

We've Got to Get Ourselves Back to the Garden: Counterculture Environmentalism and American Popular Music

Nathan Rivers
Ball State University

The Sixties are perhaps one of the most tumultuous periods in American history. The simultaneous rise of the least popular war in the nation's history, Vietnam, and the Civil Rights movement created an era of protests, rebellion against "the system," and, by the end of the 1960s, violence and rage. Through this chaotic time, however, rose a group with little aspiration of bringing about political change, let alone instigating violence over it. The Counterculture, as it became known, wanted simply to disengage from mainstream society and live under new, alternative sets of norms. This movement, different from the New Left that mainstream media outlets often lumped, incorrectly, into the Counterculture collective, chose to do so through dropping out by taking LSD, embracing forms of Native American mysticism, practicing "free love," utilizing music, especially rock, as a new means of expression, living together in communal towns, and more. The goal was to change society not through protest, but by being a living example. Perhaps the most tangible area of impact, though, came from one of the Counterculture's later movements: environmentalism.

The Counterculture's environmental movement is one of the few areas that has seen a lasting and actual impact on the functioning of American society. While the visions of utopia that members of the Counterculture envisioned faded away over time, the ideas about protecting the environment managed to cause actual change in the way that mainstream society functioned, thanks in large part to the formation of Earth Day. A mix of both mainstream and Counterculture

environmentalism, Earth Day proved to be the major catalyst for ensuring the success of the Counterculture's environmental movement. With large scale media coverage, the event resulted in the American public becoming more aware than ever before about the detrimental effects pollution was having on the environment and the planet's finite number of resources. The results were staggering, as the American government quickly joined in and began passing new legislation and regulations to help in this cause.¹ Naturally, then, the impact that Earth Day had in promoting the Counterculture's ideas of environmentalism was profound. An unexplored aspect of this, though, is how this sudden surge in environmental concerns affected popular music in the United States.

Music, by this time, was already in use as a means of reflecting and furthering the protest movements throughout the country. Naturally, most of these songs tended to focus on the more prevalent movements of the time; anti-Vietnam War songs like Country Joe & The Fish's "I-Feel-Like-I'm-A-Fixing-To-Die Rag;" anti-racism and pro-civil rights songs like "Everyday People" by Sly & The Family Stone; and songs simply protesting the way that the United States was being run by both the Johnson and Nixon administrations, such as "We Can Be Together," by Jefferson Airplane. Environmentalism seemed to be a less common topic of songs in popular music. However, with the event of the first Earth Day in 1970, songs about pollution and saving the environment came to the forefront and spread beyond groups typically associated with the

¹ Benjamin Kline, *First Along the River: A Brief History of the U.S. Environmental Movement*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Acada Books, 2000), 92-94.

Counterculture to artists and groups who proved more popular with the American public. As such, in the wake of Earth Day, the environmentalism raised and promoted by the Counterculture began to manifest itself in American popular music in three primary ways. In many cases, the pieces were descriptive of the environmental hazards and catastrophes occurring throughout the country, with the aim to bring the concerns to light to the American public. Other songs embracing Counterculture environmentalism utilized a more artistic approach, either creating fictionalized accounts of what could happen or taking nostalgic looks toward past times where pollution was not affecting America. Finally, a call to action appears in several pieces addressing these environmental concerns, with lyrics containing directions on what needed to happen to stop pollution or, in the worst-case scenarios, what needs to be done for mankind to survive the destruction of the Earth. This article will show how Counterculture environmentalism was embraced and incorporated into American popular music in the wake of the inaugural Earth Day in 1970. Prior to this study, the role that music played within the Counterculture's environmental movement has seen little examination, and as such has an almost nonexistent historiography. With this study, this article bridges this gap in historical scholarship and definitively show a connection exists between Counterculture environmentalism and American popular music.

A History of Environmentalism

While environmentalism hit its stride in the period around Earth Day, it certainly was not some new construction by the Counterculture. There had been concern

about nature and environment dating back to the middle of the nineteenth century. As Robert Gottlieb lays out, attempts at wilderness preservation and the promotion of outdoor recreational activities had been born out of the urban growth during this time. Congress began to establish national parks, such as Yellowstone in Wyoming and Yosemite in California, which promoted tourism and allowed Americans the opportunity to explore nature as a recreational activity.² This time also saw the formation of some of the first environmental advocacy groups, such as the Sierra Club and the Boone and Crockett Club, both which held aspirations of ensuring that natural resources were used correctly.³ However, few had concerns about managing waste and avoiding pollution; with industrialization continuing its profitable march, there was little need to be concerned quite yet.

With the turn of the twentieth century and the uptick in immigration into the United States, cities began to swell in size, marking urbanization as a dominant idea. This, as Peter J. Schmitt suggests in his work *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America*, was the origin of “back to nature” sentiments similar to those that would become so prominent in the Counterculture’s version of environmentalism. According to Schmitt, the urban sprawl of the early twentieth century led people to become dissatisfied with urban lifestyles and to dream of the idea of living where nature had been untainted by the expansion of

² Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, rev. ed. (Washington: Island Press, 2005), 61-62.

³ *Ibid*, 56.

mankind.⁴ This “agrarian myth,” as it came to be called, saw those living in urban settings looking to farming in rural areas of the nation as an ideal life where little work needed be done.⁵ While this idea certainly proved popular, conservationism in this time focused on wilderness areas away from substantial human populations. There was not yet widespread concern about the effects of local pollution near urban centers at this point.

