

'Go to the forest and move': 1960s American Rock Music as Electronic Pastoral

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In his song 'Hijack' (1970), the Jefferson Airplane's Paul Kantner demanded "free minds, free dope, free bodies, free music."¹ Expressed in this way, the preoccupations of the 1960s counterculture were largely humanist and anthropocentric. Yet allied to these concerns was a mystical view of the natural world, bordering on pantheism, which anticipated the more biocentric ecological concerns associated with the deep ecology movement of the 1970s.² 'Flower power' was a Romantic desire to return to what was perceived as a simpler, more natural form of social life, based on the communal patterns of pre-modern, tribal societies. The rock music associated with the hippy counterculture was integral to this newly emerging subculture of radical environmentalism. Indeed, several of the leading figures in the sixties rock scene went on to become environmental activists in the decades that followed. Joe McDonald became involved in animal rights and whale conservation; after two decades of environmental activism in his own locality, Ed Sanders of the Fugs founded the Woodstock Journal in 1995 with his wife, the writer and painter Miriam R. Sanders; Stewart Brand, former member of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, founded the *Whole Earth Catalog* in the fall of 1968, and in 1996 became a founder member of the Long Now Foundation, an organisation dedicated to promoting long-term thinking about the future of global ecosystems.³

Yet the nascent environmentalist critique produced by the rock counterculture was limited and contradictory, in that rock music also stood for hedonism, individualism, egocentricity, escapism and consumerist fashion: values largely antithetical to radical forms of environmentalism. Moreover, rock culture's adherence to a pastoral ideal of nature mystified questions of technology and economics, while its commitment to idealist notions of social change, particularly shaped by a naïve faith in the transformative powers of both rock music and LSD, prevented the emergence of a more trenchant, materialist understanding of American society. In addition, the counterculture's inherent elitism, evident in its emphasis on young people as the new agents of revolutionary change, and its consequent polarisation of society into the 'hip' and the 'square,' tended to allow its members to ignore their own complicity in consumer society, and took the place of a more potentially radical questioning of class and racial division in the United States. It also meant that youth culture could be easily assimilated into the conservative discourses of advertising, and the mass media in general.⁴ Consequently, in the 1960s, as Eric Mottram put it, the "energy of the searching young in America remained depoliticized and exploited."⁵

Rock songs, writes Robert Pattison, "are either about the ideal triumph of self as it moves to encompass more territory or about the splenetic self-questioning that

accompanies failure of this goal.” In the ‘secular pantheism’ of the rock performer, it is as if the self expands to embrace the whole universe.⁶ For many in the sixties counterculture, LSD facilitated the emergence of this cosmic self. Poet Allen Ginsberg recognised the risks of solipsism involved in such individualistic acts of self-discovery, and believed that LSD could promote a more social and ecological sense of self. He understood that the aspiration towards mystical unity within the counterculture should include ecological awareness, and that rock music could play a vital role in its propagation. As the title of his 1968 essay ‘Consciousness and Practical Action’ suggests, Ginsberg attempted to merge Buddhism with Communism by positing a self that could expand, through the mediation of LSD, towards an ethics of care for the natural world. He described the oceanic feeling of an LSD trip as a “unitive experience of One, of all of us being one – not only ourselves with varying color of skin and mysterious ego-origin or whatever we are, also one with flowers, also the very trees and plants.” For Ginsberg, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles embodied what he called “slow communalisation”, a social process which was “the centre of consciousness and also the centre out of which political activity begins.” In his tentative description, what was emerging was the “beginning of a friendly communism, or communion, or community, or friendly extension of self outward...”⁷

In 1967, the *San Francisco Oracle* rewrote the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these experiences to be self-evident, that all is equal, that the creation endows us with certain inalienable rights, that among them are: the freedom of the body, the pursuit of joy, and the expansion of consciousness.” The rock culture had begun to take the difficult steps towards the biocentric perspective implicit in the idea that “all” (not just “all men”) is “equal.” In the same year, the underground newspaper also published “Ten commandments for getting to the city of God”, one of which was to “Revere nature.”⁸ As Evan Eisenberg writes, in the sixties, rock music “moved outwards to embrace all life and preserve it in vinyl.”⁹ Yet vinyl records are a product of the oil industry: the counterculture’s dream of unity with the natural world through rock music depended on the very technologies that were threatening that world. How it dealt with such contradictions is the subject of the rest of this essay.

