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Access to Tools

By JANE and MICHAEL STERN

The Whole Earth Catalog, originally published in 1968, had one of the most arresting covers in 20th-century publishing: an image of the Earth as seen from space. The idea for the picture came to Stewart Brand, Whole Earth's publisher, in 1966, when,

in the throes of an acid trip, he thought, "Seeing an image of the earth from space would change a lot of things." Brand positioned himself on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, wearing a sandwich board and selling lapel buttons that asked, "Why haven't we seen a photograph of the whole Earth yet?" He mailed the buttons to Congress, and legend has it his lobbying goaded [NASA](#) into releasing celestial pictures from an Apollo mission.

According to "Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism," by Andrew G. Kirk, the mind-blowing photo of our planet was a catalyst for the ecology movement. The Whole Earth Catalog itself became the voice of a new kind of environmental advocacy that, rather than shunning science as nature's enemy, embraced it as the key that could unlock the door to personal freedom and create a post-scarcity social utopia. Advances like pictures from space, personal computers, geodesic domes and even nuclear power were all part of what became known as the "appropriate technology movement," for which the Whole Earth Catalog was both a resource and a summary. No tree-hugging Luddite or apocalyptic doomsayer, Brand, Kirk writes, had an optimistic outlook shaped by "a love of good tools, thoughtful technology, scientific inquiry and a Western libertarian skepticism of the government's ability to take the lead in these areas." Brand wrote of his own publication, "This is a book of tools for saving the world at the only scale it can be done, one hand at a time."

Almost two million people bought the Whole Earth Catalog. [Steve Jobs](#), a founder of Apple Computer, said recently that the Whole Earth Epilog, an updated version that appeared in 1974, was "like Google in paperback form." While it offered all the know-how needed to drop out of society, few readers went that far. Kirk writes that the catalog's appeal was to "city dwellers hoping for escape, not from the city, but from the mundane." Its celebration of an alternative lifestyle based on a fantastic panoply of useful and intriguing products had immense appeal to prosperous baby boomers who have so often striven to justify materialism as virtuous.

COUNTERCULTURE GREEN

The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism.

By Andrew G. Kirk.

Illustrated. 303 pp. University Press of Kansas. \$34.95.

Kirk's book uses the genesis and evolution of *Whole Earth* as an opportunity to survey the sea change in environmental and design attitudes that emerged in the 1960s counterculture but, he notes emphatically, eventually outgrew it. Because of its emphasis on practical solutions, not antisocial excess, the book was "a road map for careful readers who wanted to remake the existing world. Fixing the system rather than abandoning it or building something new from scratch was the critical insight that *Whole Earth* offered environmentally minded readers."

That's not to say Brand and his comrades weren't wild and crazy. Brand enthusiastically described the Alloy Gathering in New Mexico in the spring of 1969 as "outlaws, dope fiends and fanatics." They were "doers primarily, with a functional grimy grasp on the world. World thinkers, dropouts from specialization. Hope freaks." Kirk notes that "from a distance" the Alloy Gathering might have looked like just another extended hippie party, but inside its domes was "a remarkable collection of productive appropriate-technology innovators mapping out a tech-friendly environmental ethic decades ahead of its time." Among Brand's fellows in the movement were Steve Baer, who had designed the alternative energy structures at the Drop City commune in Colorado; J. Baldwin, the New Age hippie who was a *Whole Earth* writer and editor and a "thing-maker, tool-freak and prototyper" for an inventive generation"; John Perry Barlow, a [Grateful Dead](#) lyricist and counterculture libertarian who referred to cyberspace as the Electronic Frontier; and Buckminster Fuller, the iconoclastic designer whom *Whole Earth* introduced "to a new generation — promoting him to the status of cult hero."

Each of these exceptional characters is someone you'd want to learn more about, but the panoramic scale of Kirk's book reveals little beyond their roles in this grand cultural revolution. Even Brand, the nexus of the narrative, is seen from a frustratingly respectful distance. Kirk goes to great lengths to explain the idiosyncratic nature of his worldview, which will surprise readers expecting a left-leaning environmentalist cliché. An unruly activist instrumental in staging the Trips Festival, which was, in effect, LSD's coming-out party, he was also an anti-Communist who expressed no regret about training troops to go to Vietnam (when he was in the Army in the early '60s). He welcomed Herman Kahn, the futurist, nuclear optimist and model for Dr. Strangelove, to the pages of his *CoEvolution Quarterly*. Kirk describes Brand as one of those "prescient few" who "stay two steps ahead of their peers, creating and riding the crest of important trends." And while the book vividly documents his role in "the creation of the American counterculture, the birth of the personal computer, the rise of rock and roll, the back-to-the-land and commune movement, the environmental movement, and a critical reorientation of Western politics," it doesn't say what he eats for breakfast. Where does he live, what does he wear, which vehicle does he drive? Does he have a love life, and if so, with whom? What makes him tick?

It was not Andrew G. Kirk's intention to answer these questions, and he fully succeeds in what he set out to do: creating a whole catalog of the *Whole Earth* phenomenon. It is a measure of his success that we yearn to know more.

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