The Sixties proved to be the period of greatest change for the environmental movement, as populations began to focus more on these local problems. In 1962, marine biologist Rachel Carson published her now-famed work *Silent Spring*, which uncovered the major health issues posed by food producers’ indiscriminate use of the pesticide DDT. For the first time, information was presented that suggested the amount of damage that pollution was having on the environment, and, in turn, on the human condition. Carson, for instance, states that chemicals introduced into the environment had “powerful capacities for inducing biological change” that cause greatly increased cancer rates.⁶ Suddenly, environmentalism moved into the eye of the American public. If this sort of contamination was occurring within the food supply, how were other essential aspects of human life—like water, air or land—affected? While the America public poured over these questions, the United States government began to take action.

⁴ Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 4-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁶ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 219-220.

By the mid-1960s, environmentalism had become a part of mainstream politics. Indeed, for environmental historian Adam Rome, this governmental embrace of the environmental movement was one of the three key parts of the success of the Sixties' environmental revolution, the other two being the women's movement and the Counterculture contribution. While some politicians had talked of conservation in the late Fifties and early Sixties, the government truly became involved with the movement with Lyndon B. Johnson's establishment of his Great Society program. Here, as Rome attests to, Johnson made environmentalism a major part of the program, resulting in the creation of over 300 new conservation measures implemented across the country.⁷ The government under the liberal control of the Johnson administration was no longer willing to sit by and declare environmental issues as local concerns, as Republican Dwight Eisenhower suggested during his tenure in the Oval Office.⁸ Now environmentalism was a nationwide concern with both the American public and government working towards ways to fix these issues.

For some, the efforts being taken by these "mainstream" outlets towards environmental conservation were not enough. Naturally, then, it was up to the Counterculture to present more radical ideas of how best to save and protect the environment. Alternative lifestyles and movements, then, dominated the landscape of Counterculture environmentalism. Communal living became a popular way to live in environmentally friendly fashions. For instance, with

⁷ Adam Rome, "Give Earth A Chance: The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," in *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 2003), 534, accessed 10 February, 2018, PDF.

⁸ Ibid.

Colorado-based Drop City, the inhabitants chose recycling as a means of constructing their homes; instead of conventional materials, the group tore the roofs off old cars in a nearby junk yard and used them for construction material.⁹ Others, such as the Earth People's Park, had aspirations of returning to nature; living off what the land could provide and ensuring that Mother Nature was not tarnished by the hands of mankind.¹⁰ Others decided that while communes might not be the way to go, other means could be used to live alternative, greener lives. Stewart Brand, in his famed work *The Whole Earth Catalog*, declared that "We are as gods and might as well get used to it," suggesting that humankind was who truly had power over the fate of the environment.¹¹ With the correct tools and technology, which Brand provided via his Catalog, man could live in an environmentally friendly way, all while managing to get rid of "wilderness romanticism," as Andrew Kirk puts it.¹² The Counterculture, too, provided a means to make environmentalism attractive to youth. Such was the case with the now-famous environmental group Greenpeace. Frank Zelko, associate professor of history at the University of Vermont, suggests that the Countercultural origins of Greenpeace allowed it to appeal to the acid droppers, dope smokers, and

⁹ *Drop City*, directed by Joan Grossman (Pinball Films, 2012), DVD (Seventh Art Releasing, 2012).

¹⁰ The name for this commune was derived from the infamous People's Park incident that occurred at Berkeley. The intent of this commune was to produce a new People's Park on a much larger scale. "Earth People's Park: 'Our Last Chance,'" *Rolling Stone*, February 7, 1970, 12.

¹¹ Stewart Brand, "The Purpose of the Whole Earth Catalog," *Whole Earth Catalog*, Fall 1968, accessed March 4, 2018, <http://www.wholeearth.com/issue/1010/article/196/the.purpose.of.the.whole.earth.catalog>.

¹² Andrew Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 12.

members of the Sixties youth movement rather than the “middle-aged Sierra Club hikers in corduroys and cardigans.”¹³ Andrew Kirk, professor of history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, adds to the idea of environmentalism becoming hip, suggesting that the ideas brought about by Stewart Brand with his creation of the *Whole Earth Catalog* created an embrace of new, environmental technologies that resonated with the young generation that populated the Counterculture movement.¹⁴ With these sorts of developments in alternative and Counterculture environmentalism, more and more members of the American youth movement began to join in. For perhaps one of the few times in the relationship between the Counterculture and the “establishment,” the two sides were reasonably in agreement that something needed to happen to protect the environment. The result was an event that was a mix of both of these sides: Earth Day.

The idea of Earth Day came originally from “the establishment” side, especially thanks to Wisconsin senator Gaylord Nelson. Nelson found inspiration in the Vietnam War protests, which he felt could work better if done with a movement that most Americans would be willing to get behind.¹⁵ With backing from other congressmen and other top-level officials, Earth Day appealed to those who subscribed to more mainstream environmentalism. At the same time, the organizers attempted to prevent themselves from seeming too much involved

¹³ Frank Zelko, *Make it a Green Peace! The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4-5

¹⁴ Kirk, *Counterculture Green*, 17.

