

INTRODUCTION

*“There is no greater agony than bearing
an untold story inside you.”*

—Maya Angelou

STAYING THIRSTY IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

IN HIS 2005 COMMENCEMENT address at Stanford, Steve Jobs encouraged the graduates to “Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.” The visionary pioneer, best known for co-founding Apple, explained that he’d seen the phrase printed on the back of the last issue of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and found it inspirational. He told the audience that “stay hungry” meant to keep your ambition alive—to always want more, not in the sense of greed, but in a curious, driven, never-satisfied kind of way. “Stay foolish” meant to take risks, think differently, constantly innovate, and be willing to fail. There’s no better advice for an entrepreneur.

Steve Job’s quote is very similar in meaning and structure to the tagline from the popular Dos Equis “Most Interesting Man in the World” TV commercials, which featured a bearded, silver-haired “man of mystery” who oozed adventurous, Hemingway-like sophistication. At the end of each spot, the now-iconic figure would look at the camera and say, “Stay thirsty, my friends.”

It was a call to be bold, confident, and to seek out unique, memorable experiences—with a salute to his favorite beer brand.

That same sentiment is why I named my memoir *Stay Thirsty*. It not only captures my “thirst” for entrepreneurial adventures, but it’s also a nod to my most significant venture—Rocket Man Inc., which operated in the beverage industry and is the focus of a large portion of this book. From infancy and adolescence to a period of substantial growth in the face of harsh headwinds, I cover the company’s 31-year lifecycle, in vivid, sometimes painful detail. Born from a single prototype in my garage, Rocket Man grew into a leading manufacturer of portable beverage dispensing equipment, with export sales in more than sixty-five countries and a customer list that included Coca-Cola, Nestlé, and Anheuser-Busch.

Later, Rocket Man pivoted and became a leader in the stadium and special event foodservice concessions industry. Rocket Man sold millions of drinks to parched fans in more than seventy-five venues from Delaware to California. The company worked at every major sporting event in North America, including the Kentucky Derby, Super Bowl, Indy 500, and World Series. Rocket Man was also involved with hundreds of concerts and music festivals, featuring some of the most popular artists in history, like the Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen, Jimmy Buffett, and Paul McCartney, to name just a few.

A REAL-WORLD CASE STUDY

Some of you have probably read biographies of superstar CEOs like Mark Zuckerberg or Jeff Bezos, who seemed to have the Midas touch and accumulated fortunes as they changed the world.

This isn't one of those books. While such stories can be motivational (they inspired me), they're usually not all that relatable or useful to ordinary business owners. They tend to gloss over the company's early stages—as well as the pain and hardship that came with being a pioneer, which is what the life of an entrepreneur is all about.

Most successful business owners didn't have some grand, revolutionary vision, but rather a mix of dogged determination and a willingness to adapt to whatever came their way. There's a real need for more memoirs from founders that capture the raw, unfiltered challenges faced by “typical” startups. I think such a book would be beneficial not only to aspiring entrepreneurs, but also to their spouses and families who are along for the ride. Hopefully, that's what I've written.

I'm not a famous business magnate, tech mogul, or celebrity billionaire. Think of me as the serial entrepreneur next door. I've experienced both success and dismal failure with multiple products, inventions, and companies. I discuss not only Rocket Man but dozens of other ventures I started, some of which ended well and others that didn't. They include a drive-thru coffee shop, marketing service, real estate brokerage firm, residential subdivision, technology company, line of cocktail mixes, board game, and a chain of self-storage facilities.

Stay Thirsty covers these and many other ventures along my 60-year entrepreneurial journey, which is basically every day of my life since I knew what a dollar was, at the age of 6. It's arranged chronologically and grouped into specific periods of my life. There are a lot of weird and funny anecdotes, which I think most of you will find amusing. If you're an aspiring or struggling entrepreneur, you should find some comfort in knowing that de-

spite all the crazy ideas I've pursued and silly mistakes I've made, I was somehow able to succeed all the same. You might even learn something.

SAGE ADVICE

Even though this is more of a “how-I-did-it” (or “didn’t do it,” in the case of failures) than a “how-to” book, I hope to share some pragmatic, hard-earned insights, too. While most of these lessons are woven into the stories themselves, there are a few insights I specifically call out. Scattered throughout this book, you’ll find thirty-seven axioms titled *Rocket Wisdom*. These are principles I’ve come to believe through experience and wish I’d known back when I first started Rocket Man and other businesses. I probably could have. Most of these insights aren’t exactly original and some have been covered extensively in other books. I either didn’t come across them—or if I did, they didn’t resonate with me at the time. If they had, it might’ve saved me from a lot of unnecessary mistakes, financial losses, and the headaches that came from learning them the hard way. But hey, maybe reading them in this book can do that for you and improve your likelihood of success. The first *Rocket Wisdom* might be the most important.

