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True American Patriot

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Poet, musician, radical, John Sinclair talks about the state of the nation and his friend John Lennon who helped get him out of prison.

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A TRUE AMERICAN PATRIOT SPEAKS OUT

By Bill Gallagher

It ain't fair, John Sinclair

In the stir for breathing air.

Won't you care for John Sinclair

In the stir for breathing air?

-- John Lennon, 1971.

DETROIT -- Those were the days of Nixonian madness -- the hopeless war in Vietnam, the illegal invasion of Cambodia, riots on college campuses, secret police, break-ins, enemies lists, IRS audits, the White House leak-plugging "plumbers unit," and on and on. But Nixon's paranoia, crimes, abuses of power, trampling on civil liberties and the Constitution are tame, almost benign, by the standards of the Bushevik regime.

"These guys make Nixon look like a Cub Scout," says John Sinclair, a poet, musician, journalist, veteran radical, cultural icon and professional disturber of the establishment peace. The native of Davison, Mich., near Flint, became an international cause celebre in 1969 when a fascist-leaning judge sentenced him to 10 years in prison for possessing two marijuana joints. "They gave him 10 for two," John Lennon wrote in his song about Sinclair's draconian sentence.

The sentence -- right out of Stalin's guidelines -- had nothing to do with the gravity of his offense, but had everything to do with his political views. Sinclair founded the White Panther Party and included among his radical and freethinking friends Allen Ginsberg, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and Timothy Leary. He, along with photographer Leni Arndt, his partner and later wife,

organized the Detroit Artists' Workshop, a communal group of artists from all disciplines.

His love of music further branded John as a dangerous subversive and put him under the eyes of the FBI creeps J. Edgar Hoover assigned to watch every move he made. Sinclair used music as a conduit for his poetry. Until his imprisonment, he was the manager and Svengali of legendary Detroit rockers the MC5, who made sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll a national pastime.

It was for his thoughts, poems, music, politics and passion that Sinclair was deemed a dangerous enemy of Nixonian Amerika, and he paid a horrible price for his revolutionary ways.

Sinclair did hard time for his soft crime at Michigan's infamous Jackson State Prison. "Jack Town" was, and still is, a hellhole, the largest walled prison on earth, an American gulag where the goal is to degrade and dehumanize the inmates and expect that society will improve as a result. Sinclair spent his time reading and writing, but most of all just surviving.

I met Sinclair on Thursday, Dec. 8, the 25th anniversary of John Lennon's murder. We met at Agave, a fine Mexican restaurant near the campus of Wayne State University. His presence in Detroit on that day was entirely serendipity. He was in town for a poetry reading and concert at the university honoring the poets and music of Katrina-battered New Orleans, a town Sinclair loves and where he lived for 10 years.

I asked where he lives now.

"Amsterdam, for obvious reasons," he replied, with a laugh and a twinkle in his eye. But his voice softened and his eyes moistened when we talked about John Lennon.

"I always remember him on this date every year. It was so close to the date where our lives intersected, because it was Dec. 10 when he came here to Ann Arbor and got me out of prison," Sinclair said.

He shook his head, thinking about his friend John Lennon.

"For any artist to be assassinated in his prime, on his way home from work, going into his home, it's horrifying. For it to be a guy like John Lennon, who represented and believed in peace, love and communications between human beings, probably more than anyone else in the music world, you just shudder to think of this," he said.

Sinclair had been rotting in Jackson State Prison for nearly three years when his life intersected with John Lennon's. Sinclair's lawyers had challenged his sentence and the constitutionality of Michigan's marijuana laws. The case went before the Michigan Supreme Court and Sinclair won, but a lower court refused to grant an appeal bond, claiming he was a "danger to society." He remained in prison.

Friends and supporters organized a rally at the Chrisler Arena on the campus of the University of Michigan set for Dec. 10, 1971. The organizers hoped the "Free John Now Rally" would be a major event, drawing attention to the grave injustice that kept Sinclair locked up.

But filling the 15,000-seat arena worried Sinclair.

"So I was very concerned. I thought it would be awful if we staged this huge thing and nobody came, and then they'd say, 'Oh, man, this guy ain't nowhere. Nobody cares about him,'" Sinclair recalled.

Then, one of his lawyers from Ann Arbor visited Sinclair at Jackson and told him about a surprising phone call he had just gotten.

Sinclair's lawyer told him, "Oh, man, I really got good news. John Lennon is going to come. He's written a song for you."

Sinclair scoffed at the claim, saying, "Man, don't mess with me. I'm already at my wits' end here."

The lawyer went back to his office, called Lennon, tape recorded his offer to help, then went back to the prison the next day and played it for Sinclair.