Sixties rock music was an electronic pastoral, in which a desire to go back to nature, both rural and wild, interacted, unstably but creatively, with an apparently contradictory embrace of the American technological sublime. As musicologist David Schwarz observes, rock music is, in many respects, a modernist discourse, given “the increasing glorification of technology in musical instruments and sound systems that reproduce rock and roll, the urge to find increasingly ‘new’ sounds, forms of expression that surpass antecedents, the massive, public spectacle, an increasing monumentality of compositions, and glorification and commodification of individual subjectivity.”¹⁰ Yet the obverse of this technological futurism is a fascination with the archaic, the primitive and the natural. Pattison comments that this “apparent paradox” is in fact “two flanks of a single movement, the leading spirit of which is selfhood militant.” He explains that, for the rock performer, “Man’s proper home is the pastoral Eden of accomplished feeling where self is identical with the universe... One road to this leads through the primitive past of Romantic mythology, but another lies directly through scientific invention. Both converge on infinity.”¹¹

Leo Marx wrote that, in an industrial society, to affirm the continuing existence of the pastoral can serve as permission for future technological change.¹² For the sixties rock culture, then, it was possible to have it both ways. Indeed, rock 'n' roll music has always blithely integrated nature and technology in this way. After all, one of its founding icons, Chuck Berry's Johnny B. Goode, was a country boy, born in a cabin "made of earth and wood" in rural Louisiana, who learned to play guitar by "strumming with the rhythm" of the passing railroad trains.¹³ As rock music broke free of the folk revival styles in the mid-1960s, many musicians were drawn to metaphors of more contemporary technologies, particularly jet aircraft, space rocketry and nuclear energy, to describe the "far out" explorations of their newly amplified sound. In so doing, they appropriated modern technology as both a metonym of social progress and a metaphor for their quasi-mystical explorations of the inner self. Steppenwolf's 'Born to Be Wild' (1968) encapsulated this conflation of nature and modern technology, whereby to be "like a true nature child" is to identify oneself with technological speed and power ("Get your motor running"). The use of the song on the soundtrack of the movie *Easy Rider* (1969), accompanying images of motorcycles opening up the vast spaces of the American West, vividly celebrated the expansion of this adventurous, masculine self, taking the whole world in a "love embrace."¹⁴

In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1969), Tom Wolfe described Ken Kesey, leader of the Merry Pranksters, as a product of the "technological superheroics of the jet, TV, atomic subs, ultrasonics – Postwar America suburbs – glorious world! and the hell with the intellectual badmouthers of America's tailfin civilization."¹⁵ Ironically, for Wolfe, the counterculture was thus complicit in the very industrial society its rhetoric rejected. Ultimately, the rock counterculture's fascination with this technological sublime was guaranteed by the cornucopian optimism of sixties 'post-scarcity' economics, whose leading advocates were the inventor R. Buckminster Fuller and the economist Robert Theobald.¹⁶ Such optimism was challenged in the early 1970s by the neo-Malthusian counter-discourse of austerity and limits to growth that re-emerged in that decade. In the sixties, however, the widespread belief that material scarcity would be transcended by technological know-how provided for the rock culture a way of ignoring questions about the environmental costs of the global electronic technologies it embraced.¹⁷

Rock music fetishized its electronic technologies: the electric guitar, amplifier, microphone, magnetic tape and television. Captain Beefheart told an interviewer: "Electricity never stops moving. That's the 'spark of life.' How can you turn life on or off?"¹⁸ That this atavistic sense of cosmic Oneness could be gained through advanced electronic technology was a contradiction enthusiastically embraced by the rock culture. The sixties counterculture was a product of what Marshall McLuhan called 'allatonceness': the effect that twentieth century electronic technologies were having in making communications global in space and simultaneous in time.¹⁹ In June 1967, rock music became a global phenomenon when the world's first live international satellite television broadcast featured the Beatles' 'All You Need Is Love.' The mystical implications of such global connectivity were not lost on Allen Ginsberg, who spoke of wanting to make San Francisco "an electric Tibet."²⁰

Rock musicians often evoked the technological sublime when trying to explain the creative origins of their music. Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead attributed the origin of the band's experiments with loud, immersive volume and unpitched noise in an experience they had in the hills above Palo Alto, when a jet aircraft flew low over their heads as it came in to land at San Francisco airport.²¹ In the sleeve notes to *Mr. Tambourine Man* (1965), guitarist Roger McGuinn commented on the Byrds' electrification of folk music: "The instrumentation is changing somewhat to meet the nuclear expansion and jet age."²²

