Leni Sinclair & Lessons from the 60s/70s Era

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Leni Sinclair and the Lessons of the Hippie Generation:
Teachings from a Minister of Education

Chelsie Noble
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A Prologue

I first met Leni Sinclair during my sophomore year at Western Michigan University. I was enrolled in Scott Friesner’s legendary “Vietnam and Rock” course and didn’t quite know what to expect yet from either the course or Scott. Being a product of the honors college, I showed up to new classes with a tinge of nervousness, but mostly a quiet confidence. A couple of lines from that initial class in Dunbar are forever burned in my mind. Firstly, and most importantly, professors that keep students for the full class on the first day are wankers. Secondly, if we never push ourselves to learn from people that are different from ourselves, we are simply masturbating our way through life. Indeed, this class would challenge me more, and more profoundly, than any I have ever taken.

Scott (I think I still called him Mr. Friesner back then) brought in a collection of photographs one day in a slideshow format and introduced them as works that his friend Leni Sinclair had taken during our era of interest. The range was incredible: from Iggy to Coltrane, the MC5 to Black Panthers. But my favorites were those of the regular folk from the day. They weren’t rock stars, but Leni was compelled to photograph them anyways: Women with flowers in their hair, and men smoking joints; mothers with their infants, and cops standing beside hippies. Life was happening in those pictures. This was the first time I “met” Leni. I discovered a person with a sharp eye, and someone with a keen understanding of the importance of the rock stars, but more significantly, someone who saw the substance of the people off-stage. And after all, these were the people who brought meaning to the music.

I didn’t hear Leni speak until her appearance at the LHC lounge about a year later. It was then that all my preconceptions about this mysterious photographer were confirmed: she was
indeed, a damn cool woman. Sinclair wasn’t intimidating, though. She laughed easily and spoke modestly of her work. A large focus of her talk was centered around her ex-husband John Sinclair. Mr. Sinclair is a notable character, to be sure, however I was more interested in Leni. I would continue on with Scott’s trilogy series (backwards), taking “Civil Rights and Jazz” and finishing with “Blues, Jazz, and The Harlem Renaissance,” all the while maintaining interest in the ‘60s and frequently chatting with Scott about his friend Leni. When Scott offered to be involved in my honors thesis, I gladly took him up and pinpointed my area of interest: Leni Sinclair.

One couldn’t manufacture a better meet-cute for Leni and I. We decided that we would meet at a diner in Detroit, one of Leni’s regular spots. This particular spot, however, is a chain restaurant and I ended taking up real-estate at an incorrect location. After some phone directions, I arrived at the correct diner. I walked in, spotted Leni, and gave a warm greeting. She looked entirely confused, switching glances between myself and a woman who had strolled in right before me. At first I chalked her bemusement up to us being strangers (though I knew what she looked like), but after further assessment of the situation I realized what was really happening: The woman who walked in at the same time with me was Gary Grimshaw’s wife, Laura. She was burning some time while getting an oil change, and decided to check out the place because of a past recommendation from Leni. Imagine my surprise and delight! The three of us smiled at the interconnectedness of the whole affair and shared some words and food. Eventually Grimshaw would leave us to retrieve her car, and Leni and I would go to a nearby park to chat somewhere quieter.
I walked away from that first meeting with Leni with an overwhelming sense of joy. She has that effect on people. Even if you’re feeling low, Leni can bring a smile to your face. A charming German accent lingers in her speech and her face is one of kindness. Though Leni herself is not of a young age, her soul is. This woman entered the era as a youth from communist East Germany, arriving in the U.S. to challenge human rights, politics, the government, music, economics, and much more. She wasn’t a stereotypical hippie; nor were her cohorts. They were intelligent, educated artists working hard to make a meaningful difference. Sinclair’s work in the ‘60s and ‘70s serves as a reminder that people can make a difference, but we must work as a collective; supporting, encouraging, and fostering our fellow humans. I want to thank Leni for being so generous with her time and support during the course of this project; she was more than willing to meet and talk with me on multiple occasions. All statements attributed to Leni come from personal interviews that she granted me. I hope this paper serves as a reminder and does justice to the incredible being that is Leni Sinclair. And I hope this paper instills a sense of power. The past is prologue: All the power to the people.
Leni Sinclair, self portrait
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is the same as any-- to pass on information. It’s the same information and lessons that have been present since the 1960’s, and maybe since the beginning of time. The era wasn’t one of change by accident; rather, too many issues had been ignored for too long. The country had failed to rebuild after the Civil War and its residual tensions remained (sometimes buried, but ever present). Issues of equality surrounding race, gender, politics, and sex were all hitting their tipping point during the ’60s. No longer were the days of the 1950’s “American dream” and white picket fences acceptable. After all, these were the exact American myths that visibly lead to the repression of rights. And even though the preceding were all challenged during the ’60s, the same issues remain rampant today. Consequently, our nation could benefit a great deal by taking a lesson from the past and acknowledging what some consider the time when America lost its innocence. It would serve us all even more to remember that America never was innocent.

