



by David Walker
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Steve Jobs: Visionary, Inventor, and Very Challenging Photo Subject

The media is heaping accolades on Apple founder Steve Jobs, who died yesterday of cancer at the age of 56. Tributes have poured in from all over the world. Jobs was a visionary who changed the way we use and interact with technology. The iPhone and iPad have certainly helped re-make the photography landscape.

But Steve Jobs also had a reputation among photographers for being a difficult subject—and not just run-of-the mill difficult, but the archetype of difficult.

“It was the joke among photographers. He was like the nightmare subject,” says San Francisco photographer William Mercer McLeod, who photographed Jobs on assignment a total of five times, and once worked for Apple, helping to develop the company’s Aperture software.

Asked to recount his experiences photographing Jobs, another photographer said, “I don’t really want to be the guy who pans iGod during this hour of national mourning!”

Photojournalist Ed Kashi, who photographed Jobs about 10 times between the early 1980s and early 1990s, recalled via text message, “He was one of the most difficult subjects I ever dealt with during my Silicon Valley years but I appreciated his awareness of identity, setting and message of the images. There was one time I had to get a picture with him and Ross Perot and when Jobs acted up Perot turned to him and like a stern parent said ‘Steve, Grow up!!’ No matter how dreadful he could be as a subject, I am deeply saddened by his early departure.”

McLeod says his first encounter with Jobs was as an assistant for Kashi. “It was in the late 80s. [Jobs] walked into the the photo shoot and started moving the lights around. Then he picked up the phone and called the art director in New York and said he wanted to do something different.”

McLeod recalls how he and Kashi stood there watching in disbelief. “He’s the only person I ever saw do that,” McLeod continues. “Photographing Steve was like a dance. He had such a thing for control like nobody I’ve ever seen. He loved to be in charge. He wanted to have his say.”

“From an editor’s standpoint he could be difficult,” says Scott Thode, a former Fortune magazine photo editor. “[He was] not unlike a political candidate. The main difference is that he had a real sense of design and how things can look.”

Doug Menezes spent more time photographing Jobs than just about any other photographer, after Jobs agreed to let him document the development of the NeXT computer. Menezes had access to the labs and boardroom for three years.

“In all those years, Steve only screamed at me at the top of his lungs once,” Menezes recalls. It was in 1988, when Fortune hired Menezes to shoot a portrait of Jobs for the cover of the magazine. Menezes wanted to photograph him in the NeXT offices, on a staircase that Jobs had commissioned architect I.M Pei to design. Jobs arrived for the shoot, looked at what Menezes had in mind, “then [he] leaned in and says, ‘This is the stupidest fucking idea that I’ve ever seen.’ Right in my face, like 5 or 6 inches away,” Menezes says. “I felt like I was 10 years old. He went off on a tirade. He said, ‘You just want to sell magazines. And I said, ‘And you want to sell computers.’ And at that he said, ‘OK,’ and sat down.”

Menezes concludes, “I’ve been in war zones, but I like to say that I became a man learning how to stand my ground with Steve.”

Albert Watson, who photographed Jobs just once for a portfolio of people in power that Fortune commissioned him to shoot in 2006, had a different experience from other photographers. “The one thing I insisted on was that we have a three hour window of set up time,” Watson says. “We were prepared...we set up to make [every shoot] as greased lightning fast as possible for the [subject].” Watson says he had also read “a massive amount of stuff” about Jobs to help him conceptualize the shoot, and so he would be able to converse with Jobs intelligently.

When Jobs walked in, Watson says that his power, charisma and genius were palpable. “It was like when Clint Eastwood walks in to the room.”

Jobs didn’t look immediately at Watson, but looked instead at the set-up and then focused on Watson’s 4x5 camera “like it was something dinosauric,” Watson recalls, “and he said, ‘Wow, you’re shooting film.’”

“I said, ‘I don’t feel like digital is quite here yet.’ And he said, ‘I agree,’ then he turned and looked at me and said, ‘But we’ll get there.’”

Jobs gave Watson about an hour—much longer than he ever gave most photographers for a portrait session. “I had wanted to do the shot in a minimalistic way because I knew that was going to suit him very well. He said, ‘What do you want me to do?’ I said I would like 95 percent, almost 100 percent of eye contact with the camera, and I said, ‘Think about the next project you have on the table,’ and I asked him also to think about instances where people have challenged him.

“If you look at that shot, you can see the intensity. It was my intention that by looking at him, that you knew this guy was smart,” Watson says, adding, “I heard later that it was his favorite photograph of all time.”

Apple cleared its home page today to post that photograph as a tribute to Jobs.