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Bibliographic Cover Sheet

Title **The Twilight Years of Cap'n Crunch**

Publication *Wall St. Journal*

Date 2007-01-13

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V/I/P p. 1

Abstract Description of John Draper's life since his 1976 bust, focusing on the 2000s.

Keywords John Thomas Draper; John Draper; John T. Draper; Captain Crunch; Cap'n Crunch

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

LEADER (U.S.) | JANUARY 13, 2007

The Twilight Years of Cap'n Crunch

Silicon Valley legend John Draper made his name with brains and pranks, before slipping to the margins
Three jail stints and the 'rave' scene

By CHRIS RHOADS

MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. -- Underneath a highway bisecting this Silicon Valley town, home to [Google Inc.](#) and other tech giants, John Draper crammed his bulky frame through the door of a friend's home: a battered 1978 Chevy diesel bus.

Radio parts, a wrench set, arthritis medication and a book on robotics cluttered the dashboard. A padded bench for sleeping and a greasy stove filled the back.

SEE A PHOTO SLIDESHOW 



Steve LaBadessa

John Draper talks computers with Dave Bengel, an old friend.

"What do you want for lunch?" asked Dave Bengel, a self-taught engineer.

"Salmon," responded Mr. Draper, 63, who has few teeth and wears the same clothes for days. He is better known in Silicon Valley as "Cap'n Crunch," a legendary figure who 25 years ago epitomized the freewheeling, prank-filled culture that gave birth to high tech.

"Salmon, all right!" cried Mr. Bengel. He set about preparing the meal -- obtained free from a Whole Foods worker who leaves outdated products near a dumpster at a prearranged time.

In the decades since Mr. Draper gained fame for his hacking skills as a "phone phreak" -- he once claimed to have gotten then-President Nixon on the phone -- Silicon Valley has aged and matured. Pioneers that Mr. Draper worked with, such as Apple's Steve Jobs, have gone on to become wealthy members of the business establishment.

THEN THERE is "Cap'n Crunch," part of an aging community of high-tech wunderkinds. Once tolerated, even embraced, for his eccentricities, Mr. Draper now lives on the margins of this affluent world, still striving to carve out a role in the business mainstream.

Although his appearance and hand-to-mouth existence belie it, Mr. Draper developed one of the first word-processing programs as well as the technology that made possible voice-activated telephone menus. He receives invitations to speak to foreign governments and international conferences. At a recent celebration of [Apple Inc.](#)'s 30th anniversary, Mr. Draper, sporting a straggly beard, stood to contribute a story, causing the room to break into applause.

Mr. Draper spent three stints in jail in the 1970s for tampering with the phone system. A court-appointed

psychiatrist once found him to be "psychotic," although another found nothing wrong with him. Until a fall at a conference in Istanbul aggravated a back injury, Mr. Draper was a regular in the rave scene, where people gather in remote locations and dance through the night to electronic music. Mr. Draper once did \$10,000 worth of Web-site design and other computer work for a Bay-area therapist in return for physical therapy on his back because he lacks health insurance.

"When I first met him, he was toothless, wearing ripped jeans and looked like a hippie," says Tolga Katas, a music producer and computer programmer in Las Vegas who recently hired Mr. Draper to do technical work for his new Web entertainment company. "Then I learned what he has done and was blown away."

Video



[See excerpts](#) from John Draper's video blog

Mr. Draper calls aging veterans like himself part of an "off-the-grid" community. Steve Inness, 47, helped develop touch-screen cellphone technology and does programming work for startups. In recent years, he's lived on the floors and couches of employers; he was last seen hitchhiking in the desert outside Las Vegas. Roy Kaylor, 68, built one of the first electric cars in the early 1970s and contributed to a government-supported

effort to develop the technology. He lives in a trailer without electricity in the Santa Cruz mountains. Mr. Draper's recent lunch host, Mr. Bengel, 61, designed an electrohydraulic machine tool and says he has worked for several Silicon Valley companies.

Mr. Draper is the best known. "He was the king of the nerds," says Allan Lundell, who runs an independent film company and has chronicled the evolution of Silicon Valley.

Mr. Draper's father was a U.S. Air Force engineer and the family moved frequently. His younger brother, Ron, recalls John rummaging for electronic parts on military bases where the family lived, on one occasion building a radio station in his bedroom.

John was not an easy child, often bucking under the authority of his sometimes-distant father, who is now deceased. John threw tantrums when his parents smoked, says Ron, a piano teacher. Mr. Draper says he hated his parents' smoking and felt aggrieved by their refusal to stop.

"Our father didn't understand what John needed, which was a constant supply of education and resources," says Ron. "He absorbed this stuff like a sponge." Ron Draper says his parents briefly sought psychiatric treatment for his brother when he was a child for what they said was a "chemical imbalance.