"It was just unbelievable. You're in prison. People in prison are pretty much abandoned. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," Sinclair laughed.

Lennon showed up and sang his new song "John Sinclair" to a sold-out crowd.

"Immediately, the whole complexion of my situation changes," Sinclair recalled. "Instead of people saying, 'Why doesn't he just shut up and serve his 10 years?' all of a sudden, they're saying, 'Well, jeeze, John Lennon says this is wrong; maybe we ought to think about this. You know, the Beatles are coming here to look into this guy's case.' Everything changed. Ten days later, I was out. It was like a miracle."

Out of the slammer, Sinclair went to New York to meet and thank John Lennon.

"He wasn't above anyone, even though he was probably the greatest popular creative artist in the world at the time. He was just a regular guy, a beautiful cat. We hit it off pretty good."

Lennon and Sinclair thought of a project to go on a concert tour following Nixon on his 1972 re-election campaign. They'd sell tickets for three bucks and give the money to community organizations.

"The poor guy wanted to have songs, and tell people to make peace. You know, really ugly stuff like that," Sinclair said. But J. Edgar Hoover's FBI and Attorney General John Mitchell's Justice Department were going to put a stop to those plans. Hoover and Mitchell, both serial felons, by the way, got the Immigration and Naturalization Service to tell Lennon and his wife, Yoko Ono, both foreign nationals, that they were going to have visa problems unless they stopped mixing politics with pop music. "First, the government hounded him out of public life. And then, when he decided to come back, some nut blew him away," Sinclair said. "You just shudder to think of this. He was my age. He would have had another 25 years of productivity, genius, works of art. It's so sad."

Sinclair finds the violence and gun culture of America appalling.

"You'd think, at one point, they'd rethink the concept of everybody being armed. It's so stupid. And now they're taking this kind of thuggery to an international level," he said.

Sinclair believes Lennon would have found the Bushevik regime "frightening," and if he were alive, he would be doing everything he could to end the war in Iraq. Sinclair finds Bush's appeal and ability to sell the war in Iraq disgusting and more harmful than Vietnam.

"This is the worst, in my view. This is the one that took America out of the realm of civilized nations and put us in with Hitler, blitzkrieging some poor little nation because you want their oil. Lying. It's just so ugly. How long are the American people going to put up with this?" he said.

Sinclair watched the BBC in Europe as American democracy unraveled in the 2000 presidential election.

"It was frightening to me. You expect the right wing to do bad things. You don't expect the people to endorse this and cheer them on. You expect them to have more sense. This is a democratic country with a long history of intelligent, informed citizenry, and now they don't have a clue," he said.

We talked about the mainstream media, the American Pravda that helped sell Bush's war in Iraq and failed to question the phony reasons for invading the country. But beyond the propaganda, Sinclair sees a disturbing need in the American people for a leader with such horrible traits and instincts.

"I finally understand what Hitler was all about," Sinclair said, sipping black coffee. "You know, all my life I wondered, how did Germany let this little weird guy gain power? How did they give him everything? He spoke to something in them and that's what this guy does. He doesn't speak to me. I look at him and can't believe someone would follow him across the street. But they like this guy for some reason. He gives them what they want and I don't understand it. I guess I've lost any understanding of mass psychology."

Sinclair still performs with his band, the Blues Scholars, and he loves traveling around the country in an Amtrak train. He hosts a weekly radio show from Amsterdam on the Internet at www.RadioFreeAmsterdam.com. It's also available as a podcast, and his radio show archives are found at www.johnsinclair.us.

"I've never been a big fan of the way our country organizes itself socially. I think that's on the record," he chuckled, "but now more than ever. That's why I spend most of my time in Amsterdam. It's the opposite of here."

Sinclair acknowledges Europe has "right-wing religious fanatics." But unlike the fundamentalist Christianity the Busheviks are trying to impose as a state religion, the European zealots "aren't trying to get into your home. They really don't care what you do in your bedroom. They don't really care what you do to alter the inside of your head, which is as it should be, in my view. And they aren't armed."

Touring with the Blues Scholars is a haven for Sinclair. "I present a moving target," he said. His beard is gray these days and he'd love to experience another miracle like a MacArthur grant or the appearance of some wise and inspired patron to help fund his work and art. His laugh is hearty and contagious. But he is perplexed and saddened that the nation and culture he began challenging more than 40 years ago is in the worst state of his lifetime.

Asked about Lennon's song, Sinclair said, "I light up. I love to hear that song. The ironic thing about it is, I'm a blues man. It's about the closest thing to a blues song he ever made, with the snare drum and slide guitar. So I enjoy it on several levels. But most of all, it was my ticket to freedom."