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The John and Leni Sinclair Papers, 1957-1999 at the Bentley Historical Library

INTRODUCTION



John and Leni Sinclair,
John and Leni Sinclair papers, Box 37

The John and Leni Sinclair papers (1957-79) provide a rich and unique source for the study of America's radical movement in the nineteen sixties and seventies. Beginning with a remarkable series of correspondence that includes letters from Abbie Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, and Jerry Rubin, and continuing on through extensive subject files, the collection details the cultural, political, and business activities of a man whose energy and charisma made him a local and national leader of the counterculture. In addition, the collection documents the support and creativity of his wife and partner, who as a writer, photographer and publicist helped to showcase the lifestyle which he symbolized.

John Sinclair was born October 2, 1941 in Flint, Michigan and grew up in nearby Davison where he graduated from high school in 1959. He attended Albion College (1959-61) and the University of Michigan, Flint College (1962-64), where he received an A.B. degree in American literature. In April, 1964, he entered graduate school at Wayne State University. He completed course work for an M.A. in American literature (thesis on William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*) before dropping out in the fall of 1965 to pursue his activities in the Detroit jazz and poetry community.



Abbie Hoffman with gas mask
John and Leni Sinclair papers, Box 39, "Abbie Hoffman"

at right: Letter from Abbie Hoffman to John Sinclair (c. 1969) discussing the upcoming trial of the Chicago Seven. John and Leni Sinclair papers, Box 2, "Correspondence, September 1969."

John:
So great to hear from you. I have trouble in writing. I finished *Voodoo Nation* (due out - 10 days) in 5 days + my fingers pain from holding the pencil. The nation needs another name than *Voodoo*. It needs a name that comes out of the collective consciousness of the tribe that gather. I hope *Pan & Sky* are calling folks. We'll definitely be there Oct 2-5. Tom Hayden was invited in in Ed Sanders. Making lots of new contacts thru the trial which opens Sept. 24 in Chicago. Sargent **WORLD SERVES** in **LEAGUE of Injustices**. Conspiracy vs. the Feds. We are pretty scared and believe to bet, autographed booklets, etc. We'll be in Chicago for another. Seale & Rubin brought in chairs. My book is being lamp out by Forum + **Concert Hall Production crew**. Very good group... we are having a ball with it. Will send WPP multi-freebies. ~~There~~ there is a good deal about your case + the whole **Ann Arbor scene**.

(Full text of letter)

On November 1, 1964, shortly after his first arrest for "sales and possession of marijuana," Sinclair founded (with his partner Leni Arndt, poet/film-maker Robin Eichele, trumpeter Charles Moore and twelve others) the Detroit Artists' Workshop, which was a local attempt in self determination for artists of all disciplines. During 1964-1967, under the auspices of the Artists' Workshop and its campus counterpart, the Wayne State University Artists' Society (which he also originated), Sinclair produced countless jazz concerts and poetry readings featuring Detroit talent. He helped organize the Detroit Contemporary 4, the Workshop Arts Quartet and the Workshop Music Ensemble, and experimental group for which he also composed original music. Together with Robin Eichele, George Tysh and Jim Semark he founded (1964) and co-directed the Artists' Workshop Press which published a series of books, magazines, and free sheets by Detroit poets and writers, including his own *This is Our Music* (1965), *Fire Music; a record* (1966), *The Poem for Warner Stringfellow* (1966), and *Meditations: a suite for John Coltrane* (1967).



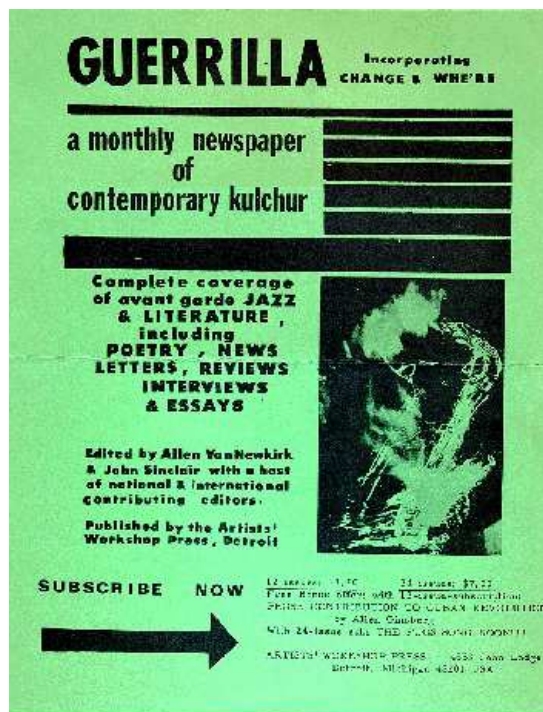
Sinclair served as editor of the Artists' Worksheet newsletter (1965), the poetry magazine *Work*, (1965-1967), the "avant-jazz" magazine *Change* (1965-66), and (with Ron Caplan) the magazine *Who're* (1966) all printed at the Artists' Workshop Press. Sinclair was also music editor and columnist (1965-68) for Detroit's *Fifth Estate* newspaper, one