This paper seeks to examine the era through the same lens Leni Sinclair did. This work is about love, positive energy, and taking care of one another. It’s about equality, honesty, art, and knowledge. While most people would agree that the preceding are all desirable values and traits to strive for, few people think about them for more than a fleeting second in a day. Even fewer devote their lives to making cultural changes in their honor.

Leni Sinclair is one of these few. She chose to devote her life to her values, and these values that have been as unwavering as her youthful energy. Although the White Panthers Party has long since dissipated, Sinclair has never abandoned her role as the “Minister of Education,” saying, “Once a Minister of Education, always a Minister of Education.” Thus, the knowledge
that she has gathered over the past five decades will be addressed in this paper. Leni’s role during the ’60s and ’70s era can not be labeled as one thing or another (photographer, activist, mother, hippie, filthy communist); rather, one could summarize her experience as present and attuned. She felt the energy of change and cultural revolution evolving, and she leapt into the era head-on. And she did so with camera in hand. Sinclair’s love of the people is obvious through any conversation with her, whether short or long. It is additionally obvious from her photographs that Sinclair believes, and always has, that all power belongs to the people. Male, female, black, white, gay, strait, or any combination of the above, everyone plays a vital and important role in our cosmic existence.

Leni’s experience during the era can certainly fulfill the “hippie” stereotype of the culture. Yes, there were protests, LSD, free love, and flowers in her hair. But if one cares to search deeper for even a moment, one finds that there was a genuine and real awakening taking place. People were coming together in different formats for a wide spectrum of reasons, but they were all sick of the status quo. These so-called “hippies” were also academics, musicians, and artists, amongst other things, and they were fueling fires of change in a way that the government could no longer ignore.

Most people associate these radicals of the day with California and New York. Indeed, the scenes were happening in both locations. The Motor City though, was more than just burning in the ’60’s. Detroit was home to its own group of beatniks, artists, musicians, and revolutionaries. Leni Sinclair was present and engaged at the inception of this movement and is a perfect reflection of the midwestern hub. She is persistent, creative, vibrant, and strong. She has seen Detroit through its highs and lows, and Detroit has seen Leni through her own. Life wasn’t
a crystal staircase for Sinclair, but she keeps climbing, wearing a smile and tie dye, and with a marijuana cigarette in tow.

This paper seeks to dust off the lessons of the 1960’s and ’70’s and to remind those who read it that they are people and they are powerful.

Coming to America

Leni Sinclair arrived in the world by the name of Magdalene Arndt on March 8, 1940, in East Germany. Her escape from the communist nation was not one that included a burning passion to flee from a very young age; rather, she started plotting around age fifteen.

Sinclair recalls when a cousin from West Germany came to visit her family after he had traveled abroad in the United States and Canada. Photos of the beautiful North American landscapes are possibly the most formative reason Sinclair chose to pursue an escape to America. “Possibly, if I can get out of East Germany,” she thought, “I can get to America, too.”

