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Welcome to Macintosh at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival

Kenneth Burns on Monday 04/07/2008 1:30 pm , (11) Recommendations

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After the Wisconsin Film Festival screening of their documentary *Welcome to Macintosh*, filmmakers Rob Baca and Josh Rizzo noted that they received no help or support from Apple Inc. You could have fooled me. The film, shown Sunday afternoon at the Chazen Museum, at times is like an infomercial for the storied Silicon Valley corporation. The tone throughout is breathless, as in an intertitle that grandly announces how, for Apple in the early 1980s, "the time had come once again to change the world."

The breathlessness is partly deserved, of course. Since its founding more than 30 years ago, Apple has released a series of products that are indeed elegantly designed. And there is no denying the ecstatic devotion of those products' biggest fans. But a more penetrating documentary might look more critically at both the products and the fans' devotion.

That said, the story of Apple is a ripping yarn -- especially its founding, in the 1970s, by a couple of shaggy Californians, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. The corporate history is told, and told well, in the first half of the film, as various witnesses (Mac designer Andy Hertzfeld, Apple evangelist Guy Kawasaki) give their testimony.

The film's second half is more loosely structured, however, and not as gripping. It is a series of mini-essays about various aspects of the Mac. For example, in one, the Hollywood film editor Richard Halsey (*Rocky, Beaches*) describes how much easier his job is now, thanks to Macintosh computers. In another sequence, and easily the most stirring one, a collector of Apple computers, Wayne Bibbens, reveals the stunning vastness of his holdings. The Chazen audience gasped again and again as Bibbens revealed room after room full of computers and peripherals.

In the Q&A after the screening, the filmmakers noted that they could easily have made a documentary about Bibbens alone. I think they are on to something, because the man's obsessiveness speaks to a disquieting undercurrent of Mac culture -- and of consumer culture -- that otherwise goes largely unexamined in *Welcome to Macintosh*.

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