"I liked the sessions," says Mr. Draper of the psychiatric counseling. "At least someone was listening to me." He acknowledges he can become obsessive but denies the idea there's anything wrong with him.

In 1964, after taking some college courses, Mr. Draper joined the Air Force, which his parents thought would provide much-needed discipline. He was sent to Alaska and later Maine, where he served as a radar technician. Since the soldiers had only one phone line on which to call home, Mr. Draper began tinkering with the access codes and figured out how to make free calls through the local switchboard.

After an honorable discharge in 1968, he built gear for several companies in the San Francisco Bay area. But his work, much of which was military-related, was out of step with the counterculture blooming around him. Mr. Draper grew his hair and began spending more time on a pirate radio station, which he operated from the back of his green Volkswagen van to make it harder for authorities to track the signal. He also turned his attention to the phone system, an attraction for like-minded techies before the arrival of personal computers.

Mr. Draper learned how to make free calls by imitating the tones used by the phone company. He learned from other "phone phreaks" -- as the hackers called themselves -- including blind teenagers with near-perfect pitch. Mr. Draper learned that a toy whistle found in a cereal box would also imitate the required tones, earning him the nickname Cap'n Crunch.

The point was not just to make free calls but to explore and learn from the phone company's rich and complicated system. On one occasion, Mr. Draper says he learned the code word needed to speak with the president -- "Olympus" -- and got through to someone on a secure line he thought was President Nixon. Mr. Draper says he told the man about a toilet-paper shortage in Los Angeles.

Authorities began to take notice, particularly after a lengthy article on phone phreaking appeared in the October 1971 edition of Esquire magazine. Mr. Draper, the group's ringleader, was arrested for the first time several months later on charges of wire fraud, and received a five-year probation.

The Esquire article also caught the attention of Steve Wozniak, an eventual Apple co-founder, who invited Mr. Draper to his dorm room at the University of California at Berkeley. When Mr. Draper appeared that evening, Mr. Wozniak, then 21, was taken aback by his guest's appearance and odor, Mr. Wozniak wrote in his recent autobiography.

"Are you Cap'n Crunch?" Mr. Wozniak asked in disbelief, according to the book.

"I am he," Mr. Draper responded as he strode into the room.

Mr. Draper showed Mr. Wozniak and a friend, Mr. Jobs, how to build a device that could produce telephone tones. The pair turned the knowledge into a small business on the Berkeley campus, their first collaboration before founding Apple a few years later.

Mr. Wozniak employed Mr. Draper at Apple, where as a contractor in 1977 he designed a device that could immediately identify phone signals and lines -- such as ones that made free calls -- something modems were not able to do for a decade. The technology would later be used for tone-activated calling menus, voice mail and other purposes.

APPLE DROPPED the device, called a phone board, anxious to avoid negative publicity from its association with illegal phoning, according to former Apple employees. "It was a great board and others at Apple didn't recognize that," says Mr. Wozniak. Mr. Draper became closer to Mr. Wozniak than to Mr. Jobs, who sometimes felt uncomfortable around Mr. Draper, former Apple employees recall.

"John was a little strange and Jobs felt better staying away from him," says Mr. Wozniak, who has remained in touch with Mr. Draper over the years. Mr. Jobs in an email declines to comment.

Just as the computer revolution was about to begin, Mr. Draper's legal problems steered him away from the action. He was sentenced to prison for phone fraud in 1976 and again in 1978, and says he was attacked during that second stint by an inmate with a baseball bat, permanently damaging his back.

The next year -- after his third bust for phone fraud -- he was berated for his behavior. "You have to pay for your long-distance phone calls," a San Jose U.S. District Court judge told Mr. Draper at his sentencing, according to an account in the San Francisco Chronicle. "Is that a very difficult moral concept to grasp?"

Mr. Draper's lawyer replied: "His entire reality has to do with the technology of computers and telephones. When he gets involved with the technology aspect, he loses all sense of morality."

TWO COURT-APPOINTED psychiatrists examined Mr. Draper. One concluded he had an "underdeveloped sense of people" and was "psychotic"; the other found nothing wrong with him, according to the Chronicle article.

In 1979, while serving a sentence of a year of nights in the Alameda County jail -- it was later reduced to a few months -- Mr. Draper wrote the EasyWriter word-processing program. At night he wrote code in longhand, diligently preparing for the next day when he could spend time in the offices of a software company he founded with friends.

Mr. Draper received permission from the sheriff's office to attend a computer fair in 1979 in San Francisco, where the program, named after the cult film "Easy Rider," was a hit. It became Apple's first word-processing

program. When IBM launched its first PC, it also chose EasyWriter, over competition from other programmers, including a young Bill Gates.

