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Case Study: Researching John Sinclair and the White Panther Party Using the American Radicalism Collection

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Various source media, *Political Extremism and Radicalism in the Twentieth Century*

The American Radicalism Collection (ARC) at Michigan State University (MSU) Special Collections holds an impressive variety of sources on groups considered 'radical', especially those most active between the 1960s and 1980s. There are significant holdings of dissident groups from the era of the American War in Vietnam from 1955-1975, especially those specific to Michigan, for anyone interested in the history of radicalism. In the U.S., a national youth culture took shape in the mid-1960s centered around rock and roll music, marijuana and LSD, and a broad rejection of U.S. Cold War policy at home and abroad. On the local and regional level, the counterculture varied greatly from place to place, but the importance of the Great Lakes region in this history is often overlooked. The Michigan counterculture of the 1960s-70s is well represented in the ARC, especially in collections pertaining to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Michigan State Police political surveillance, and Michigan's most well-known hippie, John Sinclair. The holdings on Michigan counterculture in MSU Special Collections are accessible enough for undergraduate research, yet deep enough to benefit professional scholars. The ARC contains dozens of uncatalogued materials organised by subject that vividly document the counterculture in Michigan and elsewhere. Moreover, the Alternative Press Collection contains over 1200 titles of alternative press publications - mostly self-published community news sources - that vividly capture 1960s and 1970s youth culture through advertisements, polemics, illustrations, and photographs. As a supplement, individual collections, such as the Stuart N. Dowty and Janet Goldwasser papers, the Mike Price Red Squad Files, and the Jim Jacobs papers, provide insight into Michigan anti-war activists and the state police's surveillance of them.

To begin understanding the counterculture in Michigan, a good starting point is poet and activist John Sinclair, who became a symbol of the state's homegrown counterculture in the late 1960s. He managed the rock band MC5 and co-founded the White Panther Party (WPP), a far-left, anti-racist, white political collective in Ann Arbor modeled after the Black Panther Party (BPP). On 24 July 1969, John Sinclair was sentenced to nine and a half to ten years in state prison for marijuana possession. Leni Sinclair, John's wife, organised a "Free John Now!" publicity campaign that culminated in a massive benefit concert called the "Free John Sinclair Rally" on 10 December 1971. The effort overturned Michigan's marijuana laws and led to John Sinclair's release from prison. To help understand John Sinclair's place among local radicals and the broader radical community, the ARC not only provides sources from the counterculture's participants, but also sources from outsiders and detractors.

John Sinclair's story forces scholars to rethink the counterculture as a new form of worker culture, where the lines between work and leisure were increasingly blurred. Sinclair's work as a promoter, journalist, concert organiser, and artist in his own right helped foster a thriving music scene outside of the Motown sphere in Southeast Michigan. The infrastructure of this musical community, which included journalists, venues, musicians, fans, and behind the scenes workers, facilitated a revitalisation of local political organising during the community control movement of the 1970s. Sinclair's role as a community organiser, especially during his quest to legalise marijuana, reveals the counterculture's deep engagement with mainstream society, rather than being an attempt to drop out, as it is often portrayed. Hippies like John Sinclair valued

hard work and mainstream appeal, but on terms amenable to their beliefs and values.

The ARC contains a Collection of Grande Ballroom Concert Postcards and Fliers that provide a snapshot of the musical community of Southeast Michigan around 1968. Sinclair served as a promoter for the Grande Ballroom and became the manager for the venue's house band, MC5, in 1968. Graphic artist Gary Grimshaw made fliers and concert posters for the Grande and his work is most represented within this collection, which spans December 1967-December 1968. A finding aid for the postcards lists the date, performers, and artist for each item, and this may be accessed within the catalogue search results via the MSU library website or from their Special Collections finding aids.

In 1967, John Sinclair co-founded a newspaper called the Sun with Gary Grimshaw and edited it from then until his imprisonment in 1969. The paper was known under several different names during that time (Warren-Forest Sun, Sun/Dance, Ann Arbor Sun) so, to make the most of MSU Special Collections' extensive holdings of the newspaper, it is important to perform keyword searches for each of these titles. The semi-regularly published paper was a community resource that regularly covered politics, the American War in Vietnam, music, the local drug scene, sex, and art. The newspapers also contain striking artwork by Grimshaw, photographs taken mostly by Leni Sinclair, and many editorials and essays written by John Sinclair.

Several topical files focus either directly or indirectly on John Sinclair's struggle to legalise marijuana. The folder titled 'John Sinclair: A File of Clippings and

Miscellanea,' provides especially close documentation of Sinclair's legal battle through a mixture of newspaper articles and materials printed by Sinclair and his supporters. The file 'Youth International Party (Yippies): File of Clippings, Leaflets and Miscellanea' covers Sinclair's marijuana case extensively, in addition to the broader marijuana legalisation movement. One document lists 'Every Smoke-In Ever Reported in the Alternative Press 1970-1983' and a number of materials cover marijuana legalisation activities in Washington, D.C., such as the long-running Fourth of July Smoke-In. The folder, 'Marijuana: File of Clippings, Leaflets and Pamphlets' mainly covers the legalisation movement and its opponents since the 1990s.

Several individual pieces and small collections further elucidate Sinclair's importance to the marijuana legalisation movement. An original poster from the John Sinclair Freedom Rally features an iconic photo of John taken by Leni Sinclair, as well as an almost complete list of performers and speakers at the rally. There are also flyers and the ballot proposal materials for the 1974 Michigan Marijuana Initiative. Sinclair's organisation, the Rainbow People's Party – the successor to the WPP – spearheaded the initiative, which was the first statewide effort to legalise marijuana. Lastly, Sinclair's manifesto, Marijuana Revolution, analysed the subversive power of marijuana in Western society under capitalism.

If a researcher wishes to undertake less targeted, more exploratory research, it is useful to browse the ARC by subject, such as the Black Panthers, Students for a Democratic Society, and MSU Student Activism. Other useful ARC files include those on Abbie Hoffman,

Hippies, the National Lawyers Guild, Police, Surveillance, Weathermen/Weather Underground Organization, the Michigan State University Student Strike of May 1970, the Michigan State Police Red Squad, Detroit Movement Activity from 1955-70. These collections intersect with John Sinclair's involvement in radical political circles and his experiences as a political surveillance target of the Detroit Red Squad and Federal Bureau of Investigation. Put together, the holdings in the ARC are indispensable to researchers seeking to understand Sinclair and the broader counterculture in which he operated.

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