¹⁵ Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2013), 57.

with the establishment; some claimed that the Nixon administration's promotion of ecology, even despite such measures as the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Clean Air act, was bunk, while, perhaps more radically, staff members refused donations from corporations such as Mobil Oil and Ford Motor Company.¹⁶ Come the actual Earth Day events, the Counterculture aspect seemed to appear more; students at the University of Alaska booed Secretary of the Interior Wally Hickel off stage, while in Denver, antinuclear protestors handed out an "Environmental Rape of the Year" award to the Atomic Energy Commission.¹⁷ Despite this, Earth Day suddenly made environmentalism something that everyone could get behind, whether they preferred the legislative path of mainstream politics or the radical approach more in line with Counterculture ideals. With hundreds of campuses joining in on the events and over 10 million participants, Earth Day's success surely signified the popularity and reach that environmentalism now had with the American public.¹⁸ With this newfound popularity, the stage was set for environmentalism to be absorbed into popular culture. Naturally, then, one of the first aspects that this would manifest in would be in music.

Uses of Music in the Sixties

Music in the sixties was used as a powerful tool of protest and political statements. This was the case all the way from the folk revival that occurred in

¹⁶ Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2013), 87.

¹⁷ Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 155.

¹⁸ Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 156-157.

the early part of the Sixties, which, as Dick Weissman argues, proved to be a major factor in the development of political themes in nearly all genres of popular music.¹⁹ Indeed, folk musicians of the Sixties used their music to help aid in promoting the Civil Rights and the Anti-Vietnam War movements. From Pete Seeger's famed rendition of the Civil Rights anthem "We Shall Overcome," to anti-war anthems like Phil Ochs' "I Ain't Marching Anymore," folk music served as an inherently political form of music that also proved highly popular among the American public. It was no wonder, then, that when rock music took the mantle of being the most popular form of music for youth, the political aspects of music followed along with it.

Political messages in rock music were certainly commonplace by the time that it became the dominant popular music. It certainly is simple to pick this out by just a quick glance at some of the popular songs of the time; Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, for instance, with their song "Ohio," protested the killings that had occurred at Kent State during a protest against the Vietnam War, while Jefferson Airplane, with their song "We Can Be Together," advocated for more radical means of protest, similar to that of guerilla anarchist group Up Against The Wall, Motherfucker.²⁰ For some members of the Counterculture, however, rock served as even more than that. Michael J. Kramer contends that rock music such as this allowed for Counterculture participants to form their own definitions

¹⁹ Dick Weissman, *Which Side Are You On? An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 15.

²⁰ Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, "Ohio," on *4 Way Street*, recorded 1970, Atlantic SD 2-902, 1971, 33^{1/3} rpm; Jefferson Airplane, "We Can Be Together," on *Volunteers*, recorded 1969, RCA/Victor LSP-4238, 1969, 33^{1/3} rpm.

of citizenship and develop their own “Woodstock Nation.”²¹ For him, the combination of LSD usage and rock music is what allowed for people in the Counterculture to be receptive to ideas of changing the dominant culture of America and help bring an end to the Vietnam War.²² While a compelling argument, other scholars have disagreed with the idea that rock music was actually antiestablishment. Nadya Zimmerman, for instance, suggests that the political messages of the songs were in contrast to reality; the Counterculture was more than willing to subjugate itself to the capitalist systems in place due to the movement’s lack of political motivation.²³ Despite this, the music of the period continued to reflect the political ideologies held both by the Counterculture and the general public of America. With the coming of Earth Day and its support from both sides, popular music would soon follow the same path with its support of the environmental movement.

“They Put Up a Bunch of Ugly Boxes:” Descriptions and Awareness

Bringing awareness of social issues to the American public was nothing new for members of the Counterculture. Indeed, as John McMillian suggests, Counterculture participants undertaking journalism already were committed to bringing awareness of events to light for readers of their efforts. In his discussion of underground journalism during the Counterculture era, McMillian argues that

²¹ Michael J. Kramer, *The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 25.

²² *Ibid.*, 58.

²³ Nadya Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on Late Sixties San Francisco* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 5, accessed 20 November 2017, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015077672809>.

the Counterculture was already rooted in muckraking culture, having taken influence from “dissident newspapers” that had appeared among the working classes during the market revolution of the nineteenth century.²⁴ Further, there was no fear of upsetting anyone with what was written, as McMillian suggests that those in the Counterculture were more than willing to display information upsetting to the older generations if it meant garnering more exposure for the topics they discussed.²⁵ The same sort of tradition existed in the radical environmental literature appearing among the Counterculture as well. As Bob Ostertag states in his work *People’s Movements, People’s Press*, the phenomenon existed even dating back to the days where the Sierra Club was the dominant force in American environmentalism, as, in their Sierra Club Bulletin, the group brought to light issues with the proposed construction of dams at Glen Canyon and, shortly thereafter, the Grand Canyon.²⁶ In a sense, Earth Day served as a continuation of this idea. The massive teach-in event held across the country and internationally served as a means to bring awareness to the many issues that plagued the environment, much as the Countercultural press and publications had been designed to bring awareness to the myriad social issues facing the American nation during sixties era. It is little wonder, then, that with Earth Day’s popularization of the environmental movement, this sort of expository method appeared in music produced by popular artists shortly after Earth Day.

²⁴ John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

²⁶ Bob Ostertag, *People’s Movements, People’s Press: The Journalism of Social Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 163-165.