The Detroit Artists Workshop produced countless jazz concerts featuring Detroit talent. John and Leni Sinclair papers, Box 37, "Detroit Artists Workshop Period (1)."

(New York) magazines, and had his article, reviews and poetry appear in numerous other publication besides those he edited, including; American Poet, Camels Coming, Coda, Connections, El Corno Emplumado, Incense, island, Jazz (Warsaw), The Journal, Kaleidoscope, Kulchur, Latitudes, Magazine, Move, New Lantern, Club Review, Orpheus, Other Scenes, Out of Sight, the Paper (Lansing), Poetmeat, San Francisco Oracle, Seed, Sounds (Germany), and Sounds & Fury. In July 1965, he read his works at the Berkeley Poetry Conference along with Ed Sanders, Ted Berrigan, and Lenore Kandel. He taught courses in jazz and contemporary poetry in the self-education program at the Artists' Workshop's Free University of Detroit and his poems were anthologized in *For Malcolm X* (Broadside Press) and *Poems Now* (Kulchur Press) in 1966.

Sinclair was sentenced February 24, 1966 to six months in the Detroit House of Correction for a second arrest (Oct. 1965) on "sales and possession of marijuana." Following his release he became associated with the Grande Ballroom in Detroit (October 1966) but was arrested a third time on January 24, 1967, with 55 other people in a "hippie dope raid on campus!"



"Guerilla" was one of the many publications published by the Artist's Workshop Press in Detroit. John and Leni Sinclair papers, Box 7, "Artists Workshop Press 1964-1968-Guerilla."

any means necessary were the essence of the White Panther program.

The MC-5 and later the UP and UPRISING continued to spearhead the mass work of the now politically conscious revolution, while the other cultural work of Trans-Love Energies was also carried on. Sinclair began to write for CREEM; the original Warren-Forest Sun became the White Panther Information Service's Sun dance; and the Ann Arbor Argus, which had begun independently under the editorship of Ken Kelley, was mobilized as a semi-official White Panther party organ. Originally conceived as an arm of the Youth International Party founded by Abbie Hoffman earlier in 1968, and organized around local issues in Ann Arbor such as free concerts in the parks, the White Panther Party soon had affiliated chapters established nationwide.

In July 1969 Sinclair was sentenced to prison for 9

In February 1967 Sinclair organized (with partner and now wife Leni Arndt Sinclair and artist Gary Grimshaw) a "total cooperative tribal living and working commune," Trans-Love Energies Unlimited, as an attempt to consolidate the energies of organizes units of the developing counterculture. Trans-Love produced dance concerts, rock and roll, light shows, books, pamphlets, posters, and the Warren-Forest Sun newspaper (founded and edited by Sinclair and Gary Grimshaw), and served as a cooperative booking agency for rock groups, the MC-5, the Stooges, and Billy C. and the Sunshine. In August 1967 Sinclair became personal managing Frank Bach's band the UP, as Trans-Love turned most of its attention to a rock and roll "assault" that would turn young people on to the possibilities of cultural revolution. In May-June 1968, after two fire bombings of the commune, Sinclair re-established the entire organization in two huge homes at 1520 Hill Street near that University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor. Despite this move, John Sinclair remained active in the Detroit Scene as the main publicity-production-promotional advisor to Russ Gibb's Grande Ballroom operation and as the producer (along with Darlene Pound) of Gibb's Detroit Rock & Roll Revival in May 1969.

