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Apple II: Computer Revolution's Hero Dies -- New Kids On Block Leave The Industry's Model T In Pc Dust

By [John Schwartz](#)
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON - The machine that changed the world, the magic box that first wrestled computing away from the corporate giants and gave it to anybody with \$1,400, the technology that convinced us the future was not going to fold, spindle or mutilate us, died last month.

Like many deaths, it came quietly, and in the dark. Apple didn't even put out a press release when it dropped the Apple IIe, the last of the Apple II product line. But this was no mere product cancellation. It was the death of a hero of the revolution - the personal computer revolution.

The Apple was a generational statement - the brainchild of two scruffy Silicon Valley kids named Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, cobbled together in Jobs' garage. These were the baby boomers taking on the Establishment, a rainbow-colored logo against three big blue capital letters: IBM. The computer, and the image, made Silicon Valley the new hometown of the American dream.

The Apple II was a rock 'n' roll message to the Pat Boone mainframe world. Many rival brands in the heady early days of personal computing died young, like digital Keith Moons and Janis Joplins. The Apple II, however, was more like Frank Zappa, a classic survivor chugging along, dying finally of a disease of the old. Apple had sold more than 5.5 million of the machines in its remarkable 16-year run.

By the time Apple pulled the plug, technology had long passed the II by. Almost a decade ago, the company moved on to the more powerful and easy-to-use Macintosh line of computers. Just 2 percent of the computers sold by Apple this year were IIe's, and almost all of those went to schools, the most loyal purchasers of the machines.

Despite its advanced age, the news still hit the many fans of the machine hard. They remembered with great fondness the upstart machine that started it all.

Florence Haseltine, head of the Center for Population Research at the National Institutes of Health, lovingly remembered her first 1980 Apple as saving her career: A self-confessed terrible speller, she needed the computer so that she could correct her grant proposals without retyping whole pages. "I'll always love that Apple II," she said. "It gave me freedom - and when anything does that you know it's just the beginning of a whole explosion."

This, then, was much more than just microchips and molded plastic. The Apple II was the Model T of computing. Ford's mass-produced invention took the power of transportation away from the rich railroads and put individual drivers behind the wheel. Apple users, too, were delivered from the priesthood that maintained the mainframes. And the Apple was available in any color as long as it was beige.

The machine itself was a shock: Its sculpted plastic case looked less like a clunky computer terminal than some mysterious-but-elegant kitchen appliance, perhaps from Germany.

"It was the first computer that a lot of people fell in love with," said Richard Shaffer, publisher of the New York-based Computer Letter. It was born of love, not market research, Jobs would later tell audiences: "When we first started Apple, we really built the first computer because we wanted one."

Like the Model T, that early Apple was primitive by today's turbocharged standards. Its disks could store a few college papers, nothing more. Today's machines offer thousands of times the performance, yet that early Apple was capable of running early versions of the same programs found on machines in 1993: word processors, spreadsheets and databases.

The genius at Apple wasn't just technical, though. It was an unprecedented marketing triumph: Apple got people to think that computers were cool. No longer the domain of the dorks, computers became objects of desire for a generation. Savvy publicist Regis McKenna saw how Jobs and Wozniak would punch the buttons of a generation on the make. One set of Apple ads made yuppie execs yearn for the power that could be tapped through the keyboard; another made parents fret that their precious children would fall behind the

pack if they couldn't do their homework on an Apple II.

The company cannily sold the machines directly to schools, building a loyal market of educators and parents. By 1981, when IBM weighed into the market with its initial PC, more than 300,000 Apples had been sold, and public awareness of the brand was up to 80 percent. By January 1982, the number sold had jumped to 650,000. The sleek lines of the upgraded IIc were celebrated in the design showcases of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Was it any wonder, then, that in 1982 Time magazine declared its Man of the Year to be the computer? The Apple II legitimized personal computers in education and in business, said Oliver Strimpel, executive director of the Computer Museum in Boston - which displays one of the machines prominently among other pioneering boxes. "To some extent it was the genius of the design, but to some extent it was luck - the right machine at the right place at the right time."

To Shaffer, the appeal of the Apple II lay in its relative simplicity: "You could open the top and look at the parts and see what everything did."

The II made sense partly because Wozniak designed the machine's main circuit board on his own, with equal measures of elegance and artistry.

Today's machines are put together by armies of engineers, and combine so many functions on a chip that you can't distinguish the parts under the hood. "This is the last machine I think I completely understood," Shaffer said.

The II was good for Apple long after Apple stopped being good to it. Jobs denigrated the II as he lurchingly tried to move the company to new machines.

As Apple struggled with the introductions of one failed product after another in the early 1980s - the Apple III, the Buick-sized Lisa, and the initially disappointing Macintosh - the trusty Apple II kept the company afloat.

Goodbye, Apple II. When our time comes, let's hope we will depart with similar grace, or will have accomplished a fraction as much.

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