

## THE PATRIARCH OF AMATEUR ASTRONOMY

### A short biography of John Dobson Compiled by Peggy Walker

John Lowry Dobson has been called the "Pied Piper of Astronomy," the "Star Monk," and the "Mac Guyver of Astronomy." He is arguably one of the most influential personalities in amateur astronomy in the last 50 years. He has almost single-handedly revolutionized backyard astronomy by bringing it out to the street, making it accessible for anyone who has ever looked up in wonder, and asked "Why?" He challenged telescope manufacturers as more and more amateur astronomers were making and enjoying their own larger homemade aperture telescopes. John developed the process of mirror grinding to the point it was an art form that everyone could do. He challenged amateur astronomers to rethink their hobby by actually including the public in the observing experience by going to public places with their telescopes.



**John Lowry Dobson**  
**Sep 14, 1915 - Jan 15, 2014**

*"Someone once asked me, 'Are you an astronomer, or are you a comic?', and I answered, 'This is a funny Universe and I'm not responsible.'"*

### **BREAKING BORDERS —SWA IN MEXICO, INDIA AND CANADA**

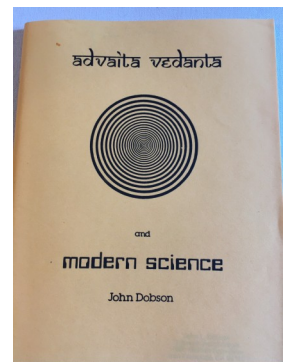
After a conference of the Riverside Telescope Makers John and the group headed to Mexico for a conference by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific in hopes to present a paper there. John said, *"We decided to take the 24 incher and go. We Went!"* The Sidewalk Astronomers bright orange van was easily recognizable to those in the astronomical community with the name San Francisco Sidewalk Astronomers on the side. So on the way to Mexico.....

*"On the toll road to Ensenada a small car passed us and they were waving enthusiastically.... When we pulled up to the last toll plaza, the driver pulled along side us and allowed us along side. We tried to tell them where we were going and the driver said, 'We already know where you are going. Would you like to follow us?' That saved our bacon because we had no idea where the meeting was!"*

That night when the skies finally cleared about 400 people got to climb the ladder and look through the 24 inch telescope. The group was invited to go to the Observatorio Astronomico National where it had a 60 inch mirror. Once there, John was asked to refigure the mirror and once they saw that it was aluminized, they realized there was no one in their party capable of doing it properly.

In 1983 John and the Sidewalk Astronomers were invited to go to India for a talk. John packed up colored posters and pictures, many slides and two 13 inch telescopes which created a bit of a challenge for the custom officials. Once the telescopes were finally released to John, they made their way to the University of Nagpur in central India. After his arrival, an article with John's passport photo was published in the newspaper which then opened the door for John and the crew to extend their visit by adding a few cities to their schedule. *"We were greeted with such an enthusiastic welcome it brought tears to my eyes."* The group received floral garlands, bouquets of flowers and coconuts with a fife and drum entrance.

John recalled that they had about 300 children in attendance and they all sat on reed mats or on the dirt floor. John went to the Astronomical Society of India at Osmania University in Hyderabad. They listened to talks at the Nagpur University since they were in English. They spent 6 weeks in Bengal across the river from Calcutta. But John's next stop was most memorable it was the Belur Math Monastery near Calcutta which is the headquarters for Ramakrishna Order of Vedanta. When John arrived at the monastery there were hundreds of monks in orange with the novice monks in white all of which were excited because of John's book. He spent some time with the monks. Before flying back home, John left both 13 inch telescopes in India, one in Nagpur and the other at Hyderabad.



In 1984, John and the group headed back into Canada and, *"This time we had no trouble crossing the border. The Canadian inspector had heard that we were going to set up first at Writing-on-Stone and promised to come. As soon as we arrived it started to rain."*

The group set up scopes at Cypress Hills and used mercury vapor lights in the evening. They also visited 9 provincial parks and the one in Alberta, Dinosaur Provincial Park had the best seeing conditions. Plus they got to see the museum specimens that were currently being excavated. Then they went to Kananaskis Park, Bow Valley, Crimson Lake and the Browning Reservation. At the Blackfoot Reservation they set up the scopes at the Government Square and conducted 6 slide shows for 60 children at a time.

