

FREE THE WEED 103

A Column by John Sinclair

Hi everybody and highest greetings from Detroit on my 78th birthday. That's a long time to walk this sordid planet called Earth and believe me, although I'm a pretty beat-up old man suffering from a variety of physical ailments at my advanced age, I'm very grateful to be here and I hope I can stay a little bit longer until I can accomplish some of the many things still on my artistic agenda.

But I've just received the fantastic news that what I consider my master work, an elongated blues work in verse titled *Fattening Frogs For Snakes*—completed in 1999, published by the Surregional Press in New Orleans in 2002, and recorded in four parts with four different ensembles in New Orleans, Detroit, Oxford and Clarksdale, Mississippi over the next several years, is now going to be released in a boxed set of vinyl albums by the Jett Plastic Recording company next April.

At the same time Horner Books, publishers of this magazine in Flint, Michigan, will print a second edition of the *Fattening Frogs For Snakes* book designed by my daughter Celia Sinclair with only a few minor corrections to the first printing, to coincide with the release of the boxed set and, in fact, to be included in the box with the albums.

And, to top it off, Funky D Records in Detroit will issue a 2-disc CD set of Volumes 3 & 4 of the collection, completing the run from Volume 1, released in 2002 by Okra-Tone Records and long out of print, and Volume 2, issued by No Cover Records here in Detroit around 2004.

Volume One (*The Delta Sound*) was produced by the late great Andre "Mr. Rhythm" Williams & Mark Bingham with Bill Lynn,

Jeff Grand and Everett Eglin on guitars, Mark Adams on keys, Rockin' Jake on harmonica, Tricky Dick Dixon on bass, Michael Voelker on drums, and ELS singing background vocals. Volume Two (*Country Blues*) was produced by Jeff Grand at No Cover Studios in Detroit and featured the late great Eddie Harsch on keyboards, Chris Rumel on bass, and James Whalen on harmonica.

The forthcoming Volume Three (*Don't Start Me To Talking*) was produced by Justin Showah at the late Voyagers Rest Studios in Oxford, Mississippi, with Lightning Malcolm on guitar, Justin on bass, Wallace Lester on drums, and guest pianist the late great Jim Dickinson. Volume Four (*Natural From Our Hearts*) is the Muddy Waters story and was produced by Jimbo Mathis at the late New Africa Studios in the Alcazar Hotel in Clarksdale, Mississippi with Eric Deaton on guitar, Justin Showah on bass, Kenny Kimbrough on drums and various guests including Jimbo on harmonica.

I know I'm probably boring your pants off with all this detail about some obscure music & poetry I recorded some years ago, but one of my life's ambitions for the past 20 years has been to get to issue *Fattening Frogs For Snakes* as a boxed set including the book itself, and now it's about to happen! What more can a poet ask for?

Since it's my birthday today, let me go back to the beginning: I got turned on to the idea of poetry, creative writing and reefer as a way of life when I read *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac upon its release in September 1957, just a month before my 16th birthday. It took me a couple of years to start writing and a couple more to find some marijuana to smoke—white people just didn't have any weed at that time—but once I put these things together I began to find the way of life I have lived ever since.

Once I started smoking marijuana on a daily basis I found the process of composing poetry increasingly rewarding both in terms of personal expression and in the quality of the product

of my labors. By the time I graduated from the Flint College of the University of Michigan in January 1964 my poetry was beginning to show some promise, and I had already served as the editor of the UM–Flint college newspaper, a mimeographed rag that we called *The Word*.

When I relocated from Flint to Detroit in the spring of 1964 I was seriously at work composing poetry and writing about music and literature for small magazines in Detroit and elsewhere. I met another poet called Allen Van Newkirk on my first day of classes in graduate school at Wayne State University and he moved into my basement apartment at the Forest Arms with me until he left for New York City later that spring.

In the meantime I met the people who would shape the next stage of my life in Detroit—the poets George Tysh, Robin Eichele and James Semark, painters Ellen Phelan, Larry Weiner and Howard Weingarden, photographers Magdalene Arndt and Carl Shurer, and musicians Charles Moore, Pierre Rochon, John Dana and Larry Nozero. My musician friends from Lansing—keyboardist Lyman Woodard, guitarist Ron English, and drummers Danny Spencer and Bud Spangler—fell in with this same bunch of characters and by the fall we formed the Detroit Artists Workshop as a base for our artistic operations in the Motor City.

With very few exceptions all of us were serious marijuana smokers and quite a few of us were regular users of psychedelic substances like peyote, mescaline and LSD. We were all variously inspired in our artistic endeavors by smoking weed and we all were early advocates of legalized marijuana, which was then classified as a narcotic by the State of Michigan.

At the Detroit Artists Workshop I wrote and performed tons of poetry, wrote about music and literature at great length, published mimeographed poetry and jazz magazines named *Work* and *Change* and *Where*, and issued a series of 20 little mimeographed books by Workshop poets.

By 1967 our underground movement had blossomed into a full-scale revolutionary cultural movement and I became a full-time cultural warrior in Detroit, taking over the management of a rock & roll band called the MC-5 and forming a wide-ranging hippie service organization called Trans-Love Energies with my then-wife, Leni Sinclair, artist Gary Grimshaw and MC-5 lead singer Rob Tyner.

This role left little time for poetry, and I left my compositional efforts by the roadside for the next 15 years. In 1982 I read a brilliant essay by my friend and mentor, the poet Edward Sanders, called *Investigative Poetry* and began writing verse once again.

My first project was a series of poems that became the book-length work in verse called *Fattening Frogs For Snakes*. Now, some 37 years later, I'm about to complete this project in grand style with the release of the boxed set on Jett Plastic Recordings and the 2nd edition of the book itself after selling out all 2000 copies of the first edition at my performances over the past 20 years.

I don't think you can blame me for being excited, and I hope you'll take the chance of investigating this work when it becomes available to the public this coming spring. As far as I can ascertain, no one has ever created a work of this particular magnitude, and I'm a very proud celebrant. And of course it all goes better with a good joint, or whatever your chosen method of delivery may be. FREE THE WEED!

P.S. On November 7 I'll be appearing with Edward Sanders and others at Third Man Records in Detroit in a special poetry event organized by M.L. Liebler.

—Detroit
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