Subscribe

The Updated Book off Jobs

By Jay Cocks | Monday, Jan. 03, 1983

Like 0 Tweet Share Read Later

A testament of prophecy, true belief, go-getting and megabucks

Email Print
Share Reprints
Follow @TIME

Stop. Before proceeding: a test. A kind of measured mile on the long road to high-tech heaven.

There are only a couple of questions. Either: a) "What will a computer do for me?"; b) "Do I really need a personal computer?"; or c)—the beginner's question—"What are these things anyway?"

A bonus: there are no penalties for wrong answers. The weight of the argument and the heat of the debate are what count now. And of all the people who have floated these questions into the cultural ozone—scientists and sociologists, computer freaks and microchip madmen, quick-buck artists and free-falling futurists—none has kept them aloft for so long, or turned them to such profitable purpose, as Steven Paul Jobs.

He is 27 years old. He lives in Los Gates, Calif., and works 20 minutes away in Cupertino, a town of 34,000 that his company has so transformed that some San Franciscans, about 35 miles to the north, have taken to calling it Computertino. There is no doubt in any case that this is a company town, although the company, Apple, did not exist seven years ago. Now, Apple just closed its best year in business, racking up sales of $583 million. The company stock has a market value of $1.7 billion. Jobs, as founder of Apple, chairman of the board, media figurehead and all-purpose dynamo, owns about 7 million shares of that stock. His personal worth is on the balmy side of $210 million. But past the money, and the hype, and the fairy-tale success, Jobs has been the prime advanceman for the computer revolution. With his smooth sales pitch and a blind faith that would have been the envy of the early Christian martyrs, it is Steven Jobs, more than anyone, who kicked open the door and let the personal computer move in.

Jobs (rhymes with lobs) did not make the revolution alone. He did not even make the machine that made the revolution, the Apple II, the personal computer that along with its other skills seemed to mint money. Stephen Wozniak, 32, Jobs' friend and former colleague who looks like a Steiff Teddy bear on a maintenance dose of marshmallows, created the Apple II. He worked from some pre-existing technology, scaling it down radically and making it affordable to consumers as well as corporations. "Steve didn't do one circuit, design or piece of code," says Wozniak, who was widely regarded as the true technological wizard in Jobs' corporate Oz. "He's not really been into computers, and to this day he has never gone through a computer manual. But it never crossed my mind to sell computers. It was Steve who said, 'Let's hold them up in the air and sell a few.' "

Subscribe

The Updated Book off Jobs

By Jay Cocks | Monday, Jan. 03, 1983

Like 0 Tweet Share Read Later

Email Print
Share Reprints
Follow @TIME

"He can con you into believing his dream," says Bill Atkinson, who by some estimates is the most gifted programmer at Apple. A company consultant, Guy Tribble, says that Jobs sets up what he calls "a reality-distortion field. He has the ability to make people around him believe in his perception of reality through a combination of very fast comeback, catch phrases and the occasional very original insight, which he throws in to keep you off balance." By whatever name—the dream, the Ditch, the rap, the reality-distortion field—fobs' unwavering ambition and ferocious will have caused a number of people to be come rich. Says Jobs, employing perhaps extravagant arithmetic: "We've made about 300 people at Apple millionaires."

Vastly more important, Jobs has been instrumental in selling hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of Americans on the new technology. He insisted that the Apple II be what the jargon calls "user friendly." He wanted it light and trim, well designed in muted colors, and today pushes his engineers hard to make machines that will not frighten away a skittish and skeptical clientele. The Jobs sales skills will be hard pressed in the months to come. In mid-January, Apple will introduce Lisa, a new model that the company has been working on full-time for four years and that is expected to sell for $10,000. Later in the year, it will officially announce Mackintosh, a more affordable version of Lisa, priced around $2,000. Some of a staff of 70—one of whom is still a teen-ager—are putting in seven-day, 90-hour weeks on Mackintosh, working under Jobs. As a boss, Jobs is admired for courting long chances, but, adds a friend, "something is happening to Steve that's sad and not pretty, something related to money and power and loneliness. He's less sensitive to people's feelings. He runs over them, snowballs them." Adds Jeff Raskin, a former Apple publications manager: "He would have made an excellent King of France."

This once and future king had decidedly modest beginnings. His parents, Paul and Clara Jobs, adopted Steven in February 1955 and later moved from Mountain View, on the peninsula south of San Francisco, to Los Altos after their son complained of rough times at the junior high school. "He came home one day from the seventh grade," Paul Jobs remembers, "and said if he had to go back to school there again he just wouldn't go. So we decided we'd better move."

Jobs made his way through Homestead High, recalls Electronics Teacher John McCollum, "as something of a loner. He always had a different way of looking at things." Solitude may, however, have bred ambition. McCollum was stunned to learn that the young loner, needing parts for class projects, picked up the phone and called Burroughs collect in Detroit and Bill Hewlett, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, over in Palo Alto.