### **THE SCHEDULE OF A ROCK STAR**

Bill Scott of the Hollywood Vedanta Center recalls how John got involved in the center. "John wanted a copy of a book of hymns and prayers called, *Altar Flowers*, so he went to the Vedanta Society in Berkley where Swami Swahanananda was the head. He had just received a box of books from the estate of a deceased member which included a copy of *Altar Flowers*. Swami Swahanananda only asked for a small amount of money for the books, but John only had a \$50.00 bill. The Swami couldn't find any change, so he said, "I'm going to twist your arm. I'm going to keep the change and make you a member of the Vedanta Society of Berkeley." John replied, "Oh Swami, my arm has never been twisted so sweetly." Swami Swahanananda had already received notice that he would be reassigned to the head of the Vedanta Society in Southern California. He invited John to stop by Hollywood on his way to the Grand Canyon. He gave his first talk at the temple in May of 1978. He returned again in December on his way to Death Valley and gave another talk. Those interested in hearing John's whole "Astronomy for Children Under 80, lectures were invited to attend a series of talks held in the evenings over the next couple of weeks. Swami attended that series, our

meeting room was packed. One man drove 140 miles from Barstow every evening to hear John talk. Swami Atmavidyananda recalls, 'I had just joined the monastery after teaching high school chemistry and math for six years. I had the background in science and Vedanta by putting them together. I was absolutely captivated. We hosted John every year thereafter for his series of classes until his stroke made it too difficult for him to continue.



Around 1983, John complained that he had nothing to do between his lectures and insisted that we start telescope making classes as well. That we did for at least 10 years running. With the help of other sidewalk astronomers, we got John to numerous star parties and talks at libraries, bookstores, school, camps, parks and astronomy clubs. We did telescope making classes for after-school programs, science classes, community clubs and centers and camps."In 1990, John travelled to Sao Paulo, Brazil to watch the solar eclipse and this started a season of international travel. John accepted invitations to go to the United Kingdom in 2002 where 13 clubs collaborated to help get John there for about a two week span. John had written up a summary of his time there and that can be found on the [sidewalkastronomers.us](http://sidewalkastronomers.us) website. No sooner did John return home that he got invited to Russia and Ukraine.



So in September, John traveled there for 3 and ½ weeks visiting amateur astronomers in the cities of Moscow, Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk, Tomsk and Kharkov in the Ukraine. In 2006, John would return to this same region and included additional cities of Novosibirsk in Russia and Sevastopol in the Ukraine. Russian travel was not covered but other than that, they were treated to nice hotels and wonderful sponsors. On his way home from Russia,

he stopped off in Frankfurt and Stuttgart, Germany and made further connections with amateur astronomers there.

Now into the new year of 2003, John was invited to a conference in Italy where he stayed for 9 days and visited the cities of Spoleto, Guggio, Spezia and Asisi. Shortly after his return home, he was invited to a yearly conference held in Chile. This particular conference

had other notable astronomers like the comet hunters Carolyn Shoemaker and David Levy. John and other attendees together visited the cities of Coyhaique and La Serena. John returned to his circuit talks for the next few years until 2006 when clubs in Australia and New Zealand invited John down under. For nine days John gave talks and workshops at the local clubs at Auckland and Wellington, New Zealand and clubs in Sydney, Melbourne as well as several other cities in Australia.

During this whole travel circuit, John continued his sidewalk events at the national parks, at Griffith Park, streets of Pasadena and Burbank as well as the street corners in San Francisco. John would spend part of the year in San Francisco and the other part in Hollywood until he developed a yearly travelling schedule. John would host classes, talks and workshops at The Randall Museum in San Francisco and would stay with friends until September to November. Mid November John would come down to the Los Angeles area to spend the holidays there and while at the Vedanta Center, hold more classes. The day after Christmas John was off to Death Valley for the yearly star party which was less than a week and would be back to Hollywood on New Year's Day.

Once back, John would go back to Vedanta Hollywood Center and continue his classes and sidewalk astronomy up at Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles. Any time there was nice weather John could be found out doing sidewalk events and about 2006, John started to join Jane Houston Jones on Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena, California. In the spring and summer months John would take up offers from clubs in Texas in the Dallas, Fort Worth area where he would conduct amateur telescope making classes. Local clubs would host John at hotels or in their homes from several days to a few weeks.

John would come back and regroup at Hollywood before he would take off in July to

Oregon. There he talked at the University of Oregon, star parties and joined the clubs sidewalk astronomy events. This was one of his favorite yearly places to go where he developed great and lasting friendships. Once in Oregon, John would travel into Washington, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming as word spread he was in the area. These are all in addition to his more local visits to amateur astronomers in California and Arizona.