Sinclair waited until the age of eighteen to escape, because as she noted, “West Germany would just send you right back if you weren’t of age.” She then spent a year on the West side of the wall taking English classes and preparing for her anticipated travels to the country that would become her future home. This was the first time the East German native was ever allowed to study the language; growing up she was instructed for eight years in Russian. Today, she says, she can’t even recite the alphabet: “[In school] Anyone who was good at Russian was ostracized. Everyone just wanted to learn English.”
Leni emigrated to the U.S. in 1959, eventually reaching Detroit and receiving sponsorship from relatives living there. She acquired a job as a nanny (German nannies were very popular) and learned English from the children as well as by taking a class (occupied almost entirely by fellow German nannies). Although Sinclair came to Detroit because of family ties, she was unwavering in her own values, values that often differed from those of her relatives. She recalls attending services at a German-speaking Baptist church where not a single black person was a member; she also recalls feeling very uncomfortable and deciding that the members were all racists. Her own family members would make racial slurs (in German) while driving in the car and Leni responded in a very militant way--eventually breaking ties with family and ceasing attendance at the aforementioned church.

Around the same time Leni took up enrollment at Wayne State University where, while pursuing a degree in geography, she developed a keen interest in student politics. She participated in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) movement, and admits to having had a large crush on leader Tom Hayden. Sinclair says that she has always been a very good follower, and was looking for a equally devoted and passionate leader. Possessing only knowledge that the government decided to teach her in East Germany, the SDS was the first thing that had made political sense to Sinclair. One of the key concepts that Leni cites from SDS is the idea of industrial democracy, or the notion that there can be no true democracy unless there is democracy in the work place. In addition to student government and the SDS, Sinclair was also on the fringes of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Student Peace Movement while enrolled at WSU.
Before completing her degree, Leni decided to take a boat back to Europe in 1962 and travel for almost a year. Though she had little money, this is the time that Sinclair says she took some of her best photography. Why? Because she had nothing else to do, of course. She was traveling and living with a French poet named Christopher Perret during her time abroad. Perret was also making little money and there was no future for them because of it. One full year spent outside of the states would have ended the hopes of Sinclair obtaining citizenship, and so she had to decide whether to stay in Europe or return to Detroit. The assassination of John F. Kennedy made Leni even more reluctant to return; she believed that chaos was sure to ensue after the president was shot. Sinclair was expecting a proposal from Perret, but she had grossly miscalculated; the French poet urged her to return to the states and finish her education. On the surface, this gesture may seem like a sweet and self-sacrificing notion on the part of Perret; in reality, he was expecting the imminent arrival of a girlfriend from England and had to get rid of Leni hastily. Sinclair would return to the states, but she would also be written out of history with respect to her work and relationship with the poet. After his passing in 1965, a book would later be published on his life which included many of Sinclair’s beautiful photographs, all without any credit to her, presumably to spare the feelings of his British partner that he was less-than-faithful to.

Leni succinctly summarizes her next steps as follows:

“I came back to finish my education, take my citizenship oath, and I met John Sinclair. And then my life stopped. After that, I lived somebody else’s life; and still do.”

Although the preceding statement may seem to cast a gloomy shadow over her years during and following her partnership with John Sinclair, she also describes them as the most vital
and exciting of her life. The social movements, cultural change, art, drugs, and politics all contributed to her vitality and engagement. But the best part, above all other things, Sinclair says, was the music. Indeed, the music was the soundtrack to the era and as such, is an inextricable piece of every other dimension flowing into the stream of the ’60s and ’70s.

Musical Affiliations

“The turning point in the history of western civilization was reached with the invention of the electric guitar.”

-Leni Sinclair, 1971

“MUSIC IS REVOLUTION. Rock and roll music is one of the most vital revolutionary forces in the West- it blows people all the way back to their senses and makes them feel good, like they’re alive again in the middle of this monstrous funeral parlor of western civilization.”

-John Sinclair, 1968

As music was regarded as the main vehicle for cultural warfare and change, it is an inseparable part of everything surrounding the era. While rock music is widely regarded as the clarion call of the ’60’s and ’70’s, initially Leni Sinclair did not prefer rock.