Even prior to Earth Day, this Counterculture idea appeared in music. *Time* magazine ran a story in 1969 regarding the efforts that folk musician Pete Seeger undertook to bring awareness to the polluted state of the Hudson River. Seeger sailed a small sloop from New York City to Albany while giving concerts along the way. The article in *Time* notes that at a stop in Nyack, Seeger brought forth a song specifically about the polluted state of the river, with the lyrics:

Sailing down my dirty stream
Still I love it and I'll keep the dream
That some day, though maybe not this year,
My Hudson River will once again run clear.
Down the valley one million toilet chains
Find my Hudson so convenient place to drain.
And each little city says, "Who me?"
Do you think that sewage plants come free?"²⁷

Already, here a year before Earth Day, the Counterculture idea of bringing attention to environmental issues was already being incorporated into music being produced. Certainly, then, this idea would be implemented further once these Countercultural environmental ideas and tactics were popularized further following the success of Earth Day.

Perhaps the most notable example of this Counterculture methodology being incorporated appears in what is likely the most famous environmental song to appear during this period. In 1971, Marvin Gaye released his popular piece "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)," which commented on the sorry state of the environment. The issues covered in Gaye's song range from air pollution to concerns about the effects that the utilization of nuclear power was having on the

²⁷ "Song of the Open Sewer," *Time*, August 22, 1969, accessed April 20, 2018, EBSCOhost.

environment. The effect that this track has had was significant, given contemporary events. For instance, Gaye sings “oil wasted on the ocean and upon our seas, fish full of mercury,” appearing at first glance to be a general lamentation about the state of the aquatic environment.²⁸ The information meant to be expressed, though, is more specific; in 1969, an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California caused a roughly 35 mile oil slick to form and kill thousands of sea-faring animals, while in 1970, an oil rig fire caused oil to be leaked into the Gulf of Mexico.²⁹ Indeed, the implication here is that Gaye is reminding the public that these catastrophic environmental events occurred in the recent past in the hopes that something might be done about it. Further, Gaye incorporates the line “what about this overcrowded land/how much more abuse from man can she stand?,” reminding the public of the uncomfortable topic of overpopulation.³⁰ Overpopulation as an environmental concern was already appearing in more Countercultural publications, such as *Rolling Stone*, which ran an article in 1972 about the popular book *Blueprint for Survival* that, perhaps disgustingly for the American mainstream, suggested that a reduction of the human population on Earth was necessary for its survival.³¹ Gaye, with “Mercy Mercy Me,” seems to be setting out to remind the American public that this is

²⁸ Marvin Gaye, “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” recorded 1971, on *What’s Going On*, streaming audio, accessed 7 February 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9BA6fFGmJl>.

²⁹ Christine Mai-Duc, “The 1969 Santa Barbara Oil Spill that Changed Oil and Gas Exploration Forever,” *L.A. Times*, May 20, 2015, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-santa-barbara-oil-spill-1969-20150520-htmlstory.html>; “Shell Oil Platform is Ablaze in Gulf; 2 Are Dead and 57 Are Rescued,” *New York Times*, December 2, 1970, accessed March 31, 2018, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

³⁰ Gaye, “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology).”

³¹ Charles Alverson, “Ecology Drops A Bomb In England,” *Rolling Stone*, April 27, 1972, 23.

indeed an issue that needs to be addressed, and that ignoring it will lead to the destruction of the Earth.

A similar means of embracing the Countercultural muckraking in music comes from Randy Newman. Though known more today for his role in creating movie soundtracks, namely that of the popular *Toy Story* films, Newman's work during the Seventies proved popular with American audiences. Such was the case with his 1972 album *Sail Away*, from which came the song "Burn On." While in part an ode to the City of Cleveland, much of the song addressed the horrific state of the Cuyahoga River that runs through the city. Pollution proved so horrendous in the Cuyahoga that the river caught fire on multiple occasions, the most contemporary at the time of Newman's writing coming in 1969.³² Newman's piece reflects this, as he sings "There's a red moon rising/on the Cuyahoga River," alluding to the red color of the fire raging on the river.³³ The outro to the song expands on this further, where Newman repeats "burn on, big river, burn on," serving both as an inspirational message for the city of Cleveland to continue to "burn on" in the sense of being a beacon of prosperity, while simultaneously referring to "burn on" in the literal sense with the river being on fire.³⁴ While the fire served as a catalyst for many regulation changes, the fire was largely ignored by Cleveland's main media outlets, consequently resulting in it being similarly forgotten about in the national media.³⁵ As such, Newman's piece serves as a

³² Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 176.

³³ Randy Newman, "Burn On," on *Sail Away*, recorded 1972, streaming audio, accessed April 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtW8RkI3-c4>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 176-178; "The Cities: The Price of Optimism," *Time*, August 1, 1969, accessed April 20, 2018, EBSCOhost.

means of informing the wider public about how bad the effects of pollution had become at this point, which continued on in the expository nature of Countercultural writings.

Pollution was not the only environmental concern addressed in this way. During this period, urban and suburban sprawl brought about concerns both about environmental effects and the spoiling of nature. Adam Rome contends that the rise of suburbanization and the destruction of “territory roughly the size of Rhode Island” for urban development every year was a major factor in the growth of the environmental movement of the 50s and 60s.³⁶ In addition to this, Rome suggests that urban spread also created concern about contamination and the use of detergent, as suburban citizens found that chemicals they used were quickly making their way back into drinking water.³⁷ Further, the detrimental impacts that the urban and suburban sprawl were laid out by Spenser W. Havlick, who documented that this expansion further injured the planet by forcing the usage of finite resources for construction and for automotive consumption and, on a more human-centered level, expanded habitation centers into places not meant for humans to live in, such as floodplains, thus causing damage to life and property and forcing the consumption of more resources in the reconstruction process.³⁸ With these sorts of concerns already at the forefront, musicians

³⁶ Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Spread and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7-8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 104-106.