Then in late summer John would go to the East Coast starting with Stellaphane's yearly convention in July. This event is hosted by the Springfield Telescope Makers a guild type group in Vermont. Once to the east coast, John would make his way around to the neighboring states like Connecticut, Maryland, Tennessee and Georgia, being hosted by the local clubs. John visited the Custer Institute on Long Island in New York on occasion which is the oldest public observatory in the U.S. – ironically built the year the Dobsons moved to San Francisco from China in 1927.

John joined the Cherry Springs Star Party in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania held usually near the beginning of June. When John was done with his eastern tour, he would return to San Francisco and his travel circuit would start all over again. Each trip John would find new invitations and opportunities to visit other astronomy clubs and societies. John would often take a mini regional tour in the Great Lakes area, to Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, then to Ohio in the Cincinnati area. Events took John to Florida, Kentucky, Texas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas and a few others. John may have worked his way through almost all the states but he did say that he never made it to Oklahoma.

John now into his 90's would continue to take advantage of the opportunities to share the night sky with the Sidewalk Astronomers and at an elementary school in Canyon Country, John said, *"You go to where the people are."* As the event continued with all the school children, John kept reiterating..... *"Give the scopes to the kids, they'll know what to do."* Both statements continue to be mantras of the Sidewalk Astronomers Organization.

John kept up his traveling circuit until about 2008 when health issues started to spring up that considerably limited his ability to travel as he had in the past. With his change in health, John did not allow that to keep him from getting out when he could. It was about this time

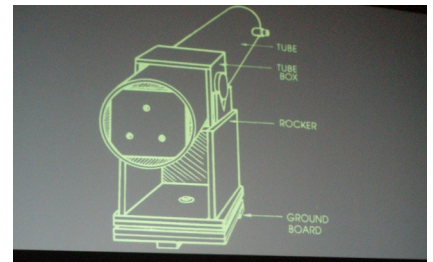
frame that John took the advisement to permanently resided at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood and limited his travel. Although he did not become a monk again, he was accepted into the community surrounded by the caring brothers and members of the society. With their continued support, he still did sidewalk observing and gave talks to the Vedanta and amateur astronomers on a limited basis.

### JOHN TURNS 95 YEARS OLD

In 2010, John celebrated his 95th birthday with the Sidewalk Astronomers and the Los Angeles Astronomical Society, who put together a bash and star party in his honor at the Griffith Observatory grounds. John gave a talk at the Leonard Nimoy theatre, which was moderated by Griffith's staff. He talked about how the telescope manufacturers rejected his new mount for a Newtonian telescope. Even referred to a letter from Sky and Telescope Magazine. John talked about his design and that the real Dsonian telescope was John's sun scope design made from a piece of a two way mirror, welder's glass and a ground glass at the

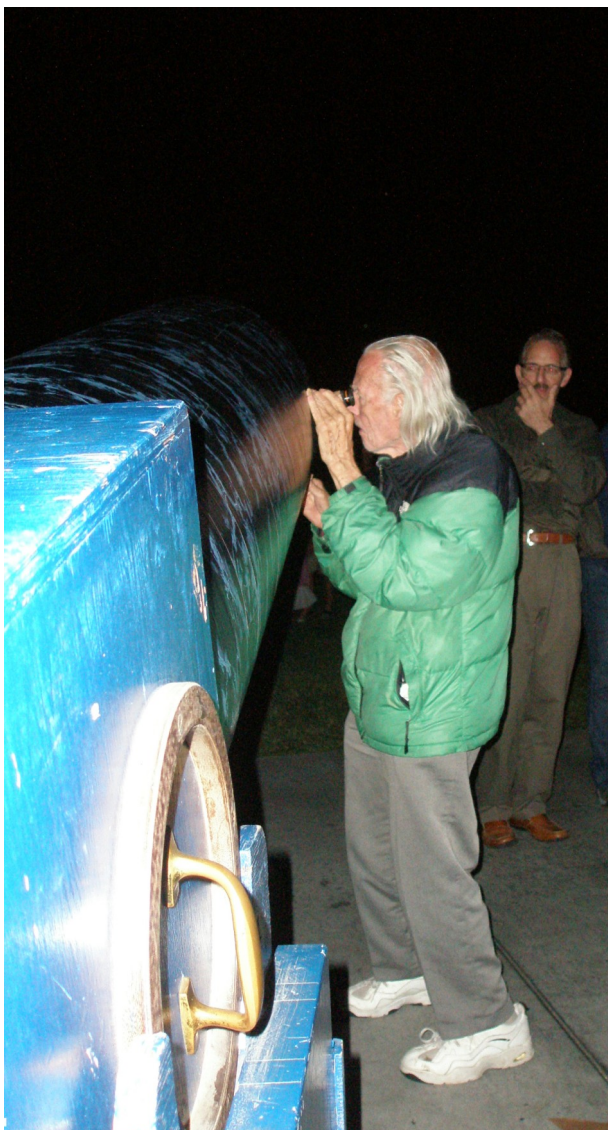
bottom. He talked about how a non-aluminized mirror was perfect because the sun is so bright it does not need a mirror surface and that a ground glass at the bottom allowed for 85% of the light to pass out the end of the tube.