Subscribe

The Updated Book off Jobs

By Jay Cocks | Monday, Jan. 03, 1983

Like 0 Tweet Share Read Later

Email Print
Share Reprints
Follow @TIME

Hewlett wound up supplying Jobs with parts for a frequency counter, a device that measures the speed of electronic impulses. This introduced Jobs to the concept of timing, critical for understanding a computer, and furnished him with a cornerstone that, according to Wozniak, he never bothered to build on. Says Wozniak: "I doubt Steve was careful down to the last detail, which is really the key to high-level engineering." Shape, not subtlety, was more in Jobs' line, foreshadowing what one Apple manager calls the "technical ignorance he's not willing to admit." It was the practical applications of technology that excited Jobs, whether it was getting together with Wozniak to use "blue boxes" to make free long-distance calls or helping to design for the graduating class of '71 a mechanical sign that showed a huge hand making a time-honored gesture of rudeness.

Despite such spirited eruptions, Jobs was still uncertain, displaced, curious. He graduated, dropped acid for the first time ("All of a sudden the wheatfield was playing Bach") and lived with his first serious girlfriend in a small wooden house along the Santa Cruz Mountains. As the summer ended, he headed for Reed College in Oregon. His father recalls what must have been a familiar litany: "He said if he didn't go there he didn't want to go anywhere." Jobs lasted only a semester but hung around the campus wandering the labyrinths of postadolescent mysticism and post-Woodstock culture. He tried pre-philosophy, meditation, the I Ching, LSD and the excellent vegetarian curries at the Hare Krishna house in Portland. He swore off meat about this time and took up vegetarianism "in my typically nutso way." One temporary result, say friends, was skin tinted by an excess of carotene to the color of an early sunset.

Cutting loose from Reed in 1974, Jobs journeyed back toward home and, answering a help-wanted ad in a local newspaper, landed a job at a video-game outfit called Atari, then in its second year of business. Jobs became the 40th employee of the small and idiosyncratic company founded by Nolan Bushnell and fueled by the success of Pong, the first of a long line of video recreations that turned simple games into eye-glazing national obsessions. Atari was a pretty loose place—staff brainstorming sessions were fueled with generous quantities of grass—but even there Jobs did not quite fit in. "His mind kept going a mile a minute," says Al Alcorn, Atari's chief engineer at the time. "The engineers in the lab didn't like him. They thought he was arrogant and brash. Finally, we made an agreement that he come to work late at night."

Subscribe

The Updated Book off Jobs

By Jay Cocks | Monday, Jan. 03, 1983

Like 0 Tweet Share Read Later

Email Print
Share Reprints
Follow @TIME

His Atari salary helped stake Jobs to a trip to India, where he met up with a Reed buddy, Dan Kottke. "It was kind of an ascetic pilgrimage," says Kottke, "except we didn't know where we were going." Seeking spiritual solace and enlightenment with a shaved head and a backpack did not distract Jobs from stubbornly haggling over prices in the marketplace and dressing down a Hindu woman for apparently watering their milk. An erratic Siddhartha at best, Jobs came home in the fall of 1974 with more questions than answers. He tried primal therapy, went in search of his real parents and on a friend's farm bumped his head on one of the last vestiges of '60s idealism: communal living. "Once I spent a night sleeping under a table in the kitchen," Jobs says. "In the middle of the night everybody came in and ripped off each other's food."

Jobs turned from life science to applied technology. Wozniak and some other friends gravitated toward an outfit called the Homebrew Computer Club in 1975, and Jobs would occasionally drop by. Wozniak was the computer zealot, the kind of guy who can see a sonnet in a circuit. What Jobs saw was profit. At convocations of the Homebrew, Jobs showed scant interest in the fine points of design, but he was enthusiastic about selling the machines Wozniak was making.

"I was nowhere near as good an engineer as Woz," Jobs freely admits. "He was always the better designer." No one in the neighborhood, however, could match Jobs' entrepreneurial flair and his instincts for the big score. It was Jobs who badgered local electronics suppliers for credit; Jobs who arranged for payment ("They'd say, 'Well, how's 30 days net?' We said, 'Sign us up.' We didn't know what 30 days net was"); Jobs who attracted a first-class industrial p.r. firm and a team of experienced managers; Jobs who organized the early manufacturing; Jobs who finally persuaded Wozniak to leave Hewlett-Packard; and Jobs who gave the fledgling company a name ("One day I just told everyone that unless they came up with a better name by 5 p.m., we would go with Apple"). In 1977, when the Apple II was introduced, the company receipts were kept in a desk drawer. By 1980, when Apple went public, it had sales of $139 million.