Before coming to the U.S., Sinclair was mostly listening to jazz. Her particular fascination with the jazz avant-garde grew into something much bigger when she first hooked up with her future husband, John Sinclair. John was the Detroit correspondent for Downbeat magazine (arguably the most important and popular jazz publication of the era) and in the early ’60’s Leni started to attend shows with him, camera in tow. The pictures that resulted from those concerts weren’t always of the best quality, and sometimes yielded only be a couple of good shots from the entire evening. Leni explains why saying, “I was militantly against the use of
flash.” As jazz clubs are typically very dark, one can readily understand the difficulties in capturing a worthwhile photograph. For the first couple of years the Sinclairs were only attracted to jazz players (especially and almost exclusively those of an avant-garde nature), like John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, and Cecil Taylor. But beginning in 1965 Leni and John would have a major bearing on the Detroit rock scene.
This isn’t merely one of my favorites of Sinclair’s photos, but also my favorite of John Coltrane. By not using flash Sinclair was more fully able to capture Coltrane’s sound within a picture. Through the lack of articulate features one is able to imagine a more mystical tone, quite like the overwhelming spiritual feel of Trane’s music. While Leni is seemingly in the dark, below the stage, Coltrane is in a different world playing his horn. This picture encapsulates the seriousness with which the musician approached his music and the overwhelming passion and spirituality he poured into each performance.
The Detroit Artists’ Workshop and Trans-Love Energies

When asking Leni Sinclair why she attended Wayne State University, she explains that’s where the beatniks were at. “If you wanted to be a beatnik, you went to college.” However, Detroit’s art scene wasn’t nearly as visible as those that could be found in California or New York. Sinclair, along with her husband and other comrades, became the group to challenge and change the status quo.

In early November, 1964, a group of Wayne State students and Cass Corridor artists banded together to form the Detroit Artists’ Workshop (DAW). Originally located at 1215 W. Forest, the building was a sanctuary for fine artists of all kinds to have a space to perform, exhibit work, and hold their own workshops. Events were free to the public and costs were shared equally by all the members. Leni remembers the time as a busy one saying, “We were always hustling; always making things to sell.” No one was getting paid, rather the workshop offered affordable housing and community programs like the “Free University of Detroit.” Eventually the group acquired a modest mimeograph machine and used it to its full potential, creating books, magazines, and pamphlets.

This was also the time when Leni met her long-term collaborator and friend, Gary Grimshaw. Grimshaw has been honorably discharged from the Navy and subsequently moved to Detroit. He then became an integral part of the workshop, generating beautiful posters and pamphlets informing the community on events being held by the workshop. The DAW would go on to host an array of musicians, including the Detroit Contemporary Five, Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, and Andrew Hill, to name a few. They would also play host to poets like Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creely, and Bill Harris. The workshop also began
publications of underground newspapers, and Leni would contribute to *The Fifth Estate* and *The Sun*, which would become *the* newspapers of Detroit’s psychedelic community.

After only a few short years, the DAW banded together with other organizations sharing similar communal goals and aspirations and created Trans-Love Energies. The group was named for the Jefferson Airplane song and always promised to “get you there on time.” Their fleet of cars that transported folks included an Opel and a VW van, with both being used to pick up bands from the airport. Trans-Love was a natural growth and progression from the DAW and was birthed into existence around the same time that the Sinclairs and the MC5 forged their partnership. The organization was also another decisive step into a communal style of living, where nobody was paid, but everyone was taken care of.

