

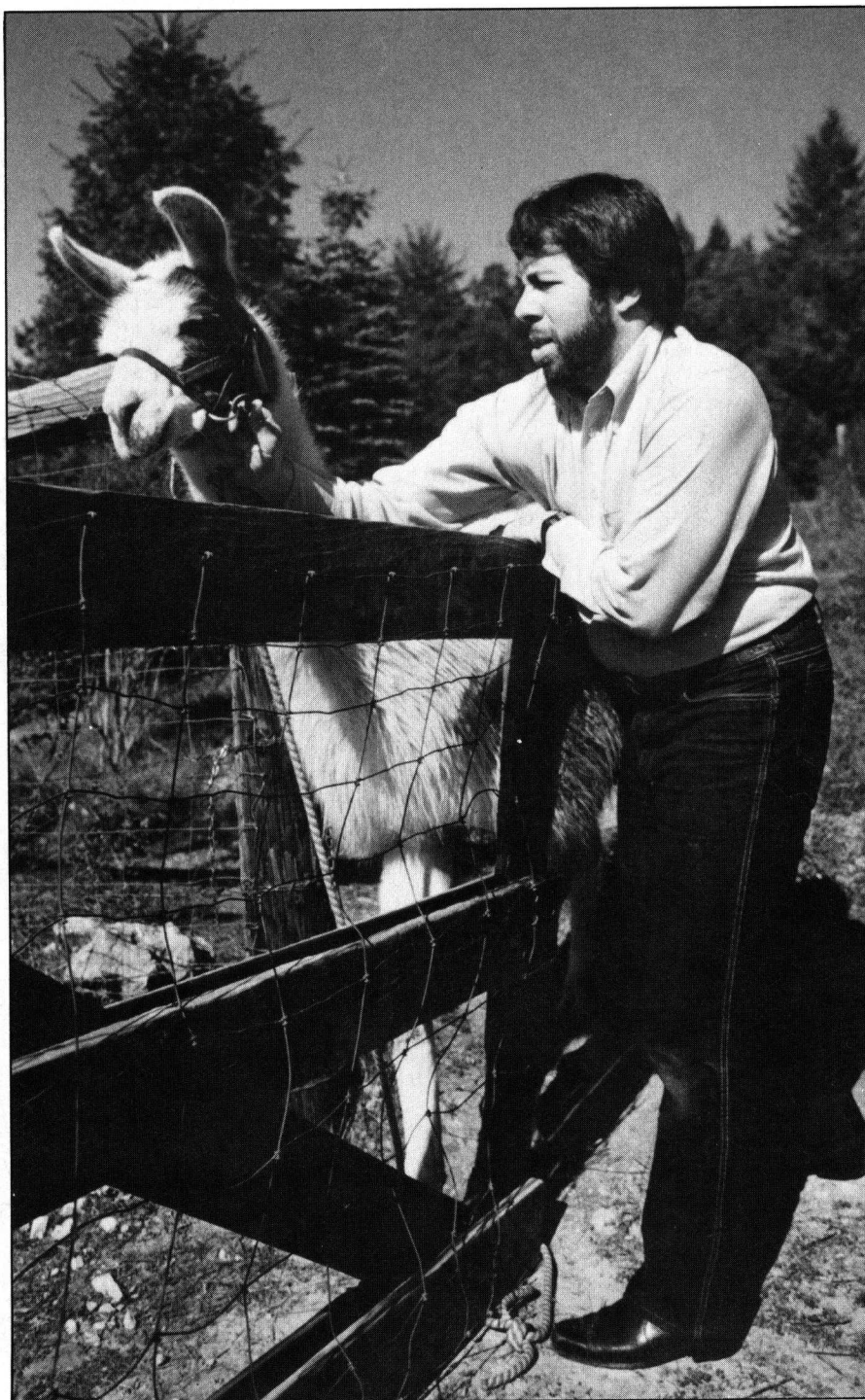
The Wizard of Woz

An Interview with Steve Wozniak

The one-time accessible high priest of high-tech is getting harder to find.

High in the hills, hanging just over the edge of the northern most tip of Santa Cruz County, an electronic gate neatly severs the driveway leading to Steve Wozniak's silicon-style tudor mansion. The security gate is new. Not long ago, when the estate was unmarred by fences, visitors would turn off the main road at the handpainted "Candi and Woz" sign, drive right up to the castle door, get out of their cars, and knock. Some pilgrims to the land of Woz proclaimed they had been sent by God.

For a long time, you could look up Stephen Wozniak's number in the phone book, dial it, and maybe get Woz himself answering. These days, if you dialed the same number, you'd be likely to get Wozniak's version of dial-a-joke. If you chanced upon one of the treasured private Wozniak numbers



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that circulate in the high tech inner-circle, you could *probably* get Woz at the other end of the line. But later, you would call the same number and get an anonymous voice, taking messages.

