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PATT MORRISON ASKS

Stewart Brand: Earth man

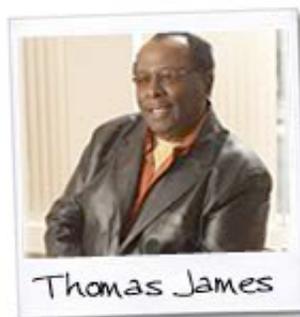
His Whole Earth Catalog made him famous. But it was far from his last hurrah.

Patt Morrison

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I almost started this conversation by asking Stewart Brand, "So . . . what's on your mind?" But who's got that kind of time?

Brand has been an ahead-of-the-curve thinker for half a century, putting rigor into the counterculture and possessing a curiosity that's taken him beyond it. His Whole Earth Catalog won the Establishment's attention and dollars -- he gave away most of the latter -- and he was on to other things. That renowned, iconographic blue-dot image of Earth from space -- Brand agitated to have NASA release the photo because he believed it would change humans' thinking about the place.



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Brand's own questing is one of the reasons he's been recycled into the news churn. His latest book, "Whole Earth Discipline, an Ecopragmatist Manifesto," swings his green cred behind nuclear energy and other "heresies." All of it fueled by brew from his portable coffee maker. Coffee, the 71-year-old says, "Makes me feel like 60."

Jerry Brown is running for governor; you were in his circle when he first held office.

If he prevails, he'd be a very good governor. His resume has more really effective green in it than almost any politician seeking office. When people say we can't do energy efficiency because it takes such a terrible economic toll, Jerry is proof that that's not the case.

He's not the same man he was nearly 40 years ago, and I don't think you'd consider yourself the same either.

I think it's only the occasional pop star who tries to keep replaying the same music. I'm older and have enjoyed the lessons of a lot of mistakes.

What mistakes? What makes you smack your forehead now and say, "How could I ever have done

that"?

The biggest, most obvious, was doing a quarterly about software. Talk about a contradiction -- software does not change at a quarterly rate. We got a bunch of money for the Whole Earth Software Catalog -- I think it was a million-dollar advance -- and neither the catalog nor the quarterly magazine was of much use at all.

And the lesson there was?

Assuming that something that worked in one domain is going to work in another. And when you're overcapitalized, you can go a lot further down the mistaken path than when you don't have any money. I was at a [meeting] of historians looking at Iraq. They point out that large, wealthy superpowers can afford to make the same mistakes over and over, whereas insurgents are so weak they have to learn from their mistakes in a very rapid fashion. That's part of the mismatch we ran into in Iraq.

Is California on the verge of being a failed experiment?

I think California keeps moving from platform to platform, because it's an easy place to start things. Silicon Valley has gone from aerospace to computers to biotech and all the various stages of computers. It has to do with [how] failure is not punished here; it's almost rewarded.

Do people still insist on buttonholing you about the Whole Earth Catalog days?

They turn up after a talk or almost anywhere, and most of the time the first thing they say is, "I still have my Whole Earth Catalog." Or, "My parents still have the catalog." And from time to time I ask, "Why?" It is an impolite question because they feel challenged when they wanted a warm glow of connection. Which they also get. I guess it's some kind of talisman of a period in their lives, in U.S. history. But anyway, I'm the Whole Earth Catalog guy. That ain't bad.

In those days, how did you balance between the philosophically romantic and the pragmatic, maybe the technical?

I probably got rid of what was left of my romanticism by the time I was 40, 45, because I'd seen a lot of people become -- what? Victims of a notion? A notion that civilization is going downhill, that bad people and bad institutions and bad ideas are shaking all that is right and good out of the world and this must be resisted even though it's a losing battle. It's a wonderfully coherent way to think and live. It just happens to be wrong. But that's part of the fun of being a romantic: You get to defy reality.

I'm neither interested in the impossible nor in the probable. I am interested in the difficult but possible. You get to do striving, but you get to also be successful. I suppose that's kind of a mix of ambition and pragmatism.