John enjoyed visiting with his long time friend and grinding companion Bob Alborzianian of the Sidewalk Astronomers. There were solar scopes set up on the lawn and John shared how they worked and how he came to engineer this scope for solar



The party went into the night and more amateurs set up scopes on the lawn for the guests. The Sidewalk Astronomers had John's big blue scope he made so many years ago in San Francisco. John did enjoy looking through his scope several times that evening as different objects came up. As the night progressed John welcomed the public to do the same. And would talk about him making the scope to those waiting to take a peek.

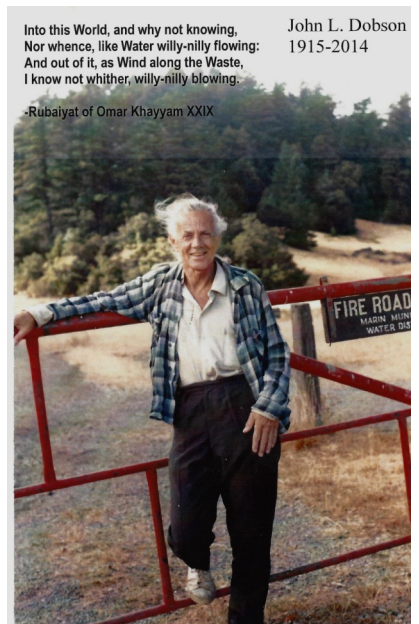
It was a memorable night.





## YOU GET TO DECIDE THE LEGACY YOU LEAVE

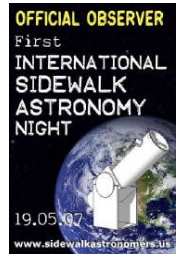
On January 15, 2014, John passed away at Saint Joseph's Hospital in Burbank, California at the age of 98 from a brief illness. At the time of his passing John was surrounded by his brothers from the Vedanta Center who prayed over him. Also in attendance were several of his friends from various astronomy communities.



Into this World, and why not knowing,  
Nor whence, like Water willy-nilly flowing:  
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,  
I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing.

John L. Dobson  
1915-2014

-Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam XXIX

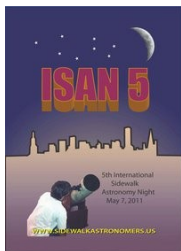
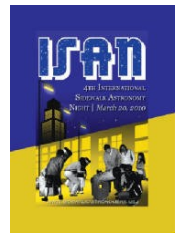


In 2005, the San Francisco Sidewalk Astronomers declared September 14th as John Dobson Day. John's legacy continued in 2007, when a Sidewalk Astronomer

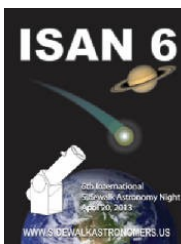
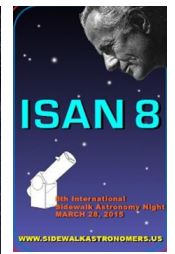
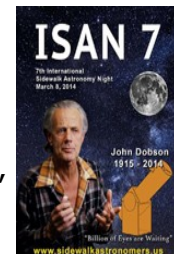
from Chile mentioned to Donna Smith that we should hold an event celebrating John world-wide. So they chose to celebrate John and his vision with a night called International Sidewalk Astronomy Night or ISAN. Usually held in Spring or Fall, all the amateur astronomers who love outreach would be encouraged to take their scopes out to be "where the people are." In particular, amateur astronomers who made their own telescopes were encouraged to show them off in their communities.



The reception was overwhelming and many communities around the world celebrated it in their unique and cultural styles. Some had garlanded elephants in a procession, others had camels carrying scopes out to their star party locations, while many in the cities had large banners and displays and party – like celebrations. The enormity could truly not be quantified as to actual numbers of countries and cities that participated world wide.