Not so long ago, just about anybody could walk right up to Wozniak and accost him for some lengthy high tech conversation, and he would readily appear at this or that event. Now, he is quicker and surer in his escapes; now, he is "unavailable" for weeks at a time. And when once Woz would give money to a lot of people's projects, he is not so quick with the checkbook these days, and sometimes makes promises he forgets to keep.

Perhaps Woz began sealing himself off after his brainchild, the US Festivals, went somehow awry and lost many millions of dollars. Maybe he began cloistering himself after his marriage and the birth of his son, Jesse. Whenever it began, Wozniak—a one-time outspoken opponent of in-

accessibility—is growing very private, very inaccessible.

Stephen Wozniak—Apple-designer, millionaire, prankster, and techie cult hero—grapples with the real-time price of fame and fortune.

After his first tech-rock concert, US Festival, Wozniak was flying high. The walls of his office at the UNUSON (an acronym for "Unite Us in Song") Corporation headquarters were partially covered with letters from people writing to him about the event. Some said it changed their lives. "Thanks, Woz" seemed to be the password, and "thanks, Woz" seemed to be perhaps the only return he needed on his multi-million dollar investment.

That was when you could easily make an appointment to converse with him. You might sit in the UNUSON lobby and wait awhile, but he would always come out to greet you with a smile and a handshake, eventually.

Wozniak was astounded by the attention he got from the US Festival. Suddenly, people who wouldn't have known him from Adam Osborne were approaching him in restaurants, on airplanes, all over the place. The press wanted him. The people wanted him. It seemed everyone was off to see the Wizard of Woz.

By all appearances, the first US Festival was a huge success. Although statistics aren't kind to humanity amassed and rocked into a frenzy, Wozniak's UNUSON vision came through almost intact: no riots, no violence, no overcrowding, no food or water shortage. No one died at the US Festival, though sadly, one person died in a car accident along the way. There was at least one birth: Stephen Wozniak's son.

Woz just wanted to throw a big party, just wanted everyone to have fun. For three long days and nights in September 1982, the "me generation" made way for "us." In the heat and dustbowl outside

San Bernadino, circus tents sheltered the latest tech exhibits and the music played. And in the evening of the second day, an historic first occurred: a live satellite link-up with the Soviet Union created a two-way broadcast of simultaneous U.S. and Soviet rock concerts. Wozniak thought this might help to humanize the "enemy" in our eyes.

When the big party was over, a hero had been born. The letters to Wozniak poured in. Inspired, Woz gave the UNUSON staff the go-ahead for the next US Festival.

Late in 1983, the headquarters of the UNUSON Corporation closed up shop,

Wozniak staged blue box shows in the Berkeley dorms: Woz would beep his way from phone-to-phone around the world, and end up ringing the phone in the next room. Woz called Irish pubs, Australian weather reports, and the Vatican. He informed the Vatican that he was Henry Kissinger calling for the Pope.

killing a banker's nightmare and a techie's dream. In its final days, it was reported that UNUSON's chief executive gave himself and the top staff members each a cool half million dollar bonus—without Wozniak's knowledge or approval. It was also reported that Woz lost millions, maybe even twenty million dollars, on the combined US events. Counterfeit tickets were reportedly one reason; musicians demanding more of Wozniak's money was another.

The press, not having any Altamont-style disaster to report, went wild when the fiscal reports started leaking out. Wozniak—a trusting man whose US Festival dream was born after he survived a private airplane crash—retreated back to Apple. When asked about the US Festivals, he neatly sidesteps the

question: "I am an engineer. That's what I am."

In techie circles, Wozniak is admired, respected, revered, and, well, almost holy. His name is an endorsement dropped from many lips: "Well, Woz is going to be there;" "Woz is on the net;" "Woz is into that." Well, hell then, if Woz is doing it, it must be good.

Some techies speak the name "Woz" with awe. Steven Jobs may be the ingenious businessman who brought Apple out of a suburban garage and into history, but Woz is the hacker who built it. Young aspiring business professionals may worship Jobs, but the techies honor Wozniak. Woz is the guru to talk tech with. Woz is the one who puts on the big parties. He is also the one who dares to break the rules.

If you hang out in a techie's world for a little while, you might be astonished, shocked, maybe even a little afraid of the amount of supposedly-proprietary information they have access to. They wonder about—and find out how—things *work*. This curiosity may not be limited to computers, but may extend to things like the banking system, bombs, the telephone company. Techies can go to great lengths to find out needed information; there are all sorts of networks, computerized and otherwise, to plug into.

If some of us had access to this kind of information, our outlaw-in-spirit side might dream of the great escapades, masquerades, and pranks we could pull off. Very few of us would ever try. But many of us admire the ones who dare to risk—and win—the gamble.

