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The Tech Lives of Woz and Jobs

Levi Asher · Thursday, February 2nd, 2012

I waited a couple of months before letting myself open up Walter Isaacson's acclaimed new biography, *Steve Jobs.* Given Isaacson's known gift for storytelling and my own penchant for computer-age pop culture history, I knew I'd be in for an obsessive reading experience once I cracked it open. This is a book I needed to clear away some uninterrupted time for.

The most enjoyable part of Steve Jobs is the first section, in which two delightful Silicon Valley counterculture tech nerds named Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak grow up and invent the world-changing Apple II, the first commercially viable personal computer, in 1977. Here, the book offers the familiar satisfying thrill we look for in the early pages of every celebrity biography: those achingly pregnant moments in which the players stand at the precipice of greatness … and then finally step over.

The dawn of the computer age is always a compelling subject, because we can all relate in some way to the feeling of surprise, personal growth and liberation that has accompanied this rapid pace of technological change (this is a dawn, after all, that we are still somewhere in the middle of). Isaacson's Steve Jobs is a classic computer-age tale of transformation and wonder — from the quaint beauty of the first Macintosh (a wonderful little machine, so efficient that its entire operating system fit along with several applications and free user space on a single one-megabyte diskette) to the wide smiles generated by the *Toy Story* movie franchise (this is what Jobs worked on in the 1990s, between the Mac and the iPhone), to the invention of the dynamic iPad device, his last offering to the world before his early death.

I've always been interested in Steve Jobs, but this book increases my regard for his intense mind. I did not realize the extent to which his personal opinions and convictions about design were manifested in the thrilling visual and tactile persona of every Apple creation. I'm impressed to realize that he was a committed and consistent Buddhist and vegan whose minimalist convictions and lifestyle choices completely informed his creative achievements, that he had the sensitivity to know that *Blood on the Tracks* is the best Bob Dylan album, that he had the good taste to date novelist Jennifer Egan long before she wrote *A Visit From The Goon Squad.*

Jobs's thoughts about aesthetics seemed to have dominated his every waking moment, and his search for ultimate absorption in perfect functionality never stopped driving him to new levels. There's a funny scene towards the middle of the book when a newly married thirty-something Steve Jobs experiments with domesticity and becomes obsessed for two weeks with the ideals of insanely great washing machine design. This was apparently what he needed to do to accustom himself to a new suburban lifestyle.

Steve Jobs was famously insensitive and rude to co-workers and business partners, and Isaacson's

biography relishes the moments of weird contradiction as the brash young California hippie crashes through a fast-changing Silicon Valley, blazing new paths as he goes. Fortunately, he mellows as the book proceeds, and eventually finds a new, quieter sense of purpose as a husband, father and re-emergent product visionary. In a touching moment in the middle of the book, Isaacson relates the plot of *Toy Story* to Jobs's innate sense that plastic consumer products have "souls", to the extent that they aspire to fulfill a purpose by being used. This rings true … but it also rings true that Jobs must have made *Toy Story* to help him connect with his own children.

Steve Jobs is a happy story — behavior problems, business battles, death by cancer and all — because it delivers a real-life example of that rare thing: a wholly realized, wholly engaged life.

Many people are reading Steve Jobs, but I bet very few of them have also read the biography I bought in the mid 1980s and still own (that's my copy in the image above) about the other guy who was once the more famous of the two Apple founders named Steve. Steve Wozniak was the technical wizard behind the Apple II, the Keith Richards to Steve Jobs's Mick Jagger. During the first decade of Apple mania (I was in college when the first Macintosh came out), Steve Wozniak was a bigger celebrity than Steve Jobs, because he had the crazier hair style, and he was the one who attempted to create a recurring Woodstock festival for the 1980s, the US Festival in San Bernardino, California, featuring the Ramones, the Police, Talking Heads, Santana, the Kinks, the Grateful Dead, Pat Benatar, Fleetwood Mac and the B-52s in 1982 and the Stray Cats, Men at Work, Oingo Boingo, A Flock of Seagulls, INXS, the Clash, Ozzy Osborne, the Scorpions and Van Halen in 1983. Today, Live-Aid is remembered as the big 80s rock bacchanal, but the US Festival kicked off the outdoor mega-concert revival three years before, and Wozniak's transition from tech geek to rock concert visionary is the subject of *Woz: The Prodigal Son of Silicon Valley, The Amazing Steve Wozniak and his Apple Computer*by Paul Garr, a slim unauthorized paperback biography published in 1984, and bought by eager readers like me.

Steve Wozniak was known for a sweet and uncompetitive disposition that made him completely unlike (but, happily, totally compatible with) the sharp-edged Steve Jobs. A few years after the launch of the Apple II, Wozniak decided that he didn't want to work for Apple anymore. He kept a low profile, though long after the US Festival he reemerged as a contestant on the TV show *Dancing With The Stars.* I'm such a Steve Wozniak fan that I actually watched a few episodes (he's a terrible dancer, but it was hilarious TV).

Paging through my yellowing copy of Paul Garr's *Woz* after reading Walter Isaacson's much more substantial *Steve Jobs,* a paradox occurred to me: Steve Jobs was a lifelong Buddhist, but never managed to lose his intense attachments in life (to success, to pride, to perfect product design and functional elegance), and only managed during his last years to produce a sometimes convincing facsimile of inner peace. It was always Steve Wozniak, cheerful and carefree, who was the natural Buddhist of Apple's two Steves.

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