

Steal This Article

A Tribute to Abbie

Bill Blank

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Ten days before Abbie Hoffman was discovered resting eternal, I joined a few hundred spectators in an eerie celebration of '60s nostalgia at the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor. The world premiere of the film *Ten For Two* featured rare footage of the 1971 concert to free the once radical and once imprisoned (ten years for two joints) White Panther, John Sinclair.

While the screening did reveal some powerful stinging moments from Stevie Wonder, Black Panther leader Bobby Seale, and folksinger Phil Ochs, the excitement was dragged down by a bewildered Jerry Rubin, a tired John and Yoko, and the obvious rip-off of the \$10 movie ticket. The commemorative ads declared: "Music + Politics = Freedom," but I guess the modern equation is "Ten For Two = One for Ten." I doubt Abbie would have recommended this for children who want to know that dreams don't have to die, for younger generations wanting to push forward and not acid trip back.

True to the *Big Chill* spirit, this showing was only a benefit for a commercial film enterprise and John (the live one) gallantly took the stage to introduce the big memory jaunt. Between applauses he mumbled something about trying to leap from the screen at the film's end to give the moment of his release from prison a bigger impact. Maybe we should have handed out reprints of the legendary "Jail John Now" spoof [FE #266, September, 1975].

Sinclair's shameless ducking of anything political in words or action has been well-known (and achingly tolerated) around Detroit's activists and poets for years, and thus the most profound announcements this strange evening were "Free James Brown" and legalize Mary Jane, surely the expected rest home for "all them '60s radicals."

But while John proved our prison system sometimes works, Abbie proved the opposite. For throughout Abbie's antics and arrests, a crucial message remained defiant: you don't have to sell out, even when the clampdown comes down hard.

Although Abbie had something to offend everyone (his later flirtations with a leftist brand of patriotism made many of us gag), his astounding energy and commitment was always inspiring and matched only by his own sense of wit (with or without the visual aids, like money burning and trick or treating with American flag costumes). As a fugitive during the '70s, even his alias mocked authority: Barry Freed.

He self-published *Steal This Book* when most radical writers were still trying to get publishers to bankroll the revolution, and his writing (ending with the underrated *Steal This Urine Test*) was further proof Abbie was anything but fad or fashion despite the media's persistent attempts to lump him with people like Jerry Rubin (or John Sinclair).

So what if the coroner's report was accurate: it was surprising Abbie lived as long and as hard as he did (didn't he do enough in those wild 52 years?). He once remarked, "You wanna talk about why my movie wasn't made? Because I never sold out, and selling out is what sells tickets."

A friend and I briefly chatted with Abbie a few years ago after an incredible two and a half hour lecture in Ann Arbor, and we both warned him to be careful, especially on his missions to Central America. He shrugged off our worries like we were a couple of retired cops.

We laughed and plotted our next demonstration, humming Phil Ochs and Clash tunes all the way back to Detroit that night. That's how Abbie still works and plays with us now...

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