Deeply influenced by the Black Panther leaders Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, Sinclair (with Pun Plamondon) founded the White Panther Party in November 1968, serving first as its minister of information and later as chairman. The ten-point program of the White Panther Party demanded economic and cultural freedom. "Everything free for everybody!" and a total "assault" on the culture by



1/2 to 10 years for possession of two marijuana cigarettes. While in prison he assembled and wrote *Guitar Army* (a Douglas/World book) and published another collection of writings, *Music & Politics* (World, 1971), co-authored by Robric Levic. His prolific writings appeared in numerous publications and made him a national symbol more influential than ever before. Two-and-a-half years of legal and political battles culminated at Crisler Arena in Ann Arbor on December 10, 1971, when 15,000 people attended the Free John Now Rally headlined by John Lennon and Yoko Ono. Just three days later, the Michigan supreme Court, on its own motion, ordered Sinclair released and later overturned his conviction, upholding his contention that Michigan's marijuana statutes were unconstitutional and void.

Promotional photograph used by Electra Records for the MC5.
John and Leni Sinclair papers, Box 37, "MC-5."



Deeply influenced by the Black Panther Party, John and others founded the White Panther Party while living in a commune in Ann Arbor. John and Leni Sinclair papers, Box 17, "White Panther Party Press Releases, undated."

Previous to Sinclair's release from prison, the cultural operations of Trans-Love Energies had been inherited by the newly evolved Rainbow Energies, Inc., a Michigan non-profit organization, and its distribution division, the Rainbow trucking Company. After months of self-examination, on April 30, 1971, the White Panther Party dissolved to form the Rainbow People's Party. Chaired by Sinclair, the Rainbow People's Party embraced Marxism-Leninism as its guide to action and concentrated on building a strong local political organization to promote the revolutionary struggle for a "communal, classless, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-sexist...culture of liberation..." Sinclair's energies for promoting cultural change, however, were soon to be more heavily channeled through another origination.

Early in 1972, Sinclair founded (with Peter Andrews) the Rainbow Multi-Media Corporation, serving as its vice-president and creative director. A Michigan non-profit organization, Rainbow Multi-Media (RMM) was designed as an alternative music-business company with a community-service orientation. To further its ultimate goal of restructuring the music industry and the entire society as well along cooperative, creative and communalistic lines, the company made its resources available on a cost-or-less basis to community organization committed to progressive social change. Besides his direct responsibilities in the Rainbow Productions and Rainbow Management divisions (the heart of the RMM business) and for overall coordination of the company's complex business operations, Sinclair had further direct responsibilities in the Graphics, Advertising, Video, Radio Productions, and Press division. He was personal manager of the band "Detroit," helped organize and establish the Rockets, and co-produced the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival (1972-1974). He handled all booking for the Community Program and the Ann Arbor People's ballroom (projects of the Ann Arbor Tribal Council), managed the Rainbow Room at the Old Shelby hotel in Detroit, and produced a weekly radio program, "Toke Time," on Ann Arbor's WNRZ-FM. During this period he also continued to be active in the areas of prison and drug reform, helping to organize the Michigan Committee for Prisoner's rights, touring California in 1971 and 1972 (with his wife, Leni) to promote the Marijuana Initiative there, returning to organize the Michigan Marijuana Initiative, and serving on the Board of Directors for the San Francisco-based Amorphia, Inc., a national non-profit corporation for drug education, research and reform.

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A typical crowd at one of the many free concerts held in Ann Arbor. John and Leni Sinclair papers, Box 38, "Free Concerts."

Following the massive financial failure of the 1974 Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival in Exile and the subsequent collapse of the entire Rainbow Multi-Media operation (Oct. 1974), the Sinclairs, along with other principals of the RMM, formed Rainbow Productions, Inc. Subsequently moving to Detroit in 1975, the firm, which Sinclair headed as president and creative director, continued with most of the activities of the defunct Rainbow Corporation including advertising and public relations, printing, photography, graphics, recording, concert production and artist and club management. Sinclair served as Arts Editor and later as Editor-In-Chief of the *Detroit Sun* (moved from Ann Arbor) until publication was suspended in October, 1976.

In May 1977, he was named as State Coordinator of Michigan NORML (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws), taking a leave of absence from the company to work full time in that capacity. In August 1977 Sinclair, with partners Frank back, Peggy Taube, and other principals of Rainbow Productions, Inc. and the Strata Corporation, formed Strata Associates, Inc., where as its president and creative director he specialized in servicing the entertainment industry, minority business enterprise, publishing consultation, and special marketing. Among the non-profit music cooperatives served are the Allied Artists Association, Jazz Development Workshop and Jazz Research Institute. Sinclair also has served as a board member and project director for the Allied Artists Association, Inc. of Detroit and hosted the popular RE:VISIONS a weekly radio program on WCBN-FM, Ann Arbor. He has been honored for his design work and promotion of jazz in Detroit. Long active in community arts and political circles in Michigan, his other associations include: Friends of Belle Isle Board of Directors, founders Society of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, the African Art Gallery Committee of the DIA, the NAACP, the Michigan Advertising Council, the Detroit Press Club, and the Motor City Cultural Association Board of Directors.