This time was also marked by the beginning of shows at the Grande Ballroom, where Leni Sinclair played a major role in the whole production—she was a member of the light show crew. The experience, along with the coinciding music, was a shining star of the ’60’s; Leni says, “Doing the light show for the Ballroom is one of the most exciting things you can imagine...It was a subliminal educational experience.”
Two perfect examples of Sinclair’s documentation of the Grande Ballroom. Top: Iggy sprawls over his mic stand, creating the appearance of an extra-terrestrial creature-like performance. Sinclair herself calls this photo iconic. The picture gives bearing to what it must have been like to see Iggy perform: full of energy and a no-f*cks-given attitude. Bottom is a picture of the MC5 with superimposed images from the light show. Though it’s hard to imagine what it must have felt like in those shows, Sinclair captures the synchronized energies of the band and the audience. Rather than one performing and the other viewing, both the band and the audience were participants in a Grande show. No other photographer has captured such a history of the Grande. Moreover, Sinclair was not only documenting, but producing the light show, and getting down with the music.
A band called the MC5 (which held meanings ranging from the Motor City, to Marijuana Cigarette and everything in-between,) came under the management of John Sinclair. One may ponder how this beautiful relationship first blossomed. In 1966, John was taken to the Detroit House of Correction (DeHoCo) for six months for a minor marijuana offense. After his release, a “Festival of the People” was planned with various different poets, jazz musicians, and artists being featured. That night a rock band was scheduled to play, and they played loud. So loud, in fact, that Leni feared the neighbors would call the police and John would somehow end up back in jail. She tried her best to tell the band to turn it down, but understandably, they couldn’t hear her (or chose not to acknowledge the request). So Leni, in turn, pulled the plug on the MC5. And that was the beginning of John and Leni’s partnership with Fred Smith, Dennis Thompson, Rob Tyner, Wayne Kramer, and Michael Davis. Leni explains that pairing with the group was a very natural progression from her jazz roots, as the band identified with the concept of “avant-rock” and would exhibit similar playing strategies as the jazz players she admired. For example, the band would play songs that would sometimes last a half an hour; and their signature tune that ended all of their shows would include the entire audience getting up on stage and giving it their all. Leni succinctly describes it by saying, “it was pure pandemonium.” Leni’s main service to the band was being their house photographer. Consequently, she has single best collection of photographs of the MC5. She viewed her job more as a documenter of history and less as an artist, though most would argue that the iconic photos she has taken serve equally as both. Sinclair has said, “The next best thing to being a musician is being a photographer of musicians...When I’m in the dark, and they’re in the light, they can’t see me but I can see them, and I can do what I want.”
Besides her massive involvement in the Grande Ballroom rock scene, Leni also was at the forefront of many music festivals and large-scale concerts. Most famously among them was the John Sinclair Freedom Rally where acts ranged from Bob Seger to Archie Shepp, The Up, and John Lennon and Yoko Ono. The event also attracted speakers like Bobby Seale, Allen Ginsberg, and Ed Sanders. One can view the full concert in a film called “Ten for Two.” Sinclair and her comrades were the organizers of the Belle Isle Love-In, which attracted thousands of “hippies” to the park in Detroit on April 30, 1967. This event was akin to a giant picnic with music, food, weed, and good vibes until evening when a biker was arrested and a riot started. Later the Detroit police would chalk up the incident as the fault of John Sinclair and the other organizers, who were (in the words of the police) more interested in “picking a fight than peace and love.” Who were these ‘rebellious youths’ that wanted complete cultural revolution, free services, and peace? These were the people that Leni worked, lived, and loved with. They were a community of like-minded people that had begun with the development of the Detroit Artists Workshop and were subsequently “reborn” as Trans Love and later, the White Panther Party.

White Panther Party, Pigs, and Reform

Leni, John, and their crew were no strangers to surveillance and unlawful treatment. Since the Detroit Artists’ Workshop years, the Detroit police, who practiced remarkably undemocratic acts, were keeping a close watch on the group, using any means necessary to arrest members, most often for marijuana possession or vulgarity. When searching through archives, one can find papers published by the DAW and Trans-Love that had been underlined and
commented on by the police. As the Sinclairs’ collectives shifted with the times, the surveillance of their activities only continued to grow/

The growth from the DAW to Trans-Love Energies only made the police more eager to harass and torment Leni and her comrades. As evidenced by the incident at the Belle Isle Love In, the Detroit police had a keen knack for distorting reality to suit their beliefs and goals. Another event involving Gary Grimshaw and a kite would prove this truth to be so. At the DAW office Grimshaw had hung a kite that was embellished as an American flag print and written on it, “Fuck America, Go Fly a Kite.” To Grimshaw and the other DAW members, this was a comment on the seemingly disrespectful nature of making a kite composed of the American flag; to the squares in the Detroit police, it was something obscene (and a good excuse to arrest Grimshaw). Despite the kite being out of view from someone standing on the street, the cops cited it as a sufficient reason to take him in.

