

John Sinclair, poet, author, activist

Fifth Estate writer dies at 82

Peter Werbe

2024

John Sinclair, poet, author of *Guitar Army*, manager of the MC5 rock band, anti-racist White Panther Party co-founder, and early *Fifth Estate* writer, died of heart failure at 82 in Detroit on April 9. Sinclair was remembered in publications across the U.S. and the world far from his Motor City base as a counterculture icon, a marijuana legalization campaigner, and a rock and roll enthusiast who was immortalized in a John Lennon song.

However, only slight mentions were made of Sinclair as a political activist whose radical perspective formed the matrix through which all of his other work flowed. In a 2005 interview in the *Detroit News*, a mainstream daily, he replied to a question about the MC5, the hard-rocking, Detroit-based band he managed, “What was our world outlook? Everything must be free for everybody—that’s a good place to start. Total assault on the culture, by any means necessary...”

Both he and his wife, Leni, were involved with the *Fifth Estate* from almost its first issue in 1965. John wrote a column, *The Coatpuller*, for the then-biweekly tabloid, heralding the emerging alternative culture of literature, free jazz, and poetry. Leni’s photos documented much of the Detroit cultural and political scene, several of which adorned the covers of the paper including those of the nascent Vietnam anti-war movement.

Although always espousing a radical outlook, John was most known for his campaign to legalize marijuana for which he suffered three convictions for possession, including one in 1969 of 9-1/2 to 10 years imprisonment by a vindictive Detroit judge for giving two joints to an undercover cop.

He famously was released following a Free John Sinclair Rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan in late 1971 headlined by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, also featuring Stevie Wonder, Bob Seger, Phil Ochs, jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp, and others. Speakers included Jane Fonda, Allen Ginsberg, Black Panther Chairman Bobby Seale, Ed Sanders from the Fugs, and others.

Lennon sang the song “John Sinclair” he composed for the event.

John, Leni, and several others, founded the anti-racist White Panther Party (WPP) in 1968. The MC5 was part of the milieu and often posed for promotion photos hoisting rifles. Sinclair said the point of the music was “to drive you out of your mind and into your body.”

The late Pun Plamondon, a WPP co-founder, addressed the fact that much of the Detroit left during the 1960s dismissed the Party and the band as apolitical hippies who were only interested in getting high and listening to rock and roll. At a 2017 retrospective on the White Panthers that I hosted at Detroit’s African American museum also featuring John and Leni, Pun said, “To the left, we were counterculture clowns, but we went out every weekend and gave out revolutionary literature including the *Fifth Estate* to hundreds and hundreds of young people while the left was arguing about Mao.”

In 1969, Sinclair, Plamondon, and Jack Forest, another White Panther member were indicted by a federal grand jury for the dynamite bombing of a secret CIA office in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where the group had moved following the 1967 Detroit Rebellion. Sinclair was already in prison on the marijuana conviction and Plamondon fled the country for Algeria where he shared residence with another fugitive, Black Panther Party leader, Eldridge Cleaver.

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the crime and punishment of john sinclair SEE PAGE 120



When the Sinclair defense team demanded government wiretap logs from numerous phones including that of the Fifth Estate, the government dropped the charges against the three. The decision of a federal judge ordering the government to disclose the White Panther illegal wiretaps was John Sinclair being restrained by court baliff after being sentenced to ten years in prison for marijuana. upheld unanimously by the U.S. Supreme Court. That led the Nixon White House to send operatives to remove the illegal phone taps it had placed in the offices of the Democratic Party at the Watergate complex, eventually leading to Nixon's resignation.

At a memorial for Plamondon in 2023 in Ann Arbor, Sinclair in honoring his friend said, "I'm no rat and never would be, but now that Pun is gone, I can say it. Pun bombed the CIA office." The crowd cheered wildly. Sinclair was a legend in the rock and roll world. He was instrumental in shaping and promoting Detroit's Grande Ballroom from 1966–1972 that first featured local bands from the city's rich music scene, and later saw the greatest classic bands of the era on stage including The Who, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Cream, Grateful Dead, as well as blues artists such as Howlin' Wolf, BB King, and John Lee Hooker. He was instrumental in bringing saxophonist John Coltrane and the Sun Ra Arkestra to the venue.

John became the manager of the MC5 as the group gained international fame for playing "high-energy rock and roll" that reflected the spirit of the era and the subculture that defined it. Many later rockers and music critics defined the band as proto-punk typified by their wild on-stage performance and high-decibel sound. Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello said the MC5 "basically invented punk rock," a description denied by Sinclair. He told the Detroit News in the 2005 interview, the MC5 described their music as "avant rock," and ascribed the origin of punk to another Detroit area band, Iggy and the Stooges.

The 5's oft-covered signature song began with, "Kick Out the Jams, Motherfuckers," a call that drove their young audiences into a frenzy of cheering and dancing, but didn't sit well with the authorities. The band often had the plug pulled on their amps to unceremoniously end a show, kicked out of venues, and beaten and arrested by the cops. They were the house band for the Grande Ballroom where they recorded their first album live, and were the only band willing to stay and play in Chicago during the violent 1968 Democratic Party convention that became a police riot of assaults on protesters.

John's poetry was recognized internationally. He wrote thousands of poems beginning in the early 1960s. Along with his Detroit Artists' Workshop compatriots, they published his work and that of other poets in a seemingly endless stream of mimeographed books and broadsheets. The self-published volumes that sold for a dollar 60 years ago, now bring prices in the hundreds. John loved to read his poems particularly with music accompaniment and released dozens of CDs backed up by either a single guitar or his Blues Scholars musical aggregation.

His last public appearance, just several weeks before his death, was in Paris at the Bourse de Commerce to close out an exhibit of the artwork of Detroit Mike Kelley. So respected was John that the performance space paid for his airfare from Detroit to Paris so he could read just a few of his poems. One couldn't ask for a better final gig.

After the first issue of the Fifth Estate appeared in late 1965, John and Leni joined the staff of one, Harvey Ovshinsky, the paper's founder. Upon seeing the upstart publication, they quickly realized the potential for publicizing the emerging hip culture in music, art, and poetry in an era when there was no internet or proliferation of alternative publications. Ovshinsky credits the Sinclairs with saving the paper from publishing only one issue. Leni's photographs and writing, and John's articles and columns brought information about the counterculture of the 1960s to a readership and community eager to be turned on.

In his bestselling 1969 manifesto for revolution, *Guitar Army*, Sinclair wrote, "Our culture is a revolutionary culture, a revolutionary force on the planet, the seed of the new order that will come to flower with the disintegration and collapse of the obsolete social and economic forms which presently infest the earth."

Let's make it so.

John Sinclair's Fifth Estate writing can be found in our online archives at <https://www.fifthestate.org/?s=John+Sinclair>

This will get you more than one page of results.

At the bottom of each page click on "older posts," which leads to articles put online earlier, not necessarily published earlier in the FE.

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fifth Estate

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