³⁸ Spenser W. Havlick, “Environmental Impact of Urbanization,” in *Sourcebook on the Environment*, ed. Kenneth A. Hammond, George Macinko, and Wilma B. Fairchild (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 317, 319.

embracing the Countercultural expository style went to work on this topic as well.

In many cases, the songs found in this category took a more generic approach to pointing out the ills occurring than those previously mentioned, making known that the environmental crisis was happening but not having any one specific event to point to. The Byrds, for instance, with the song “Hungry Planet” on their 1970 album (*Untitled*), comment on the excessive consumption of resources associated with urbanization, stating “they were in a hurry to take a lot of space/they needed bombs and tungsten, ore and iron too/so they climbed right down in and blew a lot of me right in two.”³⁹ Indeed, the implication here is the resource usage needed for humanity’s continued expansion is resulting in the complete destruction of the planet, hence the statement that the planet is being split in two.⁴⁰ John Denver, with his famed 1972 release “Rocky Mountain High,” takes a similar approach. Here, after singing about the wonderous healing power that the Rocky Mountains of Colorado possess, Denver takes time to inform his audience that this natural beauty is in danger in the last verse, singing “Now his life is full of wonder but his heart still knows some fear/of a simple thing he cannot comprehend/why they try to tear the mountains down to bring in a couple more/more people, more scars upon the land.”⁴¹ The idea Denver presents with these lines is that in order to bring more people in the Rocky Mountain area,

³⁹ The Byrds, “Hungry Planet,” recorded 1970, on (*Untitled*), audio streaming, accessed March 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEK5a08T8Gs>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ John Denver, “Rocky Mountain High,” recorded August 1972, on *Rocky Mountain High*, audio streaming, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOB4VdlkzO4>.

either to live or just for tourism, the very thing that makes the area worth being in is being destroyed. Indeed, Denver attempts to alert the audience to the environmental dangers facing the Rocky Mountains with the creation of his song.

There were a few artists who applied this muckraking methodology to more specific environmental challenges created by urbanization and suburbanization. Joni Mitchell is one such example, as she, in her 1970 work “Big Yellow Taxi” from her album *Ladies of the Canyon*, connects to the concerns about detergent and chemical usage during this period. These concerns were not new, especially after Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, but part of Mitchell’s piece served as a reminder that issues with chemical contamination was still an issue in the ever-suburbanized United States. Mitchell sings “hey farmer farmer/put away that DDT now/give me spots on my apples/but leave me the birds and the bees,” making direct connections to the harmful properties of DDT displayed in *Silent Spring*.⁴² Despite the fact that Carson’s work had come out nearly a decade before Mitchell released “Big Yellow Taxi,” the issues with the use of DDT needed to maintain a proper food supply for the growing suburban centers seemed to be still an issue, prompting Mitchell to add this part to her song as a means to inform the public that the issue had not yet been resolved.

Also tackling a more specific issue via this Counterculture expository methodology was the Eagles with their piece “The Last Resort.” Appearing on their famed 1976 album *Hotel California*, “The Last Resort” comments on the

⁴² Joni Mitchell, “Big Yellow Taxi,” recorded April 1970, on *Ladies of the Canyon*, audio streaming, accessed February 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94bdMSCdw20>.

ugliness of the pre-fabricated, mass-produced houses dotting the once beautiful countryside, with the group singing “some rich man came and raped the land, nobody caught ‘em/put up a bunch of ugly boxes and, Jesus, people bought ‘em.”⁴³ This message exposes and reflects concerns about suburban settlements like Levittown, where row upon row of nearly identical households popped up with little concern for the effect that they would have on the environment and on human quality of life.⁴⁴ The Eagles piece further reminded the public that the issues of suburbanization had not gone away, even two decades after the start of suburban sprawl. Through songs such as these, the expository methodology found in Countercultural publications, whether or not environmentally based, found their way into the music regarding environmental concerns following the inaugural Earth Day in 1970.

“But the Human Name Doesn’t Mean \$#! to a Tree:” Fictionalizations and
Nostalgic Yearnings

A more commonly incorporated aspect of Countercultural ideology integrated into popular music following Earth Day were aspects of fictionalization and nostalgia. Fictionalization, for sure, already appeared in Countercultural thinking dating back to the Houseboat Summit at the Human Be-In, wherein Alan Watts, Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, and Gary Snyder held a discussion of various aspects of the Counterculture, including what would become the major “back-to-the-land” movement. Timothy Leary specifically comments on this, stating:

⁴³ The Eagles, “The Last Resort,” recorded 1976, on *Hotel California*, Asylum Records 7E-1084, 1976, 33 1/3 rpm.

⁴⁴ Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*, 257-258.