But it was the exploration of outer space that held a particular fascination for the sixties rock counterculture. Eric Mottram makes the connection between the rock musician and the astronaut, that other icon of 1960s technological pioneering: "The electro-visual aspects of performance – wires, microphones and speakers – gear the human body into the energy of circuitry as much as an astronaut becomes the cyborg of his capsule."²³ The trope of outer space travel occurred in the Grateful Dead's 'Dark Star,' and also in songs by the Byrds and Jimi Hendrix, amongst many others.²⁴ Yet for Norman Mailer, when the Apollo 11 astronauts landed on the moon in July 1969, the event was proof that the Squares had won. In *A Fire on the Moon* (1970), the bank of instruments in the space capsule represented for him "that sense of life programmed and wasted, of reason so over-applied to life that all contradictions having been killed, the light of reason had finally left the eye..."²⁵ For Mailer, as for Thomas Pynchon, then writing his epic novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), space rocketry was the frontier technology of the modern totalitarian state.²⁶

Within rock culture, Captain Beefheart stood out in his opposition to the Apollo moon landing, believing it to be a masculinist rape of nature. He told an interviewer that "they're about to poke their genitals into our cream cheese moon right now", adding, "That's my eye". The moon, he said, is "part of me."²⁷ For Beefheart, as for the deep ecologists who were to emerge in the early 1970s, the universe was part of his cosmically expanded self, and therefore the subject of his ethical concern. But Beefheart's outright rejection of the space program was unusual. Outer space travel often featured more positively in rock music, as the counterculture mixed fascination with big technology with a desire to appropriate the imagery of space travel for its own ends, in defence of a wider notion of rationality than that which, as Mailer indicated, informed the Apollo project itself. The popularity with hippy audiences of Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) was another example of this act of appropriation.

Historian David Nye notes that manned space flight appealed to the American public in the 1960s as a progressive use of technology, in contrast to the apocalyptic fears that surrounded the nuclear arms race. The rock culture shared this view, as can be seen in the songs against nuclear weaponry which it adopted from the earlier protest folk tradition. The Byrds' 'I Come And Stand At Your Door' (1966) was based on Pete Seeger's version of the poem by the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet about a seven-year-old child killed in Hiroshima. Jerry Garcia sang 'Morning Dew', a song about nuclear annihilation written by folksinger Bonnie Dobson, at the Human Be-In in January 1967. The cover of the Jefferson Airplane's *Crown of Creation* (1968) showed the mushroom cloud from an

atomic bomb, while 'House at Pooneil Corner' evoked a strangely deserted and scarred Earth devastated by a nuclear holocaust.²⁸

That the technology of nuclear weaponry was as integral to the American military-industrial complex as space rocketry could easily be forgotten in the sublimity of an Apollo rocket launch. "In an atomic age," writes Nye, "the pilgrimage to the Kennedy Space Center promised a sublime experience that renewed faith in America and in the ultimate beneficence of advanced industrialization. This final avatar of the technological sublime is a literal escape from the threatened life-world."²⁹

This notion of space travel as a potential escape from an ecologically damaged world was taken up in the suite of interconnected songs on Paul Kantner's solo album *Blows Against the Empire* (1970), one of the first 'concept' albums in rock. In Kantner's science fiction utopia, the hippy counterculture escapes from the Earth in a hijacked spaceship, leaving behind two impending catastrophes: global overpopulation, and civil war in the United States after the state repressions of 1968.

Kantner's album extended into outer space the fascination with aviation technology reflected in the 'All-American flying machine' on which the Jefferson Airplane based its name. R. Cobb's cover for *After Bathing At Baxter's* (1967) depicted the band's eponymous multi-colored bi-plane, shaped like an old San Francisco townhouse, rising above a squalid, monochrome cityscape of factory chimneys and wrecked cars. With its exuberant balloons and banner, the Jefferson airplane was an image of transcendence through convivial, homespun technology. By the time of *Blows Against the Empire*, however, Kantner was calling the loose group of musicians with whom he was collaborating the 'Planet Earth Rock and Roll Orchestra', while crediting the album to his new band, Jefferson Starship.

