of the Dimensions in Jazz concert series, and in Amsterdam, he became friends with local poet Gil Helmick.

"Gil Helmick kind of germinated this thing and pulled Paul in," Sinclair said. "I have this other gig in Portsmouth, and that made it all very easy."

Sinclair first gained notice in the 1960s by writing for underground publications, managing the groundbreaking rock band the MC5 and helping to found the White Panther Party, which worked in support of the Black Panthers.

"I was a radical activist trying to overthrow the government, and that failed," Sinclair said in a telephone interview just after he attended a Tigers game in Detroit. "I went to prison instead."

In 1969, Sinclair was arrested for giving two marijuana joints to an undercover policewoman, and faced a possible sentence of 20 years to life. Upon conviction, he received a sentence of 9½ to 10 years.

A "Free John Now" concert in December 1971 featured John Lennon, who wrote a song for Sinclair as part of the event and issued it on his 1972 album "Some Time in New York City." Others performing included Yoko Ono, Phil Ochs, Bob Seger, Bobby Seale and Allen Ginsberg. Sinclair was released from prison three days after the concert.

Steve Gebhardt's documentary, "20 to Life," takes its title from the arrest and covers it, but it also goes beyond the arrest up to 2004, when the film was made.

Although Sinclair now considers himself more of a cultural radical -- broadcaster, poet, writer and musician -- he still has some decided positions.

Asked what happened to the 1960s movement that was supposed to change the world and didn't, Sinclair said: "I don't know. Instead we got Ronald Reagan and George Bush, just the opposite. People gave up, I guess."

Some commentators have compared the current tea party movement to the 1960s radicals because the activists are anti-government. Sinclair isn't buying it.

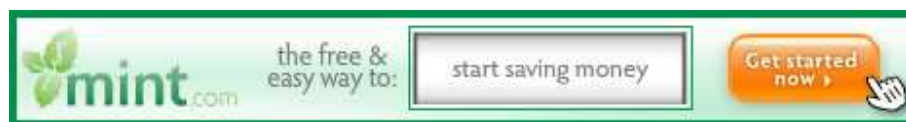
President Obama is doing a good job, Sinclair said, and he especially likes the recently negotiated nuclear reduction treaty.

He said the tea party activists "are being manipulated by the rich people who are angry that they lost control," Sinclair said. "The people voted them out by an overwhelming majority, and now they won't even participate in the government.

"How they say they are defending the Constitution, I just don't know."

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