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MC5 (Motor City Five) and John Sinclair

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Monica Berger, "MC 5." *Encyclopedia of the American Counterculture*, Gina Misiroglu, ed., M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 2008.

MC5 (Motor City Five) and John Sinclair

Icons of late 1960s musical left-wing politics, the MC5 (Motor City Five, 1965-1972), were based in Detroit and were managed by White Panther founder and leader John Sinclair. The band's loud, aggressive and grungy sound incorporated elements of rock, avant-garde jazz and blues: the MC5 explored the anarchic outer limits of noise in an effort to destroy traditional boundaries of song. Their lyrics incorporated aggressive, macho sexuality. The MC5's performance style incorporated substantial elements of late 1960s absurdist street theater. The band featured Brother J.C. Crawford, a member of John Sinclair's Trans-Love Energies collective, who would preach in a Southern hell-and-brimstone style. Ironically, the band's involvement with radical politics was in part superficial; the band used left politics to further their musical career. The connection between the MC5 and the White Panthers was based entirely on Sinclair's efforts to promote the two entities synergistically.

The band, all of whom were working-class and from Detroit, consisted of five members: Rob Tyner (1944-1991), famous for his giant white afro hairstyle; guitarist Wayne Kramer (1948-); Fred "Sonic" Smith (1948-1994) who later married Patti Smith; and Dennis Thomson (1948-) and Michael Davis (no dates). The band released three albums, of which the first, *Kick Out the Jams* (1969), is the most notable because it conveys the unprecedented, raw intensity of the MC5 live. The song "Kick Out the Jams" was an incitement to riot, a blast of street theater. In performance, Tyner would scream out the memorable and anthem-like refrain "Kick out the jams motherfuckers!!!" as an act of provocation to the police to storm the stage and arrest the band on obscenity charges. The MC5 were the only band to perform at the 1968 Democratic Convention, energizing the protesters with "Black to Comm," which featured an extended avant-garde white noise musical freak out and radical exhortations.

No other figure in the history of rock music lived radical politics as did John Sinclair. Poet John Sinclair (1941-) was a father-figure of the Sixties counterculture. He formed the Trans-Love Energies Unlimited Commune, a radical arts cooperative, in Detroit in 1967, and the White Panthers in 1968. The White Panthers, modeled on the Black Panthers and originally intended as an arm of Abbie Hoffman's Youth International Party, gave free concerts and grew to have chapters throughout the country. Sun Ra, the Afrocentric, visionary oddball, was promoted by Sinclair, a advocate for free jazz, and Sun Ra influenced the MC5, Iggy Pop and the Stooges, (whom Sinclair also managed (Szwed 244)) as well as George Clinton's Parliament Funkadelic (Szwed 263-264). Ever the provocateur, Sinclair was a major target of the police and in 1969, the authorities sentenced him to 9 ½ to 10 years in prison for possession of a mere two marijuana cigarettes. While in prison, Sinclair wrote prolifically: his manifesto "Guitar Army" was particularly influential. In 1971, a Free John Now Rally was held in Ann Arbor featuring performances by John Lennon who sang his song penned for the occasion, "Free John Sinclair." Three days later Sinclair was freed. Sinclair has devoted much of his life to radical causes and he continues to write poetry.

Notes

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