The Jefferson Airplane was also part of the counterculture's move towards Romantic naturism. Grace Slick's 'Eskimo Blue Day', on *Volunteers* (1968), proposed a deep ecological sense of the natural world as sentient, and therefore worthy of ecological concern. The redwoods "talk to me," she sang; their biocentric message is that "the human name / doesn't mean shit to a tree." Slick commented on her song: "Our greed *does* mean shit to a tree. The trees are dying. All of our separating ourselves from the planet is stupid because, the larger picture, whether or not you become president of Bank America has nothing to do with evolution."³⁰

This theme of mystical evolutionism as a return to nature was taken up by Kantner in *Blows Against the Empire*, where it sat uneasily with the theme of science fiction futurism. The first half of the album, Kantner commented later, "was Earth and the progression from darkness, and the second is getting away from Earth. There's a certain escapism there, and there's also a certain odyssey there."³¹ The opening track, 'Mau Mau (Amerikon)', angrily denounced Governor Reagan and 'Dick' Nixon as anachronistic warmongers who are about to become extinct like Tyrannosaurus Rex. Guitar and bass loosely improvise variations around simple blues riffs, as the music enacts the instinctual spontaneity and unpredictability celebrated in the lyrics as an antidote to the war society: "We're something new /

We don't quite know what it is / Or particularly care / We just do it." The following track, 'The Baby Tree', reinforces the demotic connotations of the music with its old-time banjo accompaniment, while the reference to babies introduces an image of innocence and rebirth that recurs throughout the album. 'Let's Go Together' first raises the possibility of redemption from corruption through a return to pastoral nature: "Wave goodbye to Amerika / Say hello to the garden."

Side two of the album explores at length the technological means of escape. 'Hijack', quoted at the start of this essay, is a paean to the utopian promise of the electronic pastoral: "The land is green and you make it grow, go to the forest and move". The song associates its appeal to wild nature with the "thundering electrical energy" of an outdoor rock concert in a park, a healing alternative to an American society ruined by the political violence of Dallas in 1963 and Chicago in 1968. The song's drifting, additive structure and rough-edged instrumental interplay again enacts the sense of rock music as open-ended, demotic potentiality.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone* journalist Ben Fong-Torres, Kantner described how his science fiction fantasy was inspired by Robert Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), which, with its celebration of "free love," communal living and mystical interconnectedness (what the novel calls "groking"), was a big success with the counterculture.³² The closing song 'Starship,' Kantner said, is "about us – me and Jerry Garcia and David Crosby stealing a starship – hijacking a spaceship, going where whoever comes along wants to go. It's my answer to the ecology problem. It's the only way it's all going to get together and work." That Kantner's starship project was to be researched by Owsley Stanley III, the millionaire LSD chemist and sound technician for the Grateful Dead, suggested an allegorical reading of the album in terms of the liberatory possibilities of exploring 'inner,' as well as 'outer,' space.³³

Kantner's futuristic utopia is both pastoral and urban ("our babes'll wander naked thru the cities of the universe"), and attempts to reconcile a vision of a benign natural world with modern, futuristic technology. Musically, this ambiguity is exemplified in the way the harsh *musique concrète* of 'XM', which includes the sound of a vacuum cleaner amongst its soaring electronic tape effects, drifts into the 'natural' connotations of Grace Slick's syncopated gospel piano and Jerry Garcia's spiraling pedal steel on 'Starship'. The image of piloting a spaceship recalls Buckminster Fuller's contemporaneous reference to Spaceship Earth, which posited the ecological health of the planet as an issue of enlightened technocratic control.³⁴ As a rock and roll star, Kantner's faith in the radical potential of post-scarcity technocratic pioneering was guaranteed by its complicity in the American mythologies of the good outlaw and the open road. Deliverance for the counterculture would come through the synergy of his favoured technologies - the recording studio, cinema, space rocketry and LSD – and though faith in the transformative, healing power of love.

As with all utopias, Kantner's text of the future was fissured by the contradictions and conflicts of the present. He told Fong-Torres: "Unless we have a war or a big disease or a famine, there's just too many people, and they're gonna have to get

off the planet. This is my way of starting to get off a little earlier.”³⁵ Salvation was reserved for the select few, as Kantner reinforced the elitist dichotomy between the ‘hip’ and the ‘square,’ with its idealistic faith in the innocent promise of youth, that, in hindsight, seriously limited the politics of the sixties counterculture.