During the Detroit Riots, the DAW office survived; one may conjecture that this was at least partially the case because of the services the group provided to the community, including free meals when the riots were taking place. The police, however, used the chaos to enter and exit Trans-Love buildings at will, intimidating, threatening, and destroying whatever and wherever they pleased. This harassment and abuse eventually motivated the group to move to Ann Arbor, which they did in 1968. They created their commune on Hill Street, with 28 people taking up residence there. This is also where the White Panther Party (WPP) came to fruition. These years in Ann Arbor were also marked for the Sinclairs by constant surveillance by various government agencies. To this day Leni knows that two government plants lived amongst them at the Hill Street Commune, yet she cannot identify them by name.
The WPP supported all of the tenants of the Black Panther Party and advocated for free everything, including food, education, media, space, etc. Essentially, everything free for everybody. During the era of the WPP, John Sinclair was arrested for having two marijuana cigarettes and sentenced to ten years in prison. The 28-member commune was shocked and thrown when their leader was given his sentence. Despite his absence, the group pushed forward. As Leni explains, everyone had their job and was always busy. They had to work to support one another and they had to work to free John. This would lead to the “Free John Now” concert (the event was filmed and still unofficially circulates under the title “10 for 2”) and subsequently the release of John from prison. The ruling also dictated that the pot laws were indeed unlawful, and when a subsequent 128 people were freed from Jackson State Prison; John and Leni were there to greet them and shake their hands. The story of John’s release and the court rulings are far more complicated than elaborated upon in this paper; for a full report see Max Koopsen’s LHC thesis entitled “Reevaluating Domestic Surveillance.” Nevertheless, a $25 fine is given for possession of marijuana in Ann Arbor today in no small measure due to the Sinclairs’ efforts. Leni, however, is still waiting to get her ticket. “I still want my marijuana ticket...I earned it...One day I’ll walk into the Ann Arbor police station with a joint lit up and say ‘give me my ticket’ -- frame it, and put it on my wall.”

Leni and the rest of the WPP commune certainly earned their victory. In addition to the marijuana law change, they also were the targets of a CIA conspiracy case during the time of Watergate. Three members of the WPP were being charged for a bombing of a CIA office in Ann Arbor despite the fact that no one in the WPP knew such an office even existed. The case is a long and interesting one, and further details and information can be found in Koopsen’s paper
and the recently released study of Damon Keith entitled *Crusader for Justice* by Peter J. Hammer and Trevor W. Coleman. To the point, the government had illegally wire-taped the group and the case resulted in the court ruling that the government was using illegal and unlawful tactics in the surveillance of the group. Indeed, the WPP was under the surveillance of the local police, state police, Hoover’s FBI, the CIA, and Nixon’s White House. The ruling resulted in nationwide implications supporting individual’s rights to privacy while reaffirming that even the White House is not beyond the law.

The White Panthers Party did gain traction nationally, but the government took to extremes once again to stop the group’s progression. They would plant their own agents within the group and distort messages, so that by the time the information reached California it was barely recognizable to the WPP in Michigan. Eventually, Leni and John’s group would disassociate themselves completely from the WPP and would be recognized as the Rainbow Peoples’ Party, a name proposed by Gary Grimshaw.

Words to a Powerful Partner

Despite the underlying sexist challenges that Leni had to deal with on a daily basis, her husband John made a conscious effort to evolve his views and actions in a direction that supported females (and specifically his “powerful partner”). In his book *Guitar Army*, John Sinclair admittedly states that he was unconsciously behaving in a sexist way for most of his life. He details how he assumed Leni would be the sole child rearer, left the cleaning to her, and
didn’t think twice about it. One can deduce that Leni was a “powerful partner” indeed, as she not only took care of these tasks, but also devoted time to the movements and her craft.

