

by Eric Allen

Today has been a busy day for John Sinclair. It's the day before his 66th birthday and he has already completed interviews with a few local radio stations, including his former employers, 101.9 WDET. 66-years-old and counting ... Who would have guessed the left wing poet/journalist/activist would have lasted past his 30s? Not many. Certainly not Sinclair himself.

As I sit waiting for Sinclair to arrive at our pre-determined destination, word shoots through the place that Sinclair is coming home to Michigan this week. It's not hard to understand the kinetic vibe; The Amsterdam Café is clearly his crowd. They are anti-authoritarian music lovers who most certainly share a taste for Sinclair's prized obsession — marijuana. I can't help but laugh as I think about how surprised they will be when he walks in the door.

While this thought crosses my mind, a hulking mass of a man walks through the café's small door. His swirling grey hair and small trademark spectacles mark that John Sinclair has made his entrance into the small Cass community establishment. Everyone stands to hug him and shake his hand — it's a hero's welcome for Detroit's revolutionary extraordinaire.

Sinclair has come back to Michigan this week for the U.S. premiere of a new film about his life. The documentary, *20 to Life*, follows Sinclair from the days of his Flint childhood through his current residence in Amsterdam. We talked about what his youth was like and his early days as a political activist on the campus of WSU.

**What was life like growing up in Flint?
What were your parents like?**

My parents were squares. You'll see in the movie I was quite destructive. I describe it as living on the South Pole.

**It seems like most people just accept their parents' political values as their own.
How did you develop your own political philosophies?**

Well, they beamed rhythm and blues in on the radio and it transformed me. I wanted to know where this music came from, so I started hanging out with black people because I wanted to know how they made this great music. Then I found out and just went over there instead.

So was it strictly rebelling from your parents, or just that it was something new that you were into?

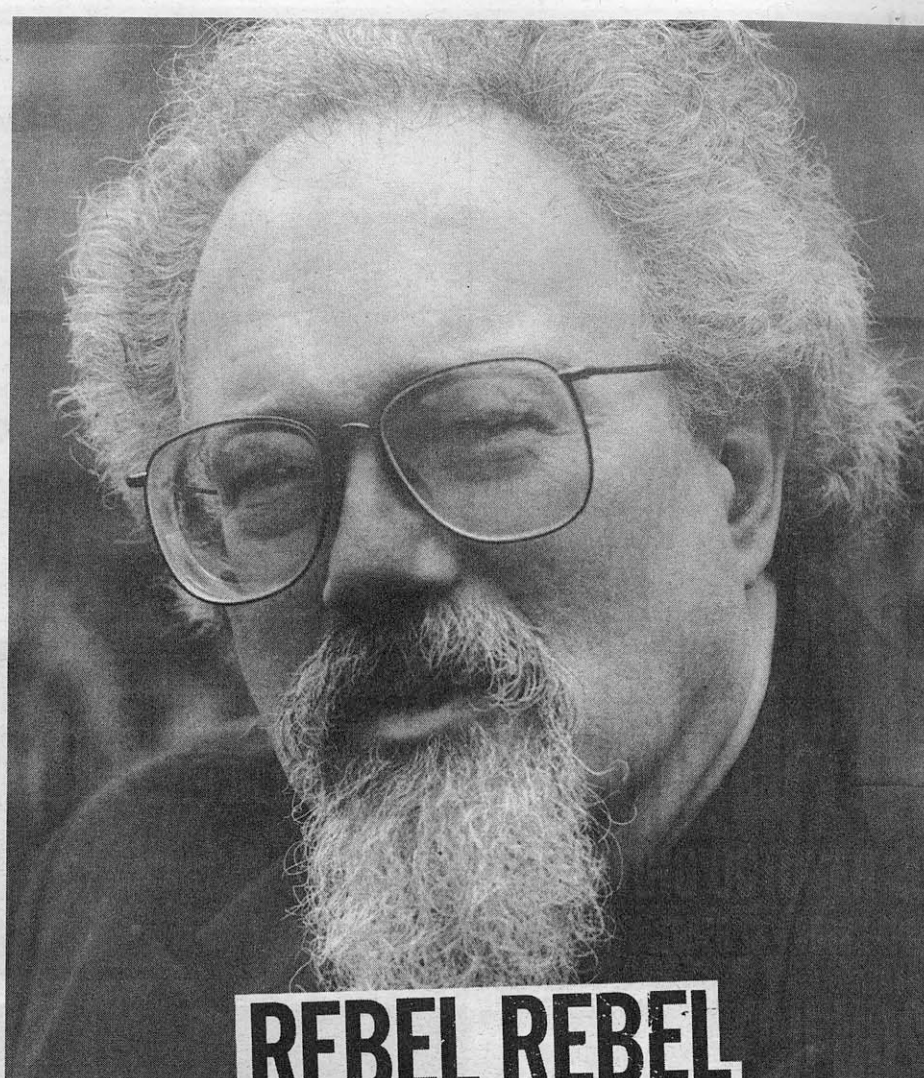
Everybody was rebelling. It's a teenager's job (laughs). Not just my parents, but the whole square set-up. I had no interest in having a job. When I grew up you either went to work for General Motors in Flint, joined the Army or you went to college if your parents saved up. If you went to college then you had to get a job. So I stayed in college as long as I could.

