

On Screen Films & DVDs

20 To Life: The Life And Times Of John Sinclair

DIR STEVE GEBHARDT 2007, 86 MIN
MODE DVD

It's salutary to recall just how high John Sinclair's cultural cachet was in the late 1960s. The opening shots on this documentary featuring John Lennon and Yoko Ono protesting his jail sentence for possession of marijuana on live television underline the centrality of his role in setting a particular cultural political agenda with post-Beat rock audiences. Indeed, his vision was so radical, positioned as he was at a nexus between so many revolutionary artforms – free jazz, high energy rock, hallucinogenic drugs, the new poetry – that it can't help but throw into harsh relief his relative disconnection from contemporary outlaw culture.

Throughout this documentary, co-produced by Sinclair himself, we're repeatedly jump-cut into live performances and recording sessions that match Sinclair's poetry with some of the most identikit bar band jazz and blues ever chug-a-lugged by white guys. Sinclair's seeming inability to take his own revolutionary tenets – his proposed "total assault on culture" – any further forward than where it stalled circa 1972 speaks of an artist and activist who is more interested in perpetuating a nostalgic and fixed view of a culture that has grown without and beyond him than of a vanguard iconoclast. His failure to embrace the music and modes of the underground that came in his wake – ideas that have effectively furthered his concept of generic cross-pollination, of total musical freedoms, of rock music fully infected by free jazz and primitive amp-humping ritual – seems to hint at a lack of genuine interest in insurrection and a concomitant commitment to old-hippie posturing and the continued gatekeeping of the 1960s legacy.

With all that in mind, the first part of the documentary is fairly engaging, although it lacks any extended archive footage of Sinclair or his protégés The MC5, making do for the

most part with inane stock shots of flower children dancing and the occasional flash of Wayne Kramer, Rob Tyner and Fred 'Sonic' Smith leg-synching to MC5 recordings. Indeed, outside of Sinclair, Kramer's brief interview sections (which look as if they were filmed in jail) provide the film's sole energy centres, while other interviewees tend more towards the "it was like.... 'Wow'" school of non-communication. Most of the MC5 saga is pretty much skimmed over, although we do get interesting sections on the brain-bombing style of the Detroit Artists Workshop (still one of the most consistently interesting small presses to come out of the 1960s) as well as the later Trans-Love Energies and White Panther Party.

But the film pretty much runs out of gas as soon as Sinclair beats his jail rap. At one point he shrugs when he recalls people coming up to him on the street after he was freed, telling him to lighten up and quit going on about the pigs. "Uh, OK," was his response. But with mainstream culture more heavily policed than ever and a current political situation that feels dangerously unbalanced and a whole new generation of young musicians – a modern Guitar Army! – fully committed to free music, noise and appalling squares, lightning rods like the late-60s John Sinclair seem more important and potentially more perfectly placed than ever. Perhaps Sinclair should look towards someone like Julian Cope for a lesson in how to remain a truly forward-thinking motherfucker. As it is, you're left with footage of him jamming bar band blues while delivering his poetry in such a mannered, era-specific style that he sounds uncomfortably like Mike Myers's beatnik character from *So I Married An Axe Murderer*. But imagine him spitting those same blues all over the music of Sonic Youth or Borbetomagus or even Wolf Eyes. Going by this documentary, it looks like someone has gotta free John Sinclair all over again.

DAVID KEENAN



Ian Curtis (Sam Riley) and Alexandra Maria Lara in *Control*

Control

DIR ANTON CORBIJN 2007, 119 MINS

One of the funnier moments in what is a surprisingly amusing film in places is when Annik Honoré, the young Belgian journalist with whom Ian Curtis becomes fatally besotted, says to him, eyes wide with fascination, "Tell me about Macclesfield." Joy Division were from that decidedly unromantic, obdurately glum Northern town, brought up there in a desperately glum decade, the 70s, among the fixtures and fittings of much earlier decades. Director Anton Corbijn wanted to recreate that dire sense of time and place, the bus shelter bleakness in which the group's members were nurtured. And yet, despite their deliberate and inescapable Northern bluntness and unvarnished Macclesfieldness, Peter Hook in particular, despite their farting and "fookings" and ale swilling, there is a still, haunting, mythical quality about Joy Division which Ian Curtis's suicide by hanging in 1980 sealed rather than created. The film was made in black and white, Corbijn has said, in order to exacerbate the feel of the period. Had he really wanted to do that, he would have filmed it in colour, revealing the depressing brown, orange and maroon gaudiness of the place and era. By filming it in monochrome, he's helped exacerbate the frozen marble aura of Joy Division.

There isn't much in the way of musical and political context to this film. A line is drawn from David Bowie to The Sex Pistols through to Curtis, but there isn't much sense of the contemporary post-punk scene, or even of

other Factory goings on. Certain of its appealing quirks are overlooked here, the fact that he not only voted Conservative but also persuaded the Liberal candidate to give him a lift to the polling station. It really matters, however. This film is not so much about Curtis's insoluble dilemma as to whether to remain with Deborah, who was married very young in 1975, and the security and responsibility that entails, as whether to pursue Annik, who epitomizes the faraway hankering of Joy Division. The epileptic attacks he suffers are, in addition to his lot, as if nature has specifically marked him out as ill fated.

Sam Riley, a relatively unknown actor, is an excellent Curtis, capturing the wide-eyed, torn apart, creatively compelling quality of the man and his fellow actors also do a starry-eyed job as a Joy Division 'tribute band'. Joy Division themselves were a bit rough by comparison with Riley, but being a photographer, it's unsurprising that there is a frieze-like quality to *Control*, such as the group sitting in stunned silence following Curtis's suicide feel like tableaux. However, Toby Kebbell as manager Robson dispels any excessive clouds of sorrow with the film's funniest, most punctuated dialogue, especially when insisting on Wilson, who has just signed a contract with Joy Division using his own blood, should drop more to add a supposed missing drummer Steve Morris's name.

DAVID STUBBS



Still from Rechenzentrum's "Expedition Existenz" video

Rechenzentrum Silence

WEISER MUSIK DVD

Silence is a reflection on meditation. After a four year hiatus, the Berlin based audiovisual artists return with a collection of compositions – by the collective's musical partners, Christian Conrad and Marc Weiser – presented against black and white or monochrome visualisations created by video artist Lillevan. Their inspiration is the Russian icon painter Andrei Rublev. In a modern world obsessed with self-expression, the art of the icon painter stands at a polar opposite. Religiously inspired, the icon painter wants to express nothing of himself but everything about God, love, nature and compassion.

Rechenzentrum have clearly ruminated on this selfless mode of expression. What emerges is a series of electroacoustic abstractions paired with images inspired by

the rhythms and textures of nature. The tick-tock beat of "Expedition Existenz" is pinned out against what could be the grain of leaves, the bones of fish or the ribs and buttresses of a hugely magnificent structure. "Jeru Salem" glides the grain of wood against fissure cracked mud and billowing clouds with sounds that suggest uncharted marshland. The vocal track "10+5" is in an elegiac swell that "Everything that lives wants love", while images that show the magnified folds of bark or a forest floor from space form a texture against the ghostly outlines of people drift. The film closes with the mid-tempo Techno track "Eye For An Eye", which shows geometric forms ploughing through airstreams in an eternal dance of flow and resistance. In and reaction, the grace of nature's elements is alive for our ears and eyes.

KEITH MOLINÉ