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John Sinclair's partner and wife, Leni was born Magdalene Arndt on March 8, 1940, in Koenigsberg, Germany. Her interest in jazz music and culture brought her to the United States in 1959; she settled with relatives in Detroit and put herself through college at Wayne State University (major in geography), where she met her partner John Sinclair while both were students there. She co-founded the Detroit Artist's Workshop in 1964 and was a major moving force in the organization, doing all the printing on the Workshop Book series, co-producing concerts and other events, organizing showings of photographic work by herself and other Detroit camera artists, and serving as president of the campus counterpart Wayne State University Artists' Society. She also co-founded Trans-Love Energies and organized the Trans-Love Light Company, the Pisces Eyes Poster Company, and handled all the photography work for the MC-5. She photographed and co-produced the high intensity Kick Out the Jams film, featuring the MC-5, which was selected for a national tour of films from Ann Arbor Film Festival in 1970. An organizer of and principal driving force behind the Free John Sinclair movement and the John Sinclair Freedom Rally, she served as chief photographer for RMM's Productions and Management divisions as well as coordinating the company's Rainbow Video division. She was darkroom manager and layout artist for Rainbow Productions until September 1975, when she became production manager for the Detroit Sun newspaper, acting also as photo editor and chief photographer. When the paper suspended publication in October 1976, she returned to Rainbow productions, Inc. where she served as Director of Agency Services including design, lay-out, printing, typesetting, photography, silk-screening, publicity, promotion, and advertising.

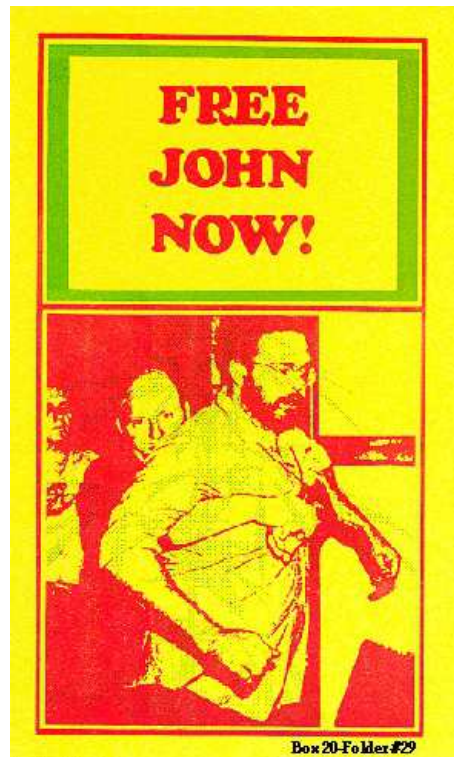
John and Leni Sinclair were married June 12, 1965. They have two daughters, Marion Sunny Sinclair, born May 4, 1967, and Celia Sanchez Mao Sinclair, born January 17, 1970.

The Sinclairs donated their papers to the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan in the spring of 1979. The order of the collection, except for certain sections, was disorganized with many overlappings and with much duplication. Processing was further complicated by the intricate network of cultural and business organizations which the Sinclairs founded or supported. After many months of reorganization and winnowing, the collection, now totaling 36 feet of materials, was open for research use in January 1980.

Correspondence in the collection has been arranged chronologically. For the period, 1969-1971, the correspondence was sorted down to the day; for the years before and after, it was sorted down to the month only. Whenever possible, correspondence concerned with specific subjects or relating to the operations of one of the Sinclair organizations has been left with the appropriate subject file or organizational record.

The rest of the collection has been arranged by subject or organization, then by type of material, and finally chronologically within the type.

This introduction to the Sinclair papers was prepared by Bentley Historical Library archivist Stephen Meyer in 1979 following the first major donation of papers by John and Leni. Since then additional material has been added to the collection. For a complete inventory of the John and Leni Sinclair papers, updated to reflect the latest donation of material, see the Bentley Historical Library's [Finding Aid to the John and Leni Sinclair Papers, 1957-1999](#)



Free John Sinclair
John and Leni Sinclair Papers, Box 20, Folder 29

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