Jobs, hyper and overwrought from the flush of such success, would occasionally burst into tears at meetings and would have to be cooled out with a slow walk around the parking lot. His personal life was also precarious. He again met the woman with whom he had spent the summer in the mountains, and she became pregnant before they finally broke up anew. The baby, a girl, was born in the summer of 1978, with Jobs denying his fatherhood and refusing to pay child support. A voluntary blood test performed the following year said "the probability of paternity for Jobs, Steven. . . is 94.1%." Jobs insists that "28% of the male population of the United States could be the father." Nonetheless, the court ordered Jobs to begin paying $385 a month for child support. It may be noted that the baby girl and the machine on which Apple has placed so much hope for the future share the same name: Lisa.

Subscribe

The Updated Book off Jobs

By Jay Cocks | Monday, Jan. 03, 1983

Like 0 Tweet Share Read Later

Email Print
Share Reprints
Follow @TIME

There is a further rough parallel between the stormy personal waters Jobs was navigating at the time and some acute growing pains Apple was suffering almost simultaneously. The company's newest addition to the line, the Apple III, went on the market in November 1980 and turned out to be, at first, a thundering dud, what Jobs now characterizes as "an evolutionary product." Apple recalled and repaired the machines, and manufactured better new ones. "A learning experience" is what Jobs terms that parlous period now. Lisa—"a revolutionary product"—will determine just how well Apple has learned its lessons and how tough it can be against a behemoth like IBM. Some outside the company who have used the new machine have been, at their most temperate, wildly enthusiastic.

If Jobs is deft at dealing with his peers and elders in commerce, a comforting combination of overnight plutocrat and shill for a new gold rush, he is positively hypnotic when he takes the computer gospel to the young. Jobs is youthful enough to fit right in and both bright enough and rich enough to get respect. Certainly, he does not live like a superstar. His pleasant home in Los Gates is nothing that would interest Architectural Digest: freshly laundered shirts lie on the floor of an unfurnished second bedroom, a love letter is magneted to the kitchen fridge, the master bedroom holds a dresser, a few framed photos (Einstein, Jobs with his buddy Governor Jerry Brown, a guru), a mattress, an Apple II. He has forsaken vegetarianism ("Interacting with people has got to be seriously balanced against living a little healthier") and dresses with what might be called tailored informality. He is a work junkie, not a sybarite, and tends to see the simple, sensual pleasures in strictly practical terms. "The amount of time you spend shopping and preparing and eating food is enormous," he maintains. "The amount of energy your body spends digesting the food in many cases exceeds the energy we get from the food."

Life at Apple has been tough for some to swallow. Following the initial problems with the Apple III, the company president fired some 40 employees and was in turn dumped by Jobs and current Apple president A.C. ("Mike") Markkula. Steve Wozniak drifted into conspicuous retirement and last year staged a rock concert in the Southern California desert. Some oldtime employees have not shared in the corporate bounty. Says one: "I wasn't obnoxious enough to make myself a millionaire." Jobs drives the staff hard, expecting long hours, high productivity and indefinite patience with his scattershot ideas. "He should be running Walt Disney," says a onetime Apple manager. "That way, every day when he's got some new idea, he can contribute to something different."

Subscribe

The Updated Book off Jobs

By Jay Cocks | Monday, Jan. 03, 1983

Like 0 Tweet Share Read Later

Email Print
Share Reprints
Follow @TIME

Taking care of business means, for Jobs, not just lighting fires under the staff and gladhanding the media. It also involves—crucially—keeping the lines open to the young. His planned donation of 10,000 Apples to California schools gets him good will, a generous tax break and an even stronger foothold in what Hollywood likes to call "the youth market." He makes periodic campus appearances, where he is as likely as not to sit, shoes off, in the lotus position atop a dormitory coffee table and engagingly field questions. Nothing too specific, mind. The students will not press for details on "Supersite," a hazy combination of Disneyland and industrial park that Jobs has been formulating. They may not even know that Jobs, an independent, has at times mulled over some vague political plans, perhaps following in the unorthodox footsteps of Jerry Brown.

If machines can be called user friendly, then students might be called computer chummy. They represent key potential customers, as do their kid brothers and sisters. They may use computers now; the majority of them will probably be doing so in five years, at school or at work. So the students sit, rapt, while Jobs spins out his visions. Just a few years ago, they might have been considered shock troops of the computer revolution getting a gung-ho speech from their guerrilla leader. Not today. Now they are the occupying forces listening to a victory address by the field marshal.

He still sounds like one of them. He still looks like one of them. And he has brought them quite an Apple to bite. Perfect. —By Jay Cocks. Reported by Michael Moritz/Cupertino

Apple Recommends Blinkist, The Best App For Intellectuals Around The World
Apple recommends Blinkist for lifelong learners, top thinkers, and anyone who wishes they had more time to learn the powerful ideas in nonfiction books.
Blinkist Magazine | Sponsored