I have come to a very simple solution: All the technology has to go underground. Because metal belongs underground. You take a hatchet out in the forest and let it go. It goes exactly where God and the Divine Process wants it to be: Underground. [...] I foresee that these tribal groups that drop out—and I mean absolutely drop out—will be helping to get back in harmony with the land, and we've got to start immediately putting technology underground. I can think of different ways we can do this symbolically. [...] So I think we should start a movement to--one hour a day or one hour a week--take a little chisel and a little hammer and just see some earth come up, and put a little seed there. And then put a little ring—mandalic ring—of something around it. I can see the highways and I can see the subways and I can see the patios and so forth...Suddenly the highway department comes along, and: "There's a rose growing in the middle of Highway 101!" And then...then...the robot power group will have to send a group of the highway department to kill the rose and put the asphalt down on the gentle, naked skin of the soil. Now when they do that, we're getting to them. There'll be pictures in the paper. And consciousness is going to change. Because we've got to get to people's consciousness. We've got to let people realize what they're doing to the earth.⁴⁵

With this, Leary laid out not only the ideas that would turn into the back-to-the-land movement so closely associated with the Counterculture, but also the fictionalized accounts of the destruction of the Earth should the public do nothing, as shown through Leary's "robot power group" comment. Andrew Kirk suggests that fictionalization took a more futuristic turn in the Seventies' version of Counterculture environmentalism, as utopian visions appeared in works such as *Coevolution Quarterly*, the successor to *The Whole Earth Catalog*, and Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia*.⁴⁶ Counterculture environmentalists, then, seemed more than willing to embrace fictionalized accounts to promote their visions of

⁴⁵ "The Houseboat Summit: February 1967, Sausalito, Calif. Featuring Timothy Leary, Gary Snyder, Alan Watts and Allen Ginsberg," Terebess Asia Online, accessed April 21, 2018, <https://terebess.hu/english/watts6.html>.

⁴⁶ Kirk, *Counterculture Green*, 156-158.

environmentalism. As such, when the Countercultural strain became more popularized with Earth Day, this method worked its way into American popular music as well.

The most prominent utilization of this came through back-to-the-land, nostalgic views that are most closely related to Countercultural environmentalism. Indeed, as Timothy Leary suggested at the Houseboat Summit, returning to nature was a major part of “dropping out”—removing oneself from mainstream norms and society—and fully embracing the Countercultural lifestyle.⁴⁷ This served, too, as a means of returning to a time when pollution and the destruction of Earth’s resources were not an issue, meaning that the Earth was in a far cleaner state and that the quality of life for humans living on the planet was certainly much higher. This nostalgic yearning, naturally, presented itself in popular music regarding environmentalism as well after Earth Day. Such examples appear in multiple works by Joni Mitchell. “Woodstock,” for instance, performed both by her and by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, suggests the necessity of returning to nature through the chorus “we are stardust, we are golden/we are billion year old carbon/and we got to get ourselves back to the garden.”⁴⁸ With this, the implication is that it is a necessity to return to nature in order to continue humanity’s privileged living. Neil Young, too, seemed to take the nostalgic view with his 1970 recording “After the Gold Rush.”

⁴⁷ “The Houseboat Summit: February 1967, Sausalito, Calif. Featuring Timothy Leary, Gary Snyder, Alan Watts and Allen Ginsberg.”

⁴⁸ Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, “Woodstock,” recorded 1969, on *Déjà Vu*, Atlantic SD 7200, 1970. 331/3 rpm.

In the opening verse of the song, Young depicts a scene from medieval times meant to display the simplicity and lack of corrupting power that man had on nature in that period.⁴⁹ He quickly contrasts it to the state of the environment in contemporary times: “Look at mother nature on the run/in the nineteen seventies.”⁵⁰ Young goes even further by suggesting that environmental catastrophe is just around the corner, depicting a fictional scene where “the sun burst through the sky,” referencing the threat that nuclear weaponry had to life on Earth.⁵¹ By crafting this fictional, nostalgic story, Young suggests that humanity needs to return to simpler times, much like the Countercultural back-to-the-land movement was attempting, in order to avoid environmental Armageddon. One final example of this nostalgic methodology being utilized came from progressive rock group Kansas. With their ten-minute epic “Song for America,” the title track to their 1975 album *Song for America*, the group depicts the American continent before and after European arrival. In the song, Kansas describes America prior to human interference as a paradise unsoiled by mankind and “so rich in Earth’s delights.”⁵² With its “virgin land of forest green,” its “sunlit valley, mountain fields,” and its “painted desert, sequined sky,” America is depicted a paradise.⁵³ However, following the arrival of Europeans, the

⁴⁹ Neil Young, “After the Gold Rush,” recorded 1970, streaming audio, accessed 8 February, 2018, https://www.neilyoungarchives.com/#/info-card?track=t1970_1130_03&k=0s14mx.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Kansas, “Song for America,” recorded 1974, on *Song for America*, Kirshner PZ 33385, 1975, 331/3 rpm.

⁵³ Ibid.

landscape is forever tarnished, as “Highways scar the mountainsides, buildings to the sky, people all around/Houses stand in endless rows, sea to shining sea, people all around.”⁵⁴ With this, Kansas also displays this nostalgic view of the environment as a means to show what modernization has done. Humanity, by distancing itself from nature, has destroyed a paradise, and only by returning to the land can it be restored. For sure, then, this nostalgic view of environmentalism linking to the back-to-the-land aspect of the Counterculture displayed itself within popular music appearing after Earth Day.

