

John Dobson

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*John Dobson lit a path to the stars for thousands
StarLight Festival to honor icon of outreach astronomy*

The late John Dobson was a trained chemist, a former monk, an avid stargazer, a revolutionary telescope designer, a philosopher and a dedicated public astronomy advocate. But for thousands, he was simply the man who would give them their first up-close look at the wonders of the sky. Widely recognized as one of the most influential figures in modern-day amateur astronomy, Dobson devoted decades to bringing the universe to the masses. He took his self-made telescopes to busy street corners and parks, gave countless lectures and offered free instruction in the art of easy telescope making all in an effort to get as many people as he could to an eyepiece.

“John used to say, ‘It doesn’t matter how big your telescope is or what kind it is. It matters how many people have looked through it,’” said Donna Smith, a personal friend and director of the Sidewalk Astronomers organization that Dobson co-founded. “He felt you needed to know about where you were born. His statement was always, ‘You’re not born in Chicago or Los Angeles. You’re born on this planet, in this solar system, in this universe. You need to know your neighborhood.’”

It was this urge to know his “neighborhood” that led Dobson to invent what he referred to as a sidewalk telescope – a simplistic design that people around the world would eventually call a “Dobsonian.” Because his end goal was to make telescopes more accessible, he never bogged down the design with a patent. In turn, it became a major catalyst for the public service astronomy movement.

“He realized the importance of it. But it was a tool for him,” Smith said of Dobson’s feelings on his astoundingly popular telescope design. Instead of accolades, he just wanted people to put his creation to use.



The fittingly humble roots of the “Dobsonian” design can be traced back to Dobson’s time as a monk of the Vedanta Monastery’s Ramakrishna Order, according to his biography on the Sidewalk Astronomers website. Although his desire to build bigger telescopes continuously grew, his resources did not. He was already grinding surplus porthole covers for mirrors, but he needed a housing and mounting structure that he could make from easy-to-find components.



The alt-azimuth mount he designed was simple to use, highly portable, inexpensive and, most importantly, ideal for taking out to the streets to engage passers-by, which he did frequently in the areas around the monastery. In addition to his impromptu observing sessions, he soon began helping others make telescopes like his, which required an increasing commitment. Eventually, Dobson was asked to leave the monastery because the monastic authorities believed his astronomy activities were taking too much time away from his duties to the order.

As this door closed in 1967, another was about to open as Dobson decided to take his outreach efforts full time and began setting up telescopes on a busy street corner in San Francisco. In 1968, Dobson and two others he had trained officially started the San Francisco Sidewalk Astronomers with two primary goals in mind: Give people the opportunity to look through a large telescope and educate them about what they are seeing. Through their efforts, more and more telescopes popped up in public areas drawing countless viewers. As the organization blossomed and launched new chapters, the San Francisco was dropped because Dobson’s design and vision had spread exponentially.



“I get letters from people who met John. One lady said, ‘He won’t remember me, I met him on a street corner.’ But she worked at an observatory, all because she happened upon John and looked through his telescope,” Smith said. “I think it is so important because anything that can interest someone in science in any way is a good thing, anything that opens your mind. There’s no downside to it.” Because his influence was so vast, it is impossible to contain his legacy.

“I guess it depends on who you are. If you were a personal friend, his legacy would definitely be his curiosity about everything,” Smith said. “If you are an amateur astronomer, you have the ability to have a larger and better telescope for a more reasonable price because John got involved. For a lot of the public that got the opportunity to view through a telescope because there’s some guy out there sharing it, and got to view through a big one, that’s probably more important.”

At this year’s inaugural StarLight Festival, organizers plan to posthumously honor Dobson, who passed away in January at the age of 98, for his immeasurable contributions and tireless commitment to outreach astronomy. Smith and other members of the Sidewalk Astronomers also will be on hand to show Dobson’s vision in action.

“If you’re doing a lot of public astronomy, the public part is as enjoyable to you, as important to you, as the astronomy part. Otherwise, you’d be out taking photographs all the time in your backyard or something,” Smith said. “There’s a whole universe out there. Give as many people a chance to see it as they can.”

The group plans to do just that by setting up a variety of telescopes for day and night viewing. They also will show attendees the process of building a “Dobsonian” telescope, which they will donate at the end of the two-day event, and have mirror samples on hand for those who want to practice grinding. “As long as people were out on the streets, he was good,” Smith said while reflecting on why the StarLight Festival would appeal to Dobson. “He would go out every clear night.”