Their union not only highlighted sexist tendencies, but more importantly, sculpted the direction in which their political groups would grow. John and Leni can be thought of in terms of their countries of origin: Leni, from communist Germany, was goal oriented and community focused, thinking in very interdependent terms: the closer the people grow and work together, the more powerful they become. John, on the other hand, held more of an individualistic perspective. As a quintessential American growing up in Michigan in a blue collar town, John’s goals were more about pursuing one’s own thoughts and challenging the status quo. He was a more philosophical political thinker, rather than a doer. The intersection of John and Leni produced a balanced perspective that many could relate to. If one wanted to smoke and talk about possibilities of freeing all services to the people, they could do that for hours with John. If someone wanted to sign up for community service, they could go see Leni and the commune’s duties chart. Though the union would not be withstanding, the twelve year marriage (1965-1977) would come to be a perfect representation of the era; people of different backgrounds and energies coming together to make important steps for change.

Things changed, however, when John was released from prison, though in December, 1971. Once again the world and culture had shifted (as it so quickly did in those days) and John simply could not meet the needs of every party. As Leni describes, he was being attacked from all sides: the extreme right and the extreme left. The right wing had always despised Sinclair, but the attacks from some groups on the left was a new and painful wound for Sinclair. Leni explains that a gay liberation group was at the forefront of this attack. The group advocated that one either
had to be gay, or at least bisexual, to be supportive of gay rights. They harassed John and advocated for “Free Leni Sinclair.” Other factions of the ultra left expected everything to be free and would create an uproar at concerts like the Ann Arbor Jazz and Blues Festival (tearing down fences, etc.). This “psychological warfare,” as Leni calls it, took such a toll on their marriage that it would not survive. John, frustrated from the attacks upon him, often took it out on the person closest to him, his partner.

Leni describes the eventual separation as a relief saying, “I believe in divorce. When people are not happy with each other, leave each other alone. At least maybe one of you will have a chance to find somebody else, or be happy not being with someone else. But don’t make life harder than it needs to be.”

Despite their parting of hearts, John and Leni’s partnership is immortalized in the era by the contributions they made together, as partners, in the Michigan jazz, rock, and arts scene.

200 Years From Now...

While Leni Sinclair surrounded herself with progressive individuals and folks fighting for equality, being a woman still wasn’t easy. She was frequently surrounded by men alone, and most of her photographs were centered around male artists. And in addition to Sinclair’s many duties surrounding the commune, the WPP, the Grande light show, and her own work as a photographer, she was also a mother in the midst of raising two girls of her own. Her first born, Marion Sunny Sinclair, was named for two of the Sinclairs’ favorite jazz artists, Sun Ra and
Marion Brown, while Celia-Sanchez Mao Sinclair was named for Fidel Castro’s rumored lover and participant in the Cuban revolution as well as Chairman Mao of communist China.

For almost all of the Sinclair daughters’ early years it was Leni who raised them. In fact, for virtually all of Leni and John’s marriage, John was either in jail or on probation, leaving a great deal of burden on Leni herself. Despite John Sinclair’s accumulation of the overwhelming majority of fame for the work the duo created together, it was Leni who was the hard working backbone of the commune, WPP, and Grande Ballroom shows. John was a good talker and effective writer, to be sure, but Leni was an excellent at the actual execution of tasks. After all, the commitments didn’t stop when John was sentenced to ten years in prison; rather, Leni and the rest of the commune had to work even more dutifully to continue John’s work in addition to taking all measures possible to get John freed from prison.

Luckily, Leni did have the support of her 28 member commune. They all had a schedule of duties, including watching the children. It was fun for the kids, Sinclair explains, as they had a different mom and dad every half an hour to play with. And parents also didn’t mind sending their children to hang out at the commune, as it enabled them to get off the streets and away from hard drugs like heroin. Leni recalls that they always drew hard and fast lines on drug use and were militantly against the use of said harder drugs. Leni would even sacrifice going to some of the more prestigious acts at the Grande, staying home and watching her daughters.

Leni believes that it will probably take around 200 years before the sexes are equal, noting that prior to the ’60s, during the ’60s, and even today, women have always been the nurturers. They are the mothers, wives, girlfriends, and daughters that foster the male artist so that he can blossom into his fullest potential. This also explains why Leni was constantly taking
pictures of male musicians; the female artists were comparatively few and far between. During an interview with Leni and Laura Grimshaw, Sinclair pointed to the Laura and said, “Here’s a perfect example right next to you. You think Gary would’ve been able to create all the work he did without you?” Laura protests for a moment and cites the work he had created before their meeting and eventual marriage; but Leni persists and Laura concedes, saying that she helped Gary get out of debt so that he had more time for his artistic abilities.