A final way the Counterculture used fictionalization in popular music was in the form of predictions and fabricated “worst case scenarios.” Indeed, several artists created environmental “doomsday” scenarios attempting to show the public what could happen should contemporary ways of treating the environment not be diverted. Jefferson Airplane and Crosby Stills & Nash had already attempted this via their collaborative effort in creating the song “Wooden Ships,” which appeared both on Jefferson Airplane’s *Volunteers* and Crosby, Stills & Nash’s *Crosby, Stills & Nash*, both released in 1969. This song works as a science fiction tale, warning the audience of the horrors that await the environment and mankind if the use of nuclear energy and weaponry did not end, further suggesting that only by using natural items—in this case wooden ships—could humanity escape the impending holocaust.⁵⁵ Utilization of this

⁵⁴ Kansas, “Song for America,” recorded 1974, on *Song for America*, Kirshner PZ 33385, 1975, 331/3 rpm.

⁵⁵ Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young, “Wooden Ships,” recorded August 18, 1969, on *Woodstock—Music from the Original Soundtrack and More*, Cotillion SD 3-500, 1970, 331/3 rpm.

methodology certainly appears following Earth Day as well. A milder example appears with Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi," where she warns that, due to the continuing development of the countryside and environment, trees will be placed in museums and that "they charged all the people/a dollar and half to see 'em."⁵⁶ While not necessarily a doomsday scenario, Mitchell's example gives a more realistic idea of the fate of the environment, implying that the world will become nothing but urban areas and that the beauty of nature will only be available to future generations in the form of museums and archives. Neil Young uses this, too, in "After the Gold Rush;" after he describes the "sun burst through the sky," Young then envisions that man will now have to leave the Earth and attempt to find somewhere new, all while taking one last bit of Earth's resources with them, as evidenced by the lines "All in a dream, all in a dream/the loading had begun/flying Mother Nature's/silver seed to a new home in the sun."⁵⁷ Young, in creating this apocalyptic account, warns his audience that finding a new planet to live on will become necessary should nothing change in the way mankind handles the environment. With this, the utilization of fictionalization, in line with the way the Counterculture environmentalism developed, manifested itself within American popular music following the inaugural Earth Day.

"So Lets Avoid an Ecological Aftermath:" Directions and Calls to Action

⁵⁶ Joni Mitchell, "Big Yellow Taxi."

⁵⁷ Neil Young, "After the Gold Rush."

Giving directions on how to live in an ecologically friendly way was one of the defining aspects of Counterculture environmentalist publications. Indeed, this was the main idea behind the publication of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, as Stewart Brand, at least initially, looked to provide ideas and means for self-sustentation for communal, off-the-grid living.⁵⁸ Andrew Kirk suggests that this was hugely appealing to members of the Counterculture, as these ideas for environmentalism allowed steps toward “a non-political revolution of rebuilding toward a postindustrial future based on creative and holistic thinking....”⁵⁹ Fred Turner corroborates this, the tools and ideas of Brand and his co-writers in *The Whole Earth Catalog* served not only as a guide to self-sustaining practices, but also as a guide to embrace new technologies, which Turner further suggests led to the rise of computer and cyber culture.⁶⁰ Indeed, Counterculture environmentalists were definitely willing to give anyone who would listen instructions on how to live in a more environmentally friendly way. Even in more popular publications, such instructional writings appeared. For instance, in 1972, *Rolling Stone* published an article instructing readers how to capitalize on a long-forgotten refuse act from the nineteenth century that allowed people reporting illegal a cut of whatever fine was assigned to the offending party.⁶¹ Another article from 1970 informs the reader of the need for new styles of urban planning that will free up

⁵⁸ Krik, *Counterculture Green*, 52-54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁰ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 92-94.

⁶¹ William Brown, “Hunting Polluters for Fun & Profit,” *Rolling Stone*, May 25, 1972, 16.

more land for farming and ecological activity, thus improving the quality of life on Earth.⁶² For certain, then, this also appeared in American popular music once Counterculture environmentalism gained popularity after Earth Day.

One of the more common suggestions that appears is that the best way for mankind to survive is by heading to outer space to leave behind the ills of Earth and start new colonies with pure, environmentally-friendly living. This idea developed even prior to it appearing in music during this period. Fred Turner mentions that by this point, writers in *Coevolution Quarterly* were advocating for taking Stewart Brand's vision of utilizing technology for back-to-the-land living further. Here, writers of the *Coevolution Quarterly* suggested that technology could be used to host new communities, proposing the idea of a space station that could house over one million people by the end of the twentieth century.⁶³ Indeed, this idea of escaping Earth to survive was already becoming a popular topic. Naturally, some musicians began picking up on it as well. Paul Kantner, a founding member of famed psychedelic rock group Jefferson Airplane, for instance, created an entire concept album around this topic. *Blows Against the Empire*, released in 1970, is Kantner's attempt to instruct audiences that escaping Earth is a necessity to escape everything part of the "system," including the threats of environmental destruction. For instance, with the song "Mau Mau (Amerikon)," the lines "I will be alive again/so drop your fuckin' bombs/burn your demon babies/I will be again," giving the idea that whoever

⁶² Tom Miller, "Paolo Soleri and His Arcological Cities," *Rolling Stone*, April 30, 1970, 18.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

stays behind on Earth can do whatever they would like, as those who actually care about the environment will have already escaped and gone on to search for a new planet to colonize and, hopefully, treat better.⁶⁴ Further, with the final track on the album, “Starship,” Kantner and his collaborators specify that other, cleaner worlds can and should be escaped to, singing “Hydroponic gardens and forests/glistening with lakes in the Jupiter starlite/room for babies and Byzantine dancing astronauts/the magician and the pantechnicon/take along the farmer and the physician/we gotta get out and down.”⁶⁵ Here, Kantner suggests that environmentally rich areas still exist in the universe, so, since escaping the Earth is a necessity, humanity certainly has numerous places to go to restart and not have issues with pollution and environmental destruction. Aside from Paul Kantner, Neil Young, too, suggests that escape into space might be necessary. Returning to “After the Gold Rush,” Young seems to imply the same idea once the worst-case scenario of nuclear apocalypse occurs, stating that mother nature’s “seed” will have to be transported to a new planet once this occurs.⁶⁶ Again, the implication here is that escaping the Earth into space is an absolute necessity in order for mankind to escape the environmental ills befalling the planet.