How did you come to be open to things the liberal canon has rejected, like nuclear power and genetically modified foods?

Some of it may be genetic. The story in Rockford, Ill., was, if you throw a Brand in the river, they'll float upstream. There was a certain inborn contrariness.

[On nuclear energy], I figure I was wrong all along. I bought, without thinking about it or doing my own research, into the mistaken over-connection between nuclear weapons and nuclear energy. Teasing those apart and saying, "Weapons bad, energy good," is not something I took the trouble to do. Because I was and am an environmentalist. The thought that nuclear waste was going to be this terrible obligation we'd put on dozens or hundreds of future generations -- I didn't actually look at how nuclear waste works, and so it was a knee-jerk response.

Are you fairly pessimistic about us getting a grip on global warming quickly enough?

Yes, I am pessimistic. One good outcome -- a quiet one -- in Copenhagen [at the global climate summit] was you started to get a serious conversation between the U.S., China and India. But the rate of greenhouse gas emissions is not slackening, it's not leveling, it's increasing. My guess is that something equivalent to the melting of the Arctic ice, in a place where people live, is what it's going to take to shake people up.

Your Long Now Foundation is planning to construct a 10,000-year mechanical clock in the desert. What is it meant to do?

Eternity is the opposite of a long time. Eternity is out of time -- it's spoken of in those terms in the church -- whereas "a long time" is more immersed in time. So we took on the Long Now to conveniently define [that] in a workable way. It's not astronomical time. It's not geological time. It's not even biological time -- it's human civilization time, dating back to the melting of ice in the Northern Hemisphere, the domestication of crops and animals.

One thing we do at the Global Business Network [*the consulting firm he co-founded*] is to encourage people to think forward by thinking back. We have people visit their own business, their own lives 20 years ago -- what things would you wish you had known. We're just expanding the range of that to the history of civilization so far, [to] hold all of civilization in a single continuous story in our minds

The clock is not just symbolic. Materiality counts. The clock we're designing is cutting edge in terms of invention, in terms of materials. We're not trying to put any ideational context on the clock; it's just a clock that's capable of ticking and telling time for thousands of years, and we'll let everybody else figure out what it means.

You had an early affinity for computers and computer types, and created a kind of social network -- the WELL -- before most people had even heard of PCs.

I had first seen what we now call hackers when I got out of the Army in '61, '62. At Stanford I saw them playing the first computer game called "Space War," clustered around a video display and absolutely ecstatic. That was compelling.

When personal computers came along, I was kind of drumming my fingers because it felt like they'd been really delayed and they weren't very powerful yet. I was involved in some online teleconferencing and [with] Larry Brilliant we started the WELL. Lo and behold, this many years later, the WELL is still continuing. One book that's inspired us was "The Great Good Place." There's a place where you live, a place where you work, and this third place, a beauty salon or a pub, where you like to hang out with your buds, so we set about making the WELL into an online great good place, and it worked out that way.

You have so many widely quoted aphorisms; is there one that you like that keeps getting quoted or misquoted back to you?

I'm lucky; the ones that get quoted I don't mind at all. The statement about "Information wants to be free" was in a paragraph that originally said "Information wants to be expensive, and information also wants to be free." That got pared down to the more interesting part of the statement.

The struggle is between expensive and free, especially now.

That's really what the original statement was about. In 1984, there was a debate between the hacker ethic of freeing up software to be improved by everybody, and the realization that this was one of the most remarkable moneymaking inventions ever. [The] tension between open source and commercial was just going to keep reasserting itself with each new capability of information and computer technology, and that has proved to be the case.

What saying would you want on your tombstone? Or do you even want a tombstone?

I like the idea of a tombstone, ideally with a bench nearby. On the tombstone, it would say, "Have a seat. What's on your mind?" I've noticed people like to talk to tombstones, and it seems like a really great thing to do. And tombstones never change the subject.

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This interview was edited and excerpted from a longer taped transcript. An archive of Morrison's published interviews is at latimes.com/pattasks.

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