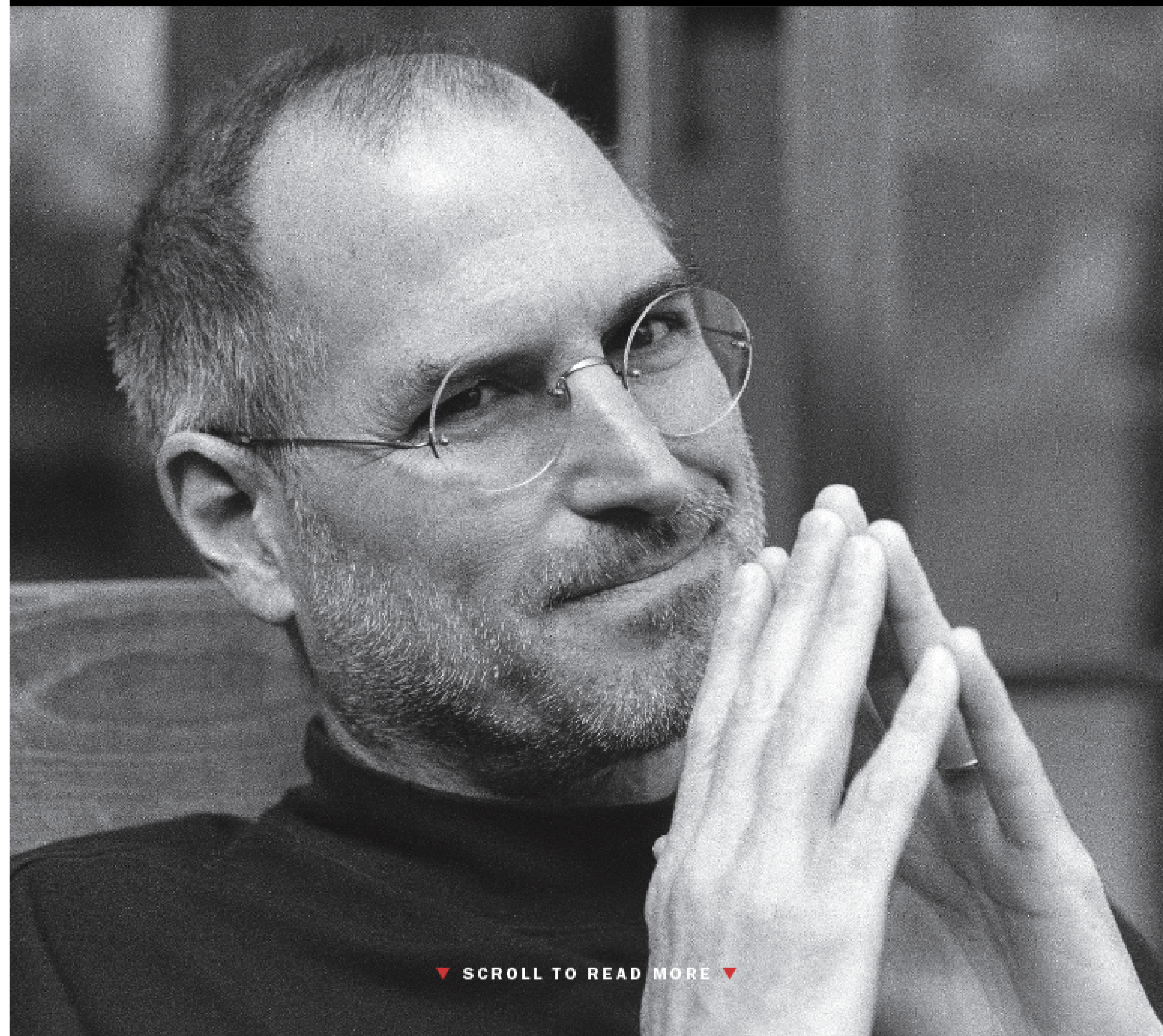
American Icon

BY WALTER ISAACSON



Photograph by Diana Walker for TIME
CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES

THE SAGA OF STEVE JOBS IS THE SILICON VALLEY CREATION myth writ large: launching a start-up in the proverbial garage and building it into the world's most valuable company. He didn't invent many things outright, but he was a master at arranging ideas, art and technology in ways that repeatedly invented the future. He designed the Mac after appreciating the power of graphic interfaces in a way that Xerox was unable to do, and he created the iPod after grasping the joy of having a thousand songs in your pocket in a way that Sony, which had all the assets and heritage, never could accomplish. Some leaders push innovations by being good at the big picture. Others do so by mastering details. Jobs did both, relentlessly.

He revolutionized six industries: personal computers, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing and digital publishing. You might even add a seventh: retailing, which Jobs did not quite revolutionize but did reimagine. Along the way, he produced not only transforming products but also, on his second try, a lasting company, endowed with his DNA, that is filled with creative designers and daredevil engineers who will carry forward his vision.

Jobs thus became the greatest business executive of our era, the one most certain to be remembered a century from now. History will place him in the pantheon right next to Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. More than anyone else of his time, he made products that were completely innovative, combining the beauty of poetry and the power of processors. With a ferocity that could make working with him as unsettling as it was inspiring, he also built what became, at least for a period this past month, the world's most valuable company. And he was able to infuse into its genetic code the design sensibilities, perfectionism and imagination that make it likely to be, even decades from now, the company that thrives best at the intersection of artistry and technology.

In the early summer of 2004, I got a phone call from him. He had been scattershot friendly to me over the years, with occasional bursts of intensity, especially when he was launching a new product that he wanted on the cover of TIME or featured on CNN, places where I'd worked. But now that I was no longer at either of those places, I hadn't heard from him much. We talked a bit about the Aspen Institute, which I had recently joined, and I invited him to speak at our summer campus in Colorado. He'd be happy to come, he said, but not to be onstage. He wanted, instead, to take a walk so we could talk.

