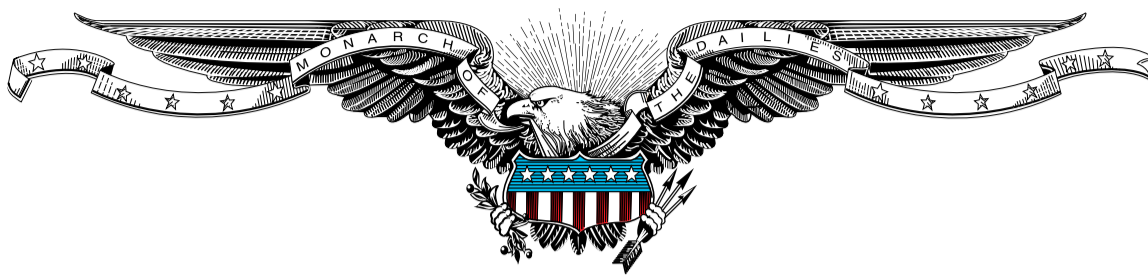




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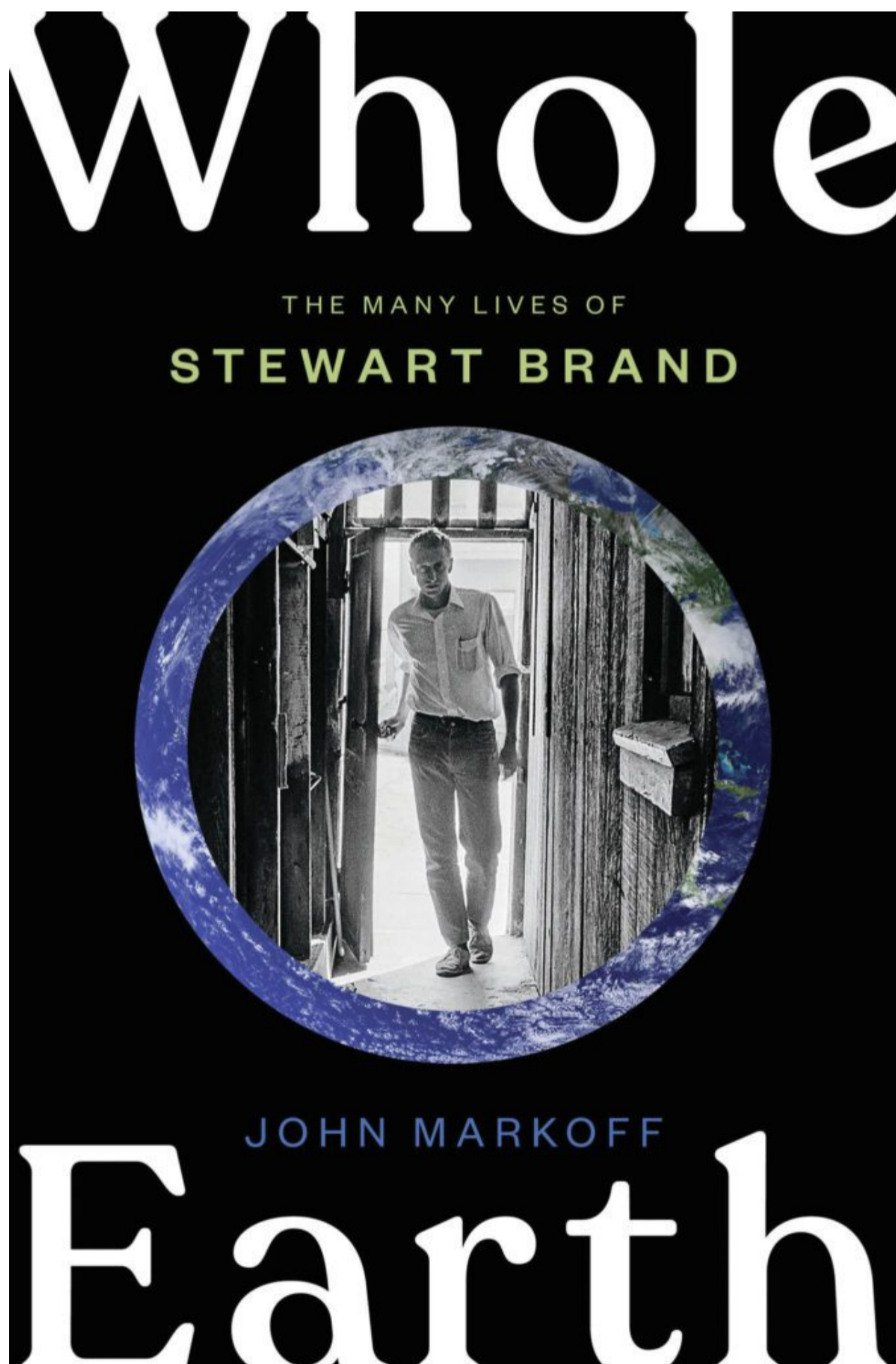