When all is said and done, amateur astronomers from all four corners of the globe; Africa, Asia, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, (Beijing, Caschen, Hanjun, Huyunti, Liuruizhe, Suhli, Xekai, Xueming), Colombia, Costa Rica, Cot d'Ivoire, Ecuador,



Egypt, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Romania, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, United States, Uruguay, Venezuela, Singapore, Ukraine and United Kingdom celebrate John and his life of public service to astronomy and the art of amateur telescope making.

***"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."***

Ralph Waldo Emerson

John as the Mac Guyver of Astronomy was a great study in: determination - he blasted through roadblocks, was resourceful - had a plan B and C, he thought unconventionally - he repurpose materials, innovator - of an easy to make and use solar telescope and he solved the problem of a non-functional telescope mount.



John as the Pied Piper of Astronomy was a great study because: he inspired the masses, equipped others for ATM success, led with a pay it forward mentality, generously shared experiences, resources and information, created star parties, related to the common man, made telescope making easy to understand - "for dummies" , included everybody and challenged amateur astronomers conduct outreach and spearheaded a movement.

John as a Star Monk showed us how: to love of the cosmos as a spiritual experience, to understand our place in the Universe, to live simply without the pressures and stress of society at large, to respect the night sky as the resource that it is, to be a good steward the Earth and

night sky, to trust the cosmos to take care of us, to respect people of all kinds, to never take life for granted, or too seriously that you forget the important things.



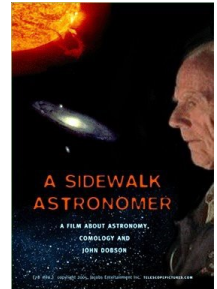
Ultimately John demonstrated by his life that - **life is always looking up.**

**For information on John Dobson, telescope making, interviews, articles on John or written by John, and Sidewalk Astronomers calendar of events - please go to the Sidewalk Astronomers website at: [sidewalkastronomers.us](http://sidewalkastronomers.us).**

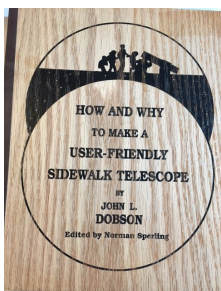
## JOHN DOBSON IN THE MEDIA

In addition to many articles in print from various papers and magazines through the years, John was featured in two documentaries. In the first, "Universe - The Cosmology Quest", John appears along with Sir Fred Hoyle, Dr. Halton C. Arp, Dr. Margaret Burbidge, Dr. Geoffrey Burbidge, Dr. Jayant Narlikar and a host of other astronomers, cosmologist, and philosophers questioning the Big Bang Cosmology.

The second film, released in the summer of 2005, "A Sidewalk Astronomer" is an unscripted profile on John in tribute to his contribution to amateur astronomy. It provides a unique insight into the unique individual known as John Dobson. In addition, John was the only amateur astronomer highlighted in the PBS series, *The Astronomers*, and appeared twice on *The Tonight Show* *Starring Johnny Carson*. The Tonight Show appearances can be found at [sidewalkastronomers.us](http://sidewalkastronomers.us) website.

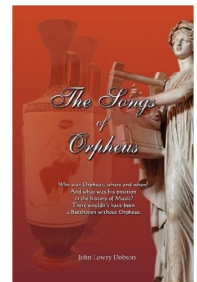


John wrote two booklets, *Advaita Vedanta and Modern Science* which he self published in 1979 and reprinted in 1983. It was slightly revamped and retitled, "Beyond Space & Time - Is there an uncaused cause behind the Deep Field?" in 2004. John took this information a bit further and gave it a more fiction-like theme and published it in 2008 as, "The Moon is New," a novel. John also penned, "Astronomy for Children Under 80," which explains his thoughts and philosophical take on astronomy.



In addition, John collaborated with Norman Sperling and together wrote a book with a wooden cover called, "How and Why to Make a User-Friendly Sidewalk Telescope" in 1991. Inside there is a brief biography with photos from the national park events and his travels and last half of the book is the step by step instructions on how to make a home made telescope.

In 2008 John published "The Songs of Orpheus," which talks about the ancient histories of Greece, Egypt, India, Rome, and Asia Minor and their interconnections.



John was even referenced in a book by, Timothy Ferris, called, *Seeing in the Dark*, where Timothy states, "The amateur astronomy revolution was incited by three technological innovations - the Dobsonian telescope, CCD light-sensing devices, and the Internet.