ROCKET WISDOM

Sometimes, It’s Better to Ignore “Good Advice.”

While all the advice I offer is well-intentioned, it may not be the advice you want to hear or need to follow. No two entrepreneurial journeys are the same. You must decide what works for you. In some cases, you may want to ignore what I say—or even do the exact opposite.

THE FLIPSIDE

**Telling You to “Ignore Good Advice”
Is Probably Bad Advice.**

If you learn everything firsthand, you waste a lot of time and energy. So contrary to the Rocket Wisdom above, if you receive insightful, logical advice from an experienced mentor, it's often best to take it or at least consider. This is an example of a “Flipside,” a second piece of wisdom I may offer that's pretty much the inverse of the first. What can I say? That's how life works. The truth is often paradoxical by nature—or at least situational. Change the circumstances, and what was true in one context might be reversed in another. The trick is to figure out which one works for you at a particular moment. Good luck with that.

If your time is limited, or you want to recap the lessons I've learned, you can always scan through the Rocket Wisdom sections. What you do with them is up to you. Believe them or not, take them to heart or ignore them, that's your call. You must write your own story. I'm simply sharing insights from mine. I hope you find them useful.

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

I tried to make the book as concise as possible, but as you can see, it's significantly longer than most memoirs. That's because, as I mentioned previously, I don't gloss over the rough patches. Instead, I present a play-by-play recap of what happened. By contrast, I recently read the autobiography of a founder that

skimmed over their company's adolescent years and covered the global pandemic in two paragraphs. I think that distorts reality and gives readers a false sense of what it takes to navigate headwinds and create a successful business. By contrast, I devote full chapters to product invention, COVID, marketing, expansion, legal issues, exit strategies, and other subjects.

Like with *Rocket Wisdom*, how you choose to engage with this book is up to you. If you aren't interested in so much depth and complexity on a particular topic, feel free to skip to the next section. Your time and attention are too precious to waste, especially if you're trying to start or run a company.

TALES FROM THE FRONT LINES

This book is also personal. I suppose we all come to a point in our lives when we want to tell our story—as much for ourselves as anyone else. It's a way to explore who we are, what makes us tick, and why. I felt it was important to write this book while I still had the mental capacity to recall important details and accurately recount the events that took place. I figured if it wasn't now, it might be never.

Although my wife, Debbie, and our sons, Curry and Tyler, have celebrated many wins with me over the years, I tried to shield them from the acute, existential stress of starting, running, closing, and selling businesses. Now that the battles are over and we've achieved financial freedom, it's time to share a few war stories with them.

For Debbie, I'm sure reading this memoir is how she'd prefer to experience some of the gut-wrenching challenges I faced.

I know this from the way she watches college basketball. As a passionate Kentucky Wildcats fan, Debbie gets extremely nervous during big games, like those in the NCAA tournament. It's much more enjoyable for her to watch the replay of a game—even one she's already seen—after she knows UK won and can enjoy March Madness without the stress of uncertainty. This book will give her a similar opportunity regarding our business setbacks. Knowing everything turned out OK will allow her to appreciate even the most harrowing of these tales, which would've been impossible if she had experienced them in real time.

ENTREPRENEURIAL NATURE VS. NURTURE

Although there is some stuff in this book about my family and other childhood influences, *Stay Thirsty* is not intended to be an autobiography. I try not to go too far into my personal life beyond the quest to understand how the circumstances of my youth contributed to my compulsion to relentlessly start businesses, despite personal risks and sacrifices. I've long wondered if it's part of my nature, a trait embedded in my DNA, or a matter of nurture. As you'll see, I've found ample evidence for both.

I will tell a few stories about my recent ancestors to examine whether my heritage is linked to my entrepreneurial tendencies. Some of these are wild, the kind of stuff you'd expect to read in a pulp fiction novel rather than a business memoir. If, like me, you're fascinated by what inherited traits drive someone to become an entrepreneur, I think these colorful characters will give you plenty to think about.

A WAY TO SAY THANK YOU

Finally, *Stay Thirsty* is also a way to honor the mentors, partners, advisers, teachers, employees, investors, service providers, and supporters who helped me through the years. I'm deeply grateful to the people who gave me advice, encouragement, and financial support. I look forward to hand-delivering a copy of this book to each of them—or their survivors—and expressing my gratitude in person.

NOTE ON ADDITIONAL READING: Throughout the book, I identify the availability of supplemental information labeled as “Additional Reading,” which can be viewed at www.staythirstythebook.com. This bonus material will allow readers who'd like to dig deeper into a specific topic—and explore it in more granular detail—to do so. It also includes convenient summaries of certain content. For example, all the thirty-seven Rocket Wisdom axioms in the book are available as a single downloadable PDF. The access code is 81725 (my dad's 100th birthday was August 17, 2025)