A similar sense of moneyed privilege and political complacency could be seen in David Crosby’s ‘Wooden Ships,’ which he wrote with his friend Kantner on his sailing boat in June 1969.³⁶ Here, sailing in a yacht on a pastoral ocean provides refuge for the nouveau riche rock stars from the impending collapse of American society. The privileged youth leave the ‘silver people’ behind on the shoreline, in an act of anti-social withdrawal: “All we can do is echo your anguished cries / Stare as all human feelings die.” According to Fong-Torres, David Crosby and Dino Valenti of the Quicksilver Messenger Service “talked about having a boat and being able to split at any time, as an alternative to fighting in the streets.”³⁷ Departing from the binary verse-chorus structure typical of rock music, ‘Wooden Ships’ depicts a journey of liberation from the ordinary and the mundane into a lush new world of sensual pleasure. Yet, as rock critic Barney Hoskyns notes, the song also “articulated the escapist elitism of the new Laurel Canyon aristocracy”, while its pull-up-the-drawbridge mentality became an important aspect in the back-to-nature movement emerging in the counterculture at this time.³⁸ In this light, Neil Young’s ‘After the Goldrush’ (1970) provided an illuminating contrast with both ‘Wooden Ships’ and ‘Hijack’, in that it used similar science fiction tropes, but depicted an ecologically damaged world without the elitist utopianism of Kantner and Crosby. Mother Nature is “on the run in the nineteen seventies,” while Young dreams of “chosen ones” preparing silver spaceships to fly “Mother Nature’s silver seed to a new home in the sun.” In Young’s dystopian near-future, though, elitist escape from a doomed Earth is not an option; he is left instead “lying in a burned-out basement.”³⁹

As noted above, in Kantner’s ‘Hijack’, playing rock music in the park is given as the cultural resource that best opposed the violent machinations of the war society. In *The Greening of America* (1970), Charles Reich’s lyrical description of an open air rock concert in Lower Sproul Plaza at Berkeley similarly evoked the university campus as a pastoral landscape, in which “above the scene presiding over it, those benevolent deities, the sun-god, the ocean breeze, the brown-green Berkeley hills.”⁴⁰ For the counterculture, then, the rock festival prefigured a new, communal society lived close to a benign natural world, with the Woodstock festival in July 1969 becoming the epitome of such utopian hopes.⁴¹ In an article in *The Quicksilver Times*, Bonnie Packer and David Pactor described the “aura of Woodstock” as “Elysiun (sic) Fields of peacefulness, of harmony with other souls and with nature, of the freeing of the hung-up mind.” Although the authors go on to criticise the co-optation of the Woodstock spirit by capitalist business, which “turned flowers into plastic”, they nevertheless concluded that “good things” happened at Woodstock “in spite of the schemes of hippie capitalists.”⁴²

The pastoral discourse within which Woodstock was represented thus did not necessarily obscure the commercial aspects of the festival for those hippies concerned with capitalist co-optation. Indeed, as David Laing notes, at Woodstock, idealism and business were inextricably linked.⁴³ In an article in

Rolling Stone in September 1969, Andrew Kopkind similarly described Woodstock as a “test of the ability of avant-garde capitalism at once to profit from and control the insurgencies which its system spawns.”⁴⁴ Like Proctor and Packer, he argued that the radical nature of the festival transcended its co-option by business interests. What Kopkind’s comments also suggest, however, is that an important blindspot for the counterculture was not necessarily its relationship with commerce, but with modern technology. “What is not illusionary,” Kopkind concluded, “is the reality of a new culture of opposition. It grows out of the disintegration of the old forms, the vinyl and aerosol institutions that carry all the inane and destructive values of privatism, competition, commercialism, profitability and elitism” (153). What he did not appear to notice was that the very rock music his magazine celebrated was mediated through records made of plastic, colloquially called ‘vinyl.’ In his instrumental piece ‘Nasal Retentive Calliope Music’, on *We’re Only In It For The Money* (1968), Frank Zappa included the sound of the needle scratching across a record. In doing so, he was drawing attention to the very processes of technological mediation and materiality obfuscated by the naturalism of the hippy movement.

