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Review: Biography juggles the many contradictions of the man behind the Whole Earth Catalog

Carl Rollyson | March 16, 2022



John Markoff is the author of "Whole Earth: The Many Lives of Stewart Brand."

Photo: Leslie Terzian Markoff

Stewart Brand, a Bay Area denizen, probably needs no introduction. But just in case you need a refresher: He invented the Whole Earth Catalog (1968), a kind of back-to-the-future, counterculture guide to information about the tools, equipment, clothing and do-it-yourself kits that aimed to make individuals self-sufficient and, yes, whole.

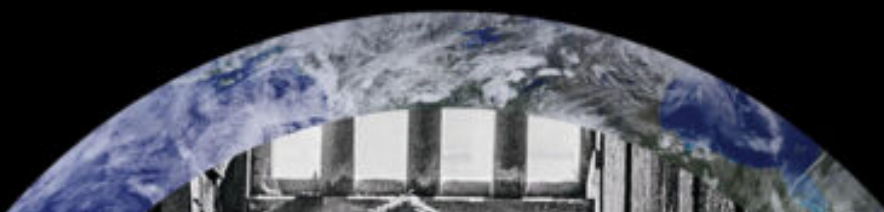
On the one hand, such a catalog returned to the days of a Sears Roebuck world of items to outfit yourself and your home, but on the other, the items Brand featured meant that an individual, or small groups, could become their own manufacturers, so to speak – like the Native Americans he visited and admired, impressed with their holistic thinking.

Brand (still alive and in his 80s) can hardly be consigned to the far left, or to the causes of radical environmentalists and anti-capitalists. His early work also created a name for what we take for granted today, the “personal computer” – his term for what Silicon Valley made into a big business he refused to repudiate.

Brand’s life, as John Markoff’s biography shows, seems full of contradictions. He is, for example, a pro-technology environmentalist who supports nuclear power. His response to climate change has meant he no longer believes that individuals – or corporations for that matter – can be self-sufficient. His work as an adviser for Gov. Jerry Brown led to his belief that government action to ameliorate climate change is paramount.

Whole

THE MANY LIVES OF
STEWART BRAND





JOHN MARKOFF

Earth

“Whole Earth: The Many Lives of Stewart Brand” by John Markoff.
Photo: Penguin Books

Even in a book as comprehensive as this, based on his access to Brand’s archives and to Brand himself, Markoff has trouble tracking this revolutionary thinker’s many changes of mind as he moved from a career in the military to photography to various startups, seeking to cope with the velocity of change by employing a slowed-down, organic way of thinking about the world.

One of Brand’s books, “How Buildings Learn,” is typical of his challenging modes of thought and why he has often run into trouble – in this case, due to his criticism of modern architects for creating

structures that cannot adapt over time to changing environmental conditions and human needs. An architect threatened to sue him. (This is a tactic the profession resorts to, as I first discovered, when another unorthodox thinker, Jill Craigie, was threatened with lawsuits by architects for deploring their designs of public high-rises that provided no human-scale space for youth.) Brand also ran afoul of environmentalists for consulting with large corporations like then-named Royal Dutch Shell and refusing to adopt far-left positions.

In a section titled “Brandisms,” pithy slogans — “We are as Gods and we might as well get good at it” — demonstrate the controversial but also influential thrust of Brand’s ideas. But missing from this biography is a chronology, a sort of chart, that might help the rest of us navigate through the teeming adventures of the Brandian world.

Whole Earth: The Many Lives of Stewart Brand

By John Markoff

(Penguin Press; 416 pages; \$32)

Author events

Long Now Foundation presents John Markoff in conversation with Stewart Brand: 7 p.m. Tuesday, March 22. In person \$25, with proof of vaccination and mask required; virtual free, RSVP required. SFJazz Center, 201 Franklin St., San Francisco. longnow.org/talks

Commonwealth Club presents John Markoff in conversation with Paul Saffo: 6 p.m. Thursday, March 24. In person \$25 (\$55 includes book), with proof of vaccination and mask required. Virtual \$5, registration required. Free or discounted for members. 110 The Embarcadero, San Francisco. www.commonwealthclub.org

Computer History Museum presents John Markoff in conversation with Nicole Perlroth: In-person (proof of vaccination required) and virtual event. 7 p.m. March 31. Free; registration required. Computer History Museum, 1401 N. Shoreline Blvd., Mountain View. computerhistory.org



Carl Rollyson

Carl Rollyson is the author of "To Be A Woman: The Life of Jill Craigie" and several other biographies.