That seemed a bit odd. I didn't yet know that taking a long walk was his preferred way to have a serious conversation. It turned out

that he wanted me to write a biography of him. I had recently published one on Benjamin Franklin and was writing one about Albert Einstein, and my initial reaction was to wonder, half jokingly, whether he saw himself as the natural successor in that sequence. Because I assumed that he was still in the middle of an oscillating career that had many more ups and downs left, I demurred. Not now, I said. Maybe in a decade or two, when you retire.

But I later realized that he had called me just before he was going to be operated on for cancer for the first time. As I watched him battle that disease, with an awesome intensity combined with an astonishing emotional romanticism, I came to find him deeply compelling, and I realized how much his personality was ingrained in the products he created. His passions, demons, desires, artistry, devilry and obsession for control were integrally connected to his approach to business, so I decided to try to write his tale as a case study in creativity.

The unified field theory that ties together Jobs' personality and products begins with his most salient trait, his intensity. It was evident even in high school. By then he had begun his lifelong experiments with compulsive diets—usually only fruits and vegetables—so he was as lean and tight as a whippet. He learned to stare unblinking at people, and he perfected long silences punctuated by staccato bursts of fast talking.

This intensity encouraged a binary view of the world. Colleagues referred to the hero/shithead dichotomy; you were either one or the other, sometimes on the same day. The same was true of products, ideas, even food: something was either "the best thing ever" or it totally sucked. He could taste two avocados, indistinguishable to ordinary mortals, and declare one of them the greatest ever harvested and the other inedible.

He thought of himself as an artist, which instilled in him a passion for design. When he was building the original Macintosh in the early 1980s, he kept insisting that the design be "friendlier," a concept alien to computer-hardware engineers of the time. His solution was to make the front of the Mac look a little like a human face, and he even kept the plastic strip above the screen thin so it would not be a thick-browed Neanderthal's face.

He intuitively understood the signals that a proper design sent. When he and his design sidekick Jony Ive built the first iMac in 1998, Ive decided it should have a handle nestled into the top. It was more playful and semiotic than it was functional. This was a desktop computer. Not many people were really going to carry it around. But it sent a signal that you didn't have to be afraid of the machine; you could touch it, and it would defer to you. The engineers objected

that it would add to the cost, but Jobs ordered it to be done.

His quest for perfection led to his compulsion for Apple to have total end-to-end control of every product it made. Most hackers and hobbyists liked to customize, modify and jack various things into their computers. To Jobs, this was a threat to a seamless user experience. His original partner, Steve Wozniak—a hacker at heart—disagreed. He wanted to include eight slots on the Apple II for users to insert whatever small circuit boards and peripherals they might want. Jobs reluctantly assented. But a few years later, when he built the Macintosh, Jobs did it his own way. There were no extra slots or ports, and he even used special screws so hobbyists could not open it up and modify it.

Jobs' instinct for control meant that he got hives, or worse, when contemplating great Apple software running on another company's crappy hardware, and he likewise was allergic to the thought of unapproved apps or content polluting the perfection of an Apple device. This ability to integrate hardware, software and content into a single, Apple-designed system enabled him to impose simplicity. The astronomer Johannes Kepler declared that nature loves simplicity and unity. So did Steve Jobs.

This led Jobs to decree that the Macintosh operating system would not be available for any other company's hardware. Microsoft pursued the opposite strategy, allowing its Windows operating system to be promiscuously licensed. That did not produce the most elegant computers, but it did lead to Microsoft's dominating the operating-system market. After Apple's market share shrank to less than 5%, Microsoft's approach was declared the winner in the personal-computer realm.

In the longer run, however, there proved to be advantages to Jobs' approach. His insistence on end-to-end integration gave Apple, in the early 2000s, an advantage in developing a digital-hub strategy, which allowed you to link your desktop computer with a variety of portable devices and manage your digital content. The iPod, for example, was part of a closed and tightly integrated system. To use it, you had to use Apple's iTunes software and download content from its iTunes Store. The result was that the iPod, like the iPhone and iPad that followed, was an elegant delight, in contrast to the kludgy rival products that did not offer such a seamless end-to-end experience.

For Jobs, belief in an integrated approach was a matter of righteousness. "We do these things not because we are control freaks," he explained. "We do them because we want to make great products, because we care about the user and because we like to take responsibility for the entire experience rather than turn out the crap that other people make." He also believed he was doing people

a service. “They’re busy doing whatever they do best, and they want us to do what we do best. Their lives are crowded. They have other things to do than think about how to integrate their computers and devices.”

In a world filled with junky devices, clunky software, inscrutable error messages and annoying interfaces, Jobs’ insistence on a simple, integrated approach led to astonishing products marked by delightful user experiences. Using an Apple product could be as sublime as walking in one of the Zen gardens of Kyoto that Jobs loved, and neither experience was the result of worshipping at the altar of openness or letting a thousand flowers bloom. Sometimes it’s nice to be in the hands of a control freak.

A few weeks ago, I visited Jobs for the last time in his Palo Alto, Calif., home. He had moved to a downstairs bedroom because he was too weak to go up and down stairs. He was curled up in some pain, but his mind was still sharp and his humor vibrant. We talked about his childhood, and he gave me some pictures of his father and family to use in my biography. As a writer, I was used to being detached, but I was hit by a wave of sadness as I tried to say goodbye. In order to mask my emotion, I asked the one question that was still puzzling me: Why had he been so eager, during close to 50 interviews and conversations over the course of two years, to open up so much for a book when he was usually so private? “I wanted my kids to know me,” he said. “I wasn’t always there for them, and I wanted them to know why and to understand what I did.” ■