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**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

WSJ.com

TECHNOLOGY | OCTOBER 6, 2011

## Mossberg: The Steve Jobs I Knew

By **WALTER S. MOSSBERG**



Walt Mossberg reflects on how an afternoon walk with Steve Jobs became a reflection of the former Apple CEO's determined, goal-driven personality.

That [Steve Jobs](#) was a genius, a giant influence on multiple industries and billions of lives, has been written many times since he retired as [Apple's](#) chief executive in August. He was a historical figure on the scale of a Thomas Edison or Henry Ford, and set the mold for many other corporate leaders in many other industries.

He did what a CEO should. He hired and inspired great people; managed for the long term, not the quarter or the short-term stock price; made big bets and took big risks. He insisted on the highest product quality and on building things to delight and empower actual users, not intermediaries like corporate IT directors. As he liked to say, he lived at the intersection of technology and liberal arts.

And he could sell. Man, he could sell.



Steve Jobs in 1997.

Associated Press

But there was a more personal side of Steve Jobs, of course, and I was fortunate enough to see a bit of it, because I spent hours in conversation with him, over the 14 years he ran Apple. Here are a few stories that illustrate the man as I knew him.

### The Phone Calls

I never knew Steve when he was first at Apple. I wasn't covering technology then. And I only met him once between his stints at the company. Within days of his return in 1997 he began calling my house, on Sunday nights, for four or five straight weekends. As a veteran reporter, I knew he wanted to flatter me, to get me on the side of a teetering company whose products I had once recommended, but had recently advised readers to avoid.

Yet there was more to the calls than that. They turned into marathon, 90-minute, wide-ranging, off-the-record discussions that revealed to me the stunning breadth of the man. One minute he'd be talking about sweeping ideas for the digital revolution. The next about why Apple's current products were awful, and how a color, or angle, or curve, or icon was embarrassing.

After the second such call, my wife became annoyed at the intrusion he was making in our weekend. I wasn't.

Later, he'd sometimes call to complain about some reviews, or parts of reviews—though, in truth, I felt very comfortable recommending most of his products for the average, non-techie consumers. (That may have been because they were his target, too.)

I knew he would be complaining because he'd start every call by saying "Hi, Walt. I'm not calling to complain about today's column, but I have some comments, if that's okay."

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### More on Steve Jobs

[Steven Paul Jobs, 1955-2011](#)

[Apple's New CEO Has Big Shoes to Fill](#)

[Steve Jobs Video](#)

[Jobs Speech: 'Find What You Love'](#)

[Steve Jobs's Best Quotes](#)

### The Optimist

I have no way of knowing how Steve talked to his team during Apple's darkest days in 1997 and 1998, when the company was on the brink and he was forced to turn to archrival Microsoft for a rescue. He certainly had a nasty, mercurial side to him, and I expect that, then and later, it emerged inside and outside the company

But I can honestly say that, in my many conversations with him, the dominant tone he struck was optimism and certainty, both for Apple and for the digital revolution as a whole. Even when he was telling me about his struggles to get the music industry to let him sell digital songs, or griping about competitors, at least in my presence, his tone was always marked by patience and a long-term view. This may have been for my benefit, knowing that I was a journalist, but it was striking.

At times in our conversations, when I would criticize the decisions of record labels or phone carriers, he'd surprise me by forcefully disagreeing, explaining how the world looked from their point of view, how hard their jobs were in a time of digital disruption, and how they would come around.

This quality was on display when Apple opened its first retail store. It happened to be in the Washington, DC, suburbs, near my home. He conducted a press tour for journalists, as proud of the store as a father is of his first child. I commented that, surely, there'd only be a few stores, and asked what Apple knew about retailing. He looked at me like I was crazy, said there'd be many, many stores, and that the company had spent a year tweaking the layout of the stores, using a mockup at a secret location. I teased him by asking if he, personally, despite his hard duties as CEO, had approved tiny details like the translucency of the glass and the color of the wood. He said he had, of course.

### The Product Unveilings

Sometimes, not always, he'd invite me in to see certain big products before he unveiled them to the world. He may have done the same with other journalists. We'd meet in a giant boardroom, with just a few of his aides present, and he'd insist—even in private—on covering the new gadgets with cloths and then uncovering them like the showman he was, a gleam in his eye and passion in his voice. We'd then often sit down for a long, long discussion of the present, the future, and industry gossip.

I still remember the day he showed me the first iPod. I was amazed that a computer company would branch off into music players, but he explained, without giving any specifics away, that he saw Apple as a digital products company, not a computer company. It was the same with the iPhone, the iTunes music store, and later the iPad, which he asked me to his home to see, because he was too ill at the time to go to the office.



### Ice Water in Hell

For our fifth All Things Digital Conference, both Steve and his longtime rival, the brilliant [Bill Gates](#), surprisingly agreed to a joint appearance, their first extended onstage joint interview ever. But it almost got derailed.



Steve Jobs is "one of the two or three leading historical figures of the tech revolution," says WSJ personal technology columnist Walt Mossberg.

Earlier in the day, before Gates arrived, I did a solo onstage interview with Jobs, and asked him what it was like to be a major Windows developer, since Apple's iTunes program was by then installed on hundreds of millions of Windows PCs.

He quipped: "It's like giving a glass of ice water to someone in Hell."

When Gates later arrived and heard about the comment, he was, naturally, enraged. In a pre-interview meeting, Gates said to Jobs "so I guess I'm the representative from hell."

Jobs merely handed Gates a cold bottle of water. The tension was broken, and the interview was a triumph, with both men acting like statesmen. When it was over, the audience rose in a standing ovation, some of them in tears.

### **The Walk**

After his liver transplant, while he was recuperating at home in Palo Alto, Steve invited me to catch up. It turned into a three-hour visit, punctuated by a walk to a nearby park that he insisted we take, despite my nervousness about his frail condition.

He explained that he walked each day, and that each day he set a farther goal for himself, and that, today, the neighborhood park was his goal. As we were walking and talking, he suddenly stopped, not looking well. I begged him to return to the house,

noting that I didn't know CPR and could visualize the headline: "Helpless reporter lets Steve Jobs die on the sidewalk."

But he laughed, and refused, and, after a pause, kept heading for the park. We sat on a bench there, talking about life, our families, and our respective illnesses. (I had had a heart attack some years earlier.) He lectured me about staying healthy. And then we walked back.

Steve Jobs didn't die that day, to my everlasting relief. But now he really is gone, much too young, and it is the world's loss.

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