



Paradigms Still Need Subverting

By Rob Patterson

Where are the cultural activists and revolutionaries of today like the best of those of the 1960s? That was the question that struck me while watching the recently released DVD of *Twenty to Life: The Life & Times of John Sinclair*.

Well-seasoned bohos (such as myself) will remember Sinclair as the founder of Detroit's White Panther Party and manager of the MC5 who was jailed for a term of 20 years to life for giving two joints to an undercover cop. John Lennon and Yoko Ono were among those who joined his cause, resulting in Lennon's song "Free John Sinclair" and his appearance at the John Sinclair Freedom Rally. I still recall gleefully reading his liner notes to the debut MC5 album as a teenage "head" (the term, along with "freak," that genuine late '60s counterculturalists used rather than the media-generated "hippie").

Sure, his album gatefold manifesto of free love, dope and rock'n'roll — matched by the 5's truly revolutionary musicality — may be tie-dyed in the rhetoric of the day to some degree. But as an agitprop avatar in a time when Bob Dylan sagaciously advised to not follow leaders, time now proves Sinclair one of the true good guys, which ergo makes him one of the greats.

Why so few cultural and countercultural rabbleroising leaders today? Sinclair's inherent goodness and bohemian depth were overshadowed by the monstrous Charles Manson, and many other cult and movement leaders who abased, abused and/or were twisted or tossed off course by the power they accumulated through leadership. Yet Sinclair's own maturation has proven that he was one '60s activist who truly was about fighting the power. And doing so by plugging into the potency of genuinely cool culture, e.g. music, literature, philosophy, spirituality and global life and thought.

In the mid '80s in New York City I spent a rather long-into-the-night evening chatting and imbibing at the original Tramps, a small but mighty music bar and cool hang on the edge of "Downtown" (which was below 14th Street), with Sinclair on one side of me. And on my other side was Giorgio Gomelsky, whose London club Crawdaddy launched The Rolling Stones and manager of The Yarbuds, among other accomplishments and adventures in the zeitgeist. I'd like to think we were a trio of lovable rogues,

provocateurs, raconteurs and sharp thinkers that question and subvert the dominant paradigm.

From the vibe of his company, Sinclair certainly seemed like someone whose heart and mind were in the right place, and was quite the charming presence. His sagaciousness and winning aura were certainly in full force in another documentary appearance — the unreleased MC5: A True Testimonial, one of the most compelling music group docs I've ever seen (and well worth seeking out as a bootleg. Though normally I shy away from advising folks to consume pirated properties, since a friend of mine who produced the film is okay with it being unofficially out there — a dispute between the filmmakers and the MC5's Wayne Kramer put the film on ice — I say go for it). In it, Sinclair was the voice of wise historical, political and cultural history.

His own doc finds him still fired by the bohemian culture that led him outside of conformity in the first place, but more artist (music and spoken word) than activist these days. For as he said in a recent interview of his political past, "I'm not angry and I'm not trying to save the world. It was pretty insistent that it didn't want to be saved. I was like okay, I'll go back to writing poems and listening to music. I was willing to try, it seemed like such a great idea, you know, and then it turned into shit."

So instead of declaring "Kick out the jams, motherf**kers", Sinclair today nudges rather than kicks. But in his day, he was one of those whose challenge to the prevailing culture came from the right place. Though the main likely reason we don't have countercultural activists of his sort today may be the conformity that herded many '60s freaks back in line and even suffuses contemporary youth — true rebellion isn't a tattoo but a state of mind and way of living — perhaps his example may inspire some from a new generation to take bold steps outside the lines. And for anyone with an interest in what the core values and philosophies of those heady days of rebellion four decades ago were like, *Twenty to Life* is a fine place to get the best side of the '60s story.

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