Escaping to space was perhaps too extreme for some. Instead, some artists provided instruction that simply returning to nature is good enough. The Kinks suggest just this with their song “Apeman” from their 1970 album *Lola*

⁶⁴ Paul Kantner, “Mau Mau (Amerikon), recorded 1970, on *Blows Against the Empire*, audio streaming, accessed March 17, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Squ_pgiztRI.

⁶⁵ Paul Kantner, “Starship,” recorded 1970, on *Blows Against the Empire*, audio streaming, accessed March 17, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tyqP9mgpW0.

⁶⁶ Neil Young, “After the Gold Rush.”

Versus Powerman and the Moneygoround, Part One. Here, The Kinks sing that to escape pollution, urbanization, nuclear fallout, and other environmentally destructive occurrences, mankind needs to “escape to a distant shore/and make like an apeman.”⁶⁷ Escaping from urbanization is referenced with the lines “in man’s evolution he has created the cities and/the motor traffic rumble, but give me half a chance/and I’d be taking off my clothes and living in the jungle.”⁶⁸ The band further comments on escaping pollution, stating “I look out my window, but I can’t see the sky/’cos the air pollution is fogging up my eyes/I want to get out of this city alive/and make like an apeman.”⁶⁹ For sure, The Kinks suggest that escaping to a simpler place and mindset is what will allow for mankind to escape from the environmental problems occurring during this period.

Finally, some groups simply took to telling audiences directly what needed to be done to protect the environment. The Beach Boys do such a thing with the song “Don’t Go Near the Water” from their 1971 album *Surf’s Up*. In the aftermath of the Santa Barbara oil spill that occurred in 1969, awareness of water pollution had already increased. The Beach Boys, though, looked to inform audiences of ways that they could help in reducing this further. After commenting on the sorry state of the aquatic environment around them, The Beach Boys tell their audience “toothpaste and soap will make our oceans a

⁶⁷ The Kinks, “Apeman,” recorded August-September 1970, on *Lola Versus Powerman and the Moneygoround, Part One*, streaming audio, accessed February 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRHqs8SffDo>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

bubble bath/so lets avoid an ecological aftermath.”⁷⁰ With this, the group suggests finding alternative ways for disposing personal products commonly flushed down the drain, which certainly falls in line with this instructive pattern found in Counterculture environmentalism. Also incorporating this aspect of environmentalism into their music was popular blues artist Bo Diddley. On his 1971 album *Another Dimension*, Diddley produced the song “Pollution,” where he provides the audience with more general ways to avoid pollution. For instance, Diddley sings “Some of you people don’t understand/about throwing your garbage in the street and use your can,” simply admonishing the audience to not litter.⁷¹ He adds further later in the song: “say it chum, watch that paper bag/put a top on that garbage can/the wind is blowing awfully hard/watch that cigarette pack baby.”⁷² Indeed, Diddley instructs his audience to be careful with how the dispose of their waste in order to prevent and reduce pollution occurring in the country. With this, the instructive pattern found within Counterculture environmentalism certainly worked its way into American popular music from rock to its progenitor, rhythm and blues?

Conclusion

Following the inception of Earth Day, the Counterculture’s strain of environmentalism worked its way into American popular music in multiple ways. Some pieces utilized the expository tradition of the Counterculture to

⁷⁰ The Beach Boys, “Don’t Go Near the Water,” recorded 1971, on *Surf’s Up*, streaming audio, accessed February 6, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjZES3_SSYA.

⁷¹ Bo Diddley, “Pollution,” recorded 1971, on *Another Dimension*, audio streaming, accessed March 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZwac1lqOGI&t=199s>.

⁷² *Ibid.*

inform and remind audiences of environmental ills, whether referring to specific events such as the Santa Barbara oil spill or the fire on the Cuyahoga River, or via more general concerns about the environment. Other pieces utilized fictionalized accounts, either to promote back-to-the-land ideas or to show the horrifying effects that contemporary environmental disasters were leading toward. Finally, a call to action appeared in several pieces, informing audiences in a variety of ways of measures needed either to end pollution and environmental destruction or to escape from it and start anew somewhere else. Going forward, popular artists continued to use these methods. In the wake of the near-meltdown of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1979, for instance, a number of popular artists, including Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, and Graham Nash, formed Musicians United for Safe Energy (MUSE) and hosted a series of concerts to raise further awareness of the dangers of using nuclear energy.⁷³ With this, Counterculture environmentalism, once popularized by Earth Day, found its way into American popular music and continued to do, even long after the inaugural Earth Day of 1970.

⁷³ Robin Herman, "Nearly 200,000 Rally to Protest Nuclear Energy," *New York Times*, September 24, 1979, accessed April 1, 2018, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.