

Tom Conrad

Motivated by the Music



Tom Conrad
Chief Technology Officer
Pandora
BSE CE '92

He was the guy with the giant collection of music CDs who always wanted to play his latest find for you. Tom Conrad arrived at Michigan in 1988 with two passions: music and computers. He had no idea then that those two, separate sides of his life would ultimately dovetail into the ultimate career.

As a high school student, Tom set his sights on Michigan, with the goal of moving to California and working for Apple after graduation. “I was 15 years old when the Macintosh came out, and was absolutely fascinated with the dawn of the GUI and the new era of user-friendly computing. It was clear to me that the people at Apple were out to change the world, and that I had to join them. I decided to become a computer engineer, and after visiting Michigan and being on campus, I knew that not only did Michigan have a great CE program, it just felt like the right place for me to pursue my dream.”

While a U-M student from 1988 – 1992, Tom worked in the CAEN visualization lab, which was chock-full of refrigerator-sized graphics computers that were dedicated to creating 3-D images and other visualizations. Most of the money he earned at CAEN went straight to amassing his collection of about 1000 CDs.

At CAEN, Tom joined a cadre of a dozen or so students who worked in the lab or were responsible for maintaining the numerous Apollo and Macintosh systems spread throughout CAEN. Many in this group shared his dream and made the pilgrimage to intern at Apple, and in 1991 Tom traveled to Cupertino for his own internship, sleeping on an inflatable mattress at the foot of U-M alum and recent Apple employee Steve Faulkenberg’s bed. “That internship was a great experience for me, and it paved the way to a permanent job at Apple.”

After graduation, Tom joined Apple and spent three years working on the Finder team, which designed the primary user interface for the Mac.

Although Tom loved Apple, in 1995 Netscape had launched and Yahoo! had gone public, and the Internet had become an irresistible technical and commercial opportunity. Tom left Apple to join Berkeley Systems and also became the technical director for the “You Don’t Know Jack” video game series. He found that the smaller Berkeley Systems environment, where he managed a team of programmers, was the place where he truly developed his chops as a commercial software developer.

In the years that followed, Tom rode the peaks and valleys of the tech boom, always following his passions. This included getting in on the ground floor at Relevance Technologies in 1998, which built back-end search and personalization for documents on the Internet. After a year, the company sold for \$40M. Inspired by his adoption of a dog, Tom joined Pets.com and led engineering from the company’s founding through its high-flying success until it crashed and burned when the Internet bubble burst.

In 2004, Tom decided to find a way to combine a love of music with the personalization technologies he’d mastered at Relevance and the consumer web development skills he’d developed at Pets.com. By chance, he learned through a connection that just such a venture had recently been formed. He joined that firm – now known as Pandora – as CTO, and hasn’t looked back.

Today, Tom oversees hundreds of people at Pandora with responsibility for product management and design, software engineering, technical operations, Pandora’s Music Genome Project®, customer service, and internal IT.

Reflecting on his experience, Tom says that “the opportunity to go to a school where Apple and similar companies recruit every year, where your peers are motivated to make a difference, and where you can dream big and take advantage of great connections – that has to be the most valuable thing I gained from Michigan. I’m certain that if I had gone to another school I would have gotten a fine engineering education, but my whole life would have been different because I wouldn’t have had the advantages I had at Michigan.” ●

“Most of the money he earned as a student working at CAEN went toward his collection of over 1000 CDs.”