What did you want to do back then?

Well, I wanted to teach English in college because I thought that was freedom. Then I found out you didn't really have to do that. So I went with that. I reached retirement age without ever having a job.

That's quite the accomplishment.

Of course I don't have any social security. I didn't pay anything in. I never expected to live this long.



REBEL REBEL

JOHN SINCLAIR

**"I DON'T HAVE ANY SOCIAL SECURITY ...
I NEVER EXPECTED TO LIVE THIS LONG."**

It seems like so many people are content with keeping their political rhetoric simply rhetoric. What made you take your words and put them into action?

There is a dividing line. That's why sometimes you gotta realize you can't go on with the program. First you gotta change yourself, and then you have to find other people who think like that and then you gotta go do some shit.

How did you make that transition?

I was inspired by the civil rights movement. I joined the NAACP, Youth Council, The Urban League, and I joined these because I wanted to do something. I was also inspired by the black Muslims. Their idea was that you had to do it yourself. The people you were up against were doing it by design. It was designed to benefit them and oppress everybody else.

You lived in the time of The Black Panthers, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, Malcolm X and yourself — it seems people like that are non-existent today. Why do you think it is like that?

Well, they bought 'em off.

A phone call comes through on John's cell phone. It's his publicist beckoning him to the Fisher Building for another interview. "Who is going to interview you at WJR?" I ask, as he begins to roll a joint. "Mitch Albom," he replies. I laugh as we both roll our eyes. "It's not bad," he says in between licking his Zig-Zag rolling paper. "He's been good to me." With that, John stuffs the joint behind his ear, bids goodbye to the café's patrons and we're off.

Walking down Second Ave. with John Sinclair and a joint fosters a bit of déjà vu. Sure, I wasn't there in '69 when he was originally busted for pot, but the irony is still pretty amusing. We're standing no more than a stone's throw away from the place where Sinclair started on his path to counterculture cult hero. "That's where my wife lived when I first met her," he states. "That was where the first beatnik coffee shop was and The Bronx, well, that's where it's always been."

There's a noticeable glint in John's eyes as we continue to walk towards my car. Not one that a clichéd journalist would emit or that smoking some dope brings on, just a particular sparkle that seems to remember these special places fondly. As I drive John to his interview with everyone's favorite sports dramatist, he says something that, to me, sums him up the best. "I know who I am," he says, taking a toke from his joint. "I don't need to impress anyone." The idea that John is John and nothing else matters has been something that he has stuck to. He didn't care that people called him a "long hair," he didn't care when he was busted for pot and he didn't care when people gave him shit for being a leftist political activist. John Sinclair never cared about what others thought — he just wanted folks to be treated fairly no matter their position in life. By doing this, John left a path for others to follow to further change the world for the better. Free John Sinclair. | RDW

John Sinclair • 10/19 • 17th Annual Bernard Firestone Labor Arts Memorial Concert, College for Creative Studies. • 10/21 • Your Place Lounge

More info: johnsinclair.us