Compared to the musicians discussed so far in this essay, Zappa’s work stood out in its use of the anti-pastoral mode as a dystopian satire on human relationships with the natural world. As a resident of Los Angeles, he rejected the back-to-nature pastoralism of San Francisco bands such as the Jefferson Airplane and Quicksilver Messenger Service, and satirised what he saw as the fake, “more-rustic-than-thou” style of the San Francisco hippies.⁴⁵ For Zappa, only the anti-pastoral mode could do justice to the atrocities of contemporary American society, including the pollution of the environment by the military-industrial state. An examination of his music in this period will show how he used modernist collage techniques to satirise the social processes at the heart of environmental degradation.

In Claude Debussy’s 1894 orchestral piece, ‘Prelude à l’après-midi d’un faune,’ the mythical creature lies half-asleep on a lazy summer afternoon, playing his flute and dreaming of nymphs. The Mothers of Invention’s ‘Prelude to the Afternoon of a Sexually Aroused Gas Mask,’ recorded live at the Royal Festival Hall in London with the BBC Orchestra in 1970, travestied Debussy’s idyll, self-consciously using aural signifiers of racial and class division to expose the pastoral mode as an evasive white, middle-class construct.⁴⁶ As Don Preston’s organ part turned a quotation from Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony, ‘The Pathétique’ (1888), into lounge-bar Muzak, baritone saxophone player Motorhead Sherwood began to “snork” like a pig, a reminder of the animality of Debussy’s faun. Although the sensuality of Debussy’s piece was shocking for its day, the sound of its bodily lust was repressed in the genteel, high art mode of the pastoral.

The bathos and crude humour with which Zappa treated sexuality and the body was, in part, his means of questioning the transcendentalist mysticism adopted by the flower-power movement. His travesty of Debussy also questioned its racial politics. When Zappa’s calls out to Sherwood, “Blow your harmonica son”, the piece invokes the material reality of African-American poverty and hardship by quoting ‘Trouble Everyday,’ his own blues song about the Watts riots. Zappa

references the blues to point to the realities of oppression and alienation that the myth of pastoral contentment complacently ignores.

'Prelude to the Afternoon of a Sexually Aroused Gas Mask' also highlights the realities of pollution caused by the military-industrial complex. The title evokes Zappa's childhood memories of the gas masks his parents kept at the family home near Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland, in case of spillage from the tanks of mustard gas at the military base where his father worked as a meteorologist.⁴⁷ Such images of despoilation recur in what Zappa called his "conceptual continuity."⁴⁸ He thought of the title 'Nine Types of Industrial Pollution' (1968) after driving through New Jersey.⁴⁹ In 1993, he wrote 'Outrage at Valdez' for a Jacques Cousteau documentary about the Alaskan oil spill of 1989.⁵⁰ In both instrumental pieces, modernist dissonance can be seen to express the shock and ugliness of social and environmental damage.

Yet Zappa's concern for the damaging effects of industrial pollution was unusual because it had none of the nostalgia for arcadian nature that characterised many of his contemporaries in the rock field. Indeed, his work dwelt on, and even relished, the ugliness of the natural world, and its potential hostility towards human beings. He thereby reminded his listeners that the desire to go back to pristine nature is a Romantic fantasy that masks the material facts of labour, power and class inequality that have been fundamental to human relationships with the natural world, and cannot be wished away. The brutality of nature is evident in Neon Park's cover art for *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* (1970), which shows a man cutting himself shaving, using a weasel instead of an electric shaver. The confusion of animal and machine is typical of the conflation of the organic and inorganic in Zappa's work, a destabilising of the opposition between nature and culture also evident in the image of the "sexually aroused gas mask."

For Zappa, human contact with nature is always mediated by the necessity of labour. "Kids have a natural sense of mysticism, and a feeling of being connected to nature", he wrote in 1989. "The natural world is very exciting when it's all brand-new". He then added a typically sly sting in the Romantic tail: "For example, kids have an appreciation for snow which is generally not shared by the guy who has to shovel a driveway. The older you get the more you take nature for granted (unless you're Euell Gibbons and you want to eat everything that's lying in the ground until you die from it)."⁵¹ For Zappa, then, the instrumentality of human relationships with nature is inevitable. Nature has always been a site of labour and its attendant social inequalities. The satire on Euell Gibbons, the 'Father of Modern Wild Foods,' rejects the automatic association of nature and the 'natural' with good health in New Age culture. Zappa made a similar point in the Royal Festival Hall concert of October 1968, in a skit in which macrobiotic food turns Don Preston, dressed in a villain's cape and top hat, into a homicidal monster.⁵²

The ruination of nature epitomised for Zappa not a loss of Edenic innocence, then, but the repressiveness of the military-industrial complex and the consumer society it maintains. In a concert in Stockholm in 1967, he introduced his instrumental piece 'King-Kong' by saying that the gorilla was "doing okay" in the jungle before the Americans came and "made some money – by using the gorilla – then

they killed him.”⁵³ Siding with this epitome of wild nature did not mean that Zappa fantasized about going back there. Instead, he rejected the naïve anti-urbanism that proved so limiting to the environmental politics of the counterculture, and its subsequent development into New Age environmentalism and deep ecology.