Leni is probably pretty close in her 200 year estimate, especially when one takes into account her definitions of sexism. As displayed in an issue of The Sun, Leni writes, “Sexism simply means judging people by their sex first and as human beings second...Women are not only looked at as different from men, but also as their inferiors -- that’s male chauvinism.” Certainly some progress has been made since the era to bridge the gender gap; this progress is directly linked to and is a product of brave and strong women like Sinclair herself. Though the disparity between the sexes is still significant (consider, for example, current family planning laws and our gendered income discrepancies), the gap is narrowing. As for Sinclair today, she says a couple of things have stuck since the ’60s: she only eats brown rice (a nod to her once micro-biotic diet), and she plans her outfits so that she doesn’t have to wear a bra. Right on sister, right on.

Music is Revolution

When looking back on the day, Leni Sinclair is as modest about her photography as she is about the impact she and her comrades had. “We participated in a cultural revolution, at best,” she contends. One can argue that not only did they “participate,” but they were the proverbial
fuel to the fire. They created an energetic and abundant scene in a midwestern hub that was virtually nonexistent prior to their efforts.

The Detroit Artists’ Workshop gave people an outlet to express themselves and to view expressions by others; it turned up the volume on conversations that were previously only whispered in dark corners of the city. It was a movement that generated full support for artists, so that they could afford to create without having to succumb to the assembly lines of GM and Ford. The DAW grew and transformed as the scene did in Detroit and Ann Arbor, eventually evolving into Trans-Love Energies and penultimately the White Panthers Party. These groups gained nation-wide attention and demanded a complete cultural and political reevaluation.

Leni Sinclair was also a key component to the area’s most happening music scene, the Grande Ballroom. With the music and her light shows, people finally had a place to come together and feel connected to the music, the lights, the ballroom, and most importantly, to one another. The music was the revolution; as Leni says, “The ’60s music and politics, there wasn’t any difference.”

And Sinclair participated with camera in hand. She, more than any other photographer, documented the short life of the Grande as a musical destination. Her unrelenting, often militant, attitude towards her values should be venerated by any person who considers themselves a revolutionary. Leni will name LSD as the biggest contribution to the cultural revolution, but without smart, strong, motivated individuals like herself, the drug’s effects would have been as useless as trying to use it as a governmental truth serum.

Today Leni still resides in Detroit, and she still loves her people. She says, “I’m always glad when I touch back down in Detroit [after a trip] and I see all my people,” going on to
describe how uncomfortable she is when surrounded by exclusively white people. She is incredibly gracious to those in need, even when she doesn’t have much herself. This fact was supported when she spent the day at a benefit for Gary Grimshaw’s family, giving some of her priceless artifacts to be auctioned in the hopes they would help to pay for his residual medical bills. Sinclair continues to advocate strongly for the use of marijuana, and possesses a medical card herself (making her dream of getting ticketed in Ann Arbor highly unlikely). She contends that all states will legalize its use when they see how much money they can make.

Above all, Leni Sinclair remains a Minister of Education. She passes on her life experiences as tokens of the importance of community and the power that people possess. Often citizens forget that they are, indeed, participants in their own existence; Leni is here to tell them differently. Though many of the fights she and her friends addressed in the ’60s and ’70s remain on-going today (gender equality, gay rights, planet preservation, war mongering, etc.) one must look to history first and continue to build upon those efforts, otherwise they will be buried, ignored, and unfulfilled, which is exactly what the powers that be would like. But we can improve the function and fidelity of the country and the world by remembering that all the power belongs to the people.
This photograph is another personal favorite, taken at an outdoor concert in Ann Arbor. Sinclair captures the love, energy, and lifestyle of her people in the era within one photograph. It’s hard not to smile when looking at this picture, sensing the pure joy of the participants dancing along, arm in arm. Though one can see this same picture from LA and San Francisco, I like to think that this picture has a uniquely midwestern feel to it.
Works Cited