Mr. Draper bought a Mercedes and a home in Hawaii. But the company he founded, Cap'n Software Inc., earned less than \$1 million in revenue over a six-year period, according to Mr. Draper and Matthew McIntosh, who ran operations. The real winner was Bill Baker, who handled EasyWriter's distribution and marketing through his own company. Without Mr. Draper's knowledge, Mr. Baker hired his own programmers to create EasyWriter II just as Cap'n Software was publishing EasyWriter 1.1.

Cap'n Software sued and the matter was settled in court with Mr. Baker paying the pair an undisclosed amount. Mr. Baker, now an Internet entrepreneur in Corona del Mar, Calif., says his version of EasyWriter was for the higher-end corporate market and didn't conflict with Mr. Draper's, although he acknowledges the possibility for confusion.

Mr. Baker says he helped Mr. Draper get a start in business. "There are people who see themselves as victims no matter how much money or how many opportunities you give them," says Mr. Baker, who sold his distribution company in 1983 for \$10 million.

Mr. Draper worked for several years in the late 1980s for [Autodesk Inc.](#), a San Rafael, Calif., company that makes design software. He was laid off along with others when new management arrived. It would be his last corporate job.

Through the 1990s, the story was the same. Mr. Draper was qualified for any number of openings, but some companies didn't want to hire someone with a criminal record while others remained wary of his eccentricities. Promising opportunities with Apple and NASA came and went, he says.

As Silicon Valley was taking flight again, this time with the Internet boom, Mr. Draper turned to the rave scene. He traveled as far as Australia and India, where he got by for months at a time earning money designing Web sites and writing computer code.

Mr. Draper several years ago developed some Internet-security equipment and started a company. Some clients were interested, but the company foundered when one of its executives, a fellow raver, made off with much of the money from investors, say Mr. Draper and another executive, John Johnson.

Mr. Johnson is still trying to make a go of the product, with Mr. Draper's help. Mr. Johnson's dilemma is whether to use Mr. Draper's name -- or hide it. "Some companies say we don't want any contact with that guy," says Mr. Johnson, who says he's in advanced discussions with the U.S. Department of Defense about the product. The Pentagon declines to comment.

Mr. Katas, who recently hired Mr. Draper to work for his online entertainment company, [en2go.com](#), recently arranged to have Mr. Draper meet a software executive in Beverly Hills as a possible source for more work. Before the meeting, Mr. Katas emailed the executive about the "legendary John Draper," listing his achievements.

Mr. Draper, who was included in the email, replied to the executive and Mr. Katas that he had no money for parking and doubted that his car would make the trip across town.

"John just doesn't understand that if he seems unsuccessful, then successful people won't understand how talented he really is," says Christine Marie. Ms. Marie does promotional work for Mr. Katas and helps Mr. Draper organize his business life, handling invitations to speak at conferences and an online TV show he produces that deals with Internet security. She also occasionally cleans up his apartment and washes his clothes.

Mr. Draper's friends from the EasyWriter days worry that time is running out. Work is getting harder to find now that tech companies are outsourcing programming work to inexpensive labor markets overseas.

Contemporaries who've gone on to riches and fame say they've tried to help Mr. Draper over the years. Mr.

Wozniak, who now invests in high-tech companies and is involved in computer education in schools, recently gave Mr. Draper a new Apple Powerbook computer. He has also helped out with Mr. Draper's legal bills.

Mr. Wozniak says Mr. Draper's problem is that his skills lie in technology rather in making business deals or starting a company. "He didn't come from a business orientation," says Mr. Wozniak.

Mr. Draper's unusual behavior, such as shouting at anyone smoking anywhere near him, could wear on fellow workers and employers. "He was not a self-starter, or associated with all the companies springing up back then," says Mr. Wozniak. "But, actually, John is one of the happiest guys I know, no matter what his situation seems."

ON A RECENT MORNING at a Bob's Big Boy restaurant in Burbank, Calif., where he goes when he has enough money, Mr. Draper ordered his usual breakfast: eggs and bacon first, to be followed five to seven minutes later by grilled pancakes loaded with butter and syrup.

The first course arrived. "The bacon's too greasy, I can't accept these," he shouted at the waiter. Mr. Draper sends back his bacon about 70% of the time. He says that since he has no opposing teeth, the bacon needs to be crisp enough to break off in his mouth. He lost most of his teeth from infrequent dental care, which he blames on his lack of health insurance.

After breakfast, Mr. Draper returned to his one-room apartment beside a four-lane expressway. The apartment was in squalor, with open cereal boxes, clothes in trash bags, computers and old newspapers strewn about. Mr. Draper left an angry voice message for a client who hadn't paid for some programming work. He fretted that without the money he would have difficulty covering his electricity bill that month.

"I'm blacklisted, man, a permanent menace to society, I guess," he said. "It's too bad because there are some things I think I could contribute."

Write to the Online Journal's editors at newseditors@wsj.com

Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A1

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