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John Markoff's new book depicts Stewart Brand's contributions from the 1960s to the present

By Paul Wilner Special to The Examiner • April 4, 2022 4:30 pm



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By Paul Wilner

Special to The Examiner

"He lit a spark," veteran technology author John Markoff says about Stewart Brand. The

indefatigable entrepreneur, best known for launching The Whole Earth Catalog in 1968, has also been at the center of countercultural movements for decades.

The first person believed to use the term “personal computer,” Brand cofounded the pioneering online community The Well and CoEvolution Quarterly, which featured contributions from Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry. More recently, his Long Now Foundation tries to separate the signal from the noise and focus on the challenges of the next 10,000 years.

Markoff, a Palo Alto native who retired from the *New York Times* in 2016 and previously authored “What the Dormouse Said: How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer,” remembers visiting the Whole Earth Truck Store in Menlo Park when he was on break from college up in Washington. His new biography, “Whole Earth: The Many Lives of Stewart Brand,” traces the impact of this latter-day Zelig. Many lives, indeed.

“There was a straight line from the Trips Festival” — the famously acid-drenched Longshoreman’s Hall event Brand organized at the behest of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters in 1966 — “to the rise of the Haight,” Markoff says. “But by the time the Summer of Love happened, he was gone. When everybody else showed up, he would take off.” (Brand famously passed out buttons reading, “Why haven’t we seen a photograph of the whole earth yet?” after an acid-induced epiphany on a North Beach rooftop.)

Born in Rockford, Michigan, Brand was a “stereotypical Midwestern kid” who was “completely seduced by California” when his brother enrolled at Stanford, Markoff recalls. Brand followed in his sibling’s footsteps at The Farm, but by his senior year he’d discovered North Beach and fallen in love with its nascent Beat scene as it was morphing into hippiedom. But he was always a searcher.

“What he took away from Buckminster Fuller was that if you want to create social change, train someone to use a new tool,” Markoff says. “The Whole Earth Catalog emerged at the same time Silicon Valley was being formed and had a huge impact on that culture, best expressed by Steve Jobs’ Stanford commencement speech in 2005 (quoting Brand’s aphorism): ‘Stay hungry. Stay foolish.’”

Unlike the tech billionaires he inspired, Brand has never tried to cash in. However, he has enough to keep him afloat on the Sausalito tugboat he shares with his wife, Ryan Phelan.

“Look at the Google founders,” Markoff says. “They were supposed to destroy evil, and wealth corroded them. Apple was about the chemistry between Steve Wozniak, who just wanted to share computer design with his friends, and Jobs, who understood there was a market. That’s the canonical story of Silicon Valley. Stewart was about something else. He’s always been more intellectually curious than people realize.”

Both Markoff and Brand will celebrate the book’s launch on April 7 at 6 p.m., in conversation with Mike Cerre at Sausalito Books by the Bay.

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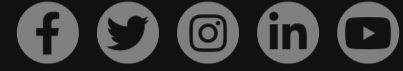
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