Long before Apple, Wozniak and Jobs, his long-time friend, were already underground heroes—sort of an electronic-age Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid. About a dozen years ago, Wozniak read a "fiction" story in *Esquire* magazine about an underground celebrity, Cap'n Crunch, and his exploits with the world's telephone companies. Always on the lookout for technical facts, Woz thought the details relayed in the story were too accurate to be fiction. He was right. The Cap'n was a very real person who

had found a way to toy with the phone system. He was notorious with the world's operators for making free long distance calls everywhere. The Cap'n had in his possession a highly-illegal sound-frequency transmitter called the "blue box." The blue box was inspired by a whistle that at one time came free inside a box of Cap'n Crunch cereal, and with it, the Cap'n could beep telephone number frequencies into the phone lines without triggering off the billing system.

Wozniak put out the word through the underground network that he wanted to meet the Cap'n. Before long, he did. Soon, the Cap'n had initiated Wozniak and Jobs into the mysterious magic of the blue box.

The two Steves staged blue box shows in the UC Berkeley dorms: Woz would beep his way from phone-to-phone around the world, and end up ringing the telephone in the next room. Woz called Irish pubs, Australian weather reports, and the Vatican. He informed the Vatican that he was Henry Kissinger calling for the Pope.

The blue boxes sold like hotcakes. "I made a contact in Southern California," says Wozniak, "and then I was selling maybe ten or twenty at a time."

Wozniak built blue boxes and Jobs pushed them. They cost about \$40 to build and sold for \$80. Wozniak recalls: "Steve and I were partners; we split the profits. But it was more intriguing to me not to make any money at all. I paid all the money (to build the blue boxes) and split the proceeds with Steve. So I broke even and he made some money. I didn't really care because it was interesting to me to be doing something that no one else was doing."

Steve Wozniak tells these stories with rakish glee. Still, it is curious to note that Steven Jobs has become Apple Computer's Chairman of the Board, while Wozniak, ever the techie, has a small cubicle office just like that of every other Apple engineer. There is no privacy in Woz's cubicle for the laughter this reminiscing elicits, so Wozniak has reserved an Apple conference room. When our time in the room is up, he leads the way to another room, dragging the tape recorder and

talking all the way.

He is a very fast talker. His list of pranks is long. He has pulled pranks on the phone company, on the micro-industry, on Apple, on his friends. But no one has yet pulled a good prank on Woz....

Steve Wozniak arrives unexpectedly early for an appearance in a video-documentary. He is smiling and eager to meet his co-star: a wheel-chair-bound, nine-year-old computer wiz-kid. Wozniak is surprisingly at home in front of the cameras, surprisingly at home with the boy. "You're an inspiration," he tells the kid.

They tell each other jokes while working on the kid's Apple computer. The boy shows Woz how to play a new video game. "Ah, you got me!" Wozniak yells, frantically pulling at the joystick.

They talk about computers and the boy's muscular dystrophy. Wozniak is curious how the boy inserts his diskettes, turns the machine on, uses the keyboard.

They talk about ending war. Wozniak says, "Maybe computers can give us something more meaningful to think about in our lives. Computers are going to make us all talk the same language someday. The trouble is, the world tends to think of itself as countries versus countries. We're all separate. But we don't think that way about states. We're not against Arizona. But we're against Russia. Computers can help aid the communication between people...."

Ah, the whisper of an US Festival dream still sounds.

After about an hour, Woz and the wiz-kid shake hands. Wozniak has an afterthought: "By the way, how are your grades in school?"

"What kind of a question is that?" squeals the kid.

"Oh, just being a friend, that's all," replies Wozniak.

Arriving at Wozniak's estate a little late for our appointment, our way is barred by the electronic gate. We follow the instructions on the security phone, and get Woz on the other end of the line. He says he will open the gate. We wait for a while, and the gate does not open. We dial again. He is surprised.

The gate slides open and we cruise up the hill to the castle. Woz steps out the door. Although this appointment was made only yesterday, he already can't quite remember what it is for. We remind him. He is very distracted, says he only has ten minutes, that someone else is waiting, that his wife has taken their kid out back to see the llamas so the kid won't climb all over Woz for a while.

A tiny puppy sniffs appreciatively at Wozniak's feet; he scoops up the dog, laughing, talking, playing—ten minutes passes, twenty, twenty-five. We get the feeling that we could have stayed longer, but sometimes you just have to let a hero have some peace.

Gawkers and guru-seekers can't drive up to Wozniak's castle door anymore; fans usually can't stop him for a long talk; newly-initiated techies can't get him on the phone. But if you know his secret code you might get him on the computer networks, and he still gets middle-of-the-night phone calls from the (now legitimately wealthy and somewhat famous) Cap'n.

There's a rumor in the micro-industry that Wozniak's current project is a true, single-chip Apple computer. It seems unusual in this highly-competitive Silicon Rush that Wozniak's success does not appear to inspire jealousy in other techies. Even more, it is almost as if the techies *want* Woz to stake another claim on history.

Perhaps the single-chip Apple rumor is only the high hopes and wishful thinking of a host of devotees. On the other hand, perhaps Woz has grown bored of leaning on past laurels. Perhaps the Wozniak touch will once more turn silicon chips into gold—and revolutionize microcomputing all over again.