Unlike the San Francisco bands from which he took great pains to distance himself, Zappa admitted his complicity in consumer society, rather than feigned transcendence from it. Nor did his work succumb to the elitist dreams of escape into pastoral nature we saw earlier in Paul Kantner’s ‘Hijack’ and David Crosby’s ‘Wooden Ships.’ Getting back to nature in such a politically evasive way evidently did not appeal to the resolutely urban Zappa, who told a story of how he gave up smoking during a chest cold: “I walked into a hotel room and I could smell the rug, the disinfectant – as for smelling ‘the great outdoors,’ I don’t live outdoors. Outdoors for me is walking from the car to the ticket desk at the airport.”⁵⁴ Such an ironic stance may be cynical and irresponsible; if the biologist E. O. Wilson’s ‘biophilia’ hypothesis is correct, and the emotional affinity that human beings have with the natural world is part of our evolutionary development, then he is in denial.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, his work serves as a useful provocation to highlight the Romantic nostalgia to which many of his contemporary musicians succumbed in the late 1960s, and which, as we have seen in this essay, was the paradoxical obverse of their technological futurism. Whether this means that Zappa’s music is preferable to Kantner’s opens up questions of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics that are beyond the scope of this essay.

Whatever the case, the creative richness and diversity of late sixties rock culture allowed for both the electronic pastorals of Paul Kantner and the anti-pastorals of Frank Zappa, both of which explored and reflected in their own ways the complex relationship between modernity, technology and the natural world.

¹ Kantner, Paul. *Blows Against the Empire*. RCA. 1970.

² On the distinction between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, see Harvey, David. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996, p. 397; and Pepper, David. *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 35-7.

³ Brand, Stewart. *The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999.

⁴ See Cantwell, Robert. *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 307-8; Frank, Thomas. *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Chicago and London: University of Oregon Press, 1997, p. 14.

⁵ Mottram, Eric. *Blood on the Nash Ambassador*. London: Hutchinson Radius, 1988, p. 215.

⁶ Pattison, Robert. *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 110

⁷ Ginsberg, "Consciousness and Practical Action", in Berke, Joseph, ed. *Counter Culture*. London: Owen, 1969, p. 173.

⁸ Quoted in Miller, Timothy. *The Hippies and American Values*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991, p. 109.

⁹ Eisenberg, Evan. *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*. London: Picador, 1987, p. 80.

¹⁰ Schwarz, David. *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 98.

¹¹ Pattison, op. cit., p. 126.

¹² Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 10.

¹³ Braun, Hans-Joachim. "'Movin' on': trains and planes as a theme in music", in *'I Sing the Body Electric'. 23rd Symposium of the International Committee for the History of Technology (ICOHTEC)*. Budapest: Wolke, 2000, 106-120; Berry, Chuck. *The Blues Collection*. Orbis. 1993.

¹⁴ Steppenwolf. *Born to be Wild*. Movieplay Gold. 1994.

¹⁵ Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York: Bantam, 1969, p. 35.

¹⁶ See Kostelanetz, Richard, ed. *Beyond Left and Right: Radical Thought For Our Times*. New York: William Morrow, 1968.

¹⁷ See Meadows, Donella H., Meadows, Dennis L., Randers Jorgen, Behrens III, William W. *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. London: Earth Island, 1972.

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- ²⁸ "I Come And Stand At Your Door" is on The Byrds, *Fifth Dimension*; "Morning Dew" is on *The Grateful Dead*, Warner Bros. 1967; Bonnie Dobson's version is on Various Artists, *The Best of Broadside 1962-1988: Anthems of the American Underground from the Pages of Broadside Magazine*. Produced, compiled and annotated by Place, Jeff and Cohen, Ronald D. Smithsonian Folkways. 2000; Jefferson Airplane, *Crown of Creation*, RCA 1968.
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