TRANSCRIPT Episode 11 – Scott Stornetta

Jonathan Bench: Today I'm joined by Dr. W. Scott Stornetta, who is considered by many to be the co-inventor of the blockchain. He is an investor, mentor, and CEO of SureMark Digital, which creates an unforgeable peer-to-peer identity to protect against deepfakes. A fellow at the Rotman School of Management, he holds a PhD in physics from Stanford University. He and his wife have three children and six grandchildren. Scott, thank you so much for spending time with me today.

Scott Stornetta: It's a pleasure.

Jonathan: I like to start with origin stories. Can you share a few highlights about your background—where you came from, what led you to the blockchain, and where you are now with SureMark?

Scott: Happy to. There's a theory that the rich get richer—not just economically, but in terms of opportunity. I sometimes think my so-called success traces back to eighth grade when I didn't want to go to class one day. I decided to hide in the guidance counselor's office. When the secretary asked if I was there to meet someone, I said yes—and on the spot, I told her I needed to talk about skipping a year in math.
That one decision led to actually skipping a year, which led to early research opportunities, which helped me get into the school I wanted, and so on. So maybe cutting class once was my real origin story!

More seriously, I earned my PhD in physics at Stanford, working on computer science–related topics. That led me back to the East Coast to join a branch of the old Bell Labs research system. It was in that fertile research environment that I began thinking about what we now call the blockchain.

Jonathan: You and Stuart Haber are credited as co-inventors. How did you end up working together?

Scott: At Bellcore, you weren't assigned projects—you were told that if management knew what to assign you, they wouldn't have needed to hire you. You chose your own work. I'd met Stuart during the interview process, and when I arrived, I sought him out and posed a problem: how to create immutable electronic records. He immediately agreed it was an intriguing challenge, and we began collaborating.

Jonathan: For those not deep into blockchain, can you explain the idea of an immutable record and why it matters?

Scott: Sure. What we wanted was a universal ledger—a record so widely witnessed that no one, now or in the future, could doubt that it was truly recorded when claimed and not

altered afterward. In a world where digital items can be infinitely copied, we wanted to create the "one true record."

Jonathan: Once you solved that, what were some early applications?

Scott: One of our first clients was a leading speaker manufacturer—let's just say its name rhymes with "Rose." They wanted to ensure that when they developed a new idea, it could be documented immediately and irrefutably as "first reduced to practice." They needed automatic systems that could stand up to any challenge about when an idea originated.

Jonathan: Then there's a long gap until 2008, when the Satoshi White Paper appeared, citing your work multiple times. Were you surprised?

Scott: Not really. This may sound like hubris, but Stuart and I were convinced we'd developed a fundamentally sound solution to the data integrity problem. We had done all we could to popularize it, then moved on. When Bitcoin arrived, we weren't surprised—it seemed inevitable that any lasting solution would build on our system.

Jonathan: Let's fast-forward to today and SureMark. You've been a mentor to me, and I've followed your work since hearing you speak at a conference in Utah. SureMark seems to tackle a similar kind of "first principles" problem—identity in the age of deepfakes.

Scott: Exactly. Previously, we were focused on creating unchallengeable records without needing a trusted third party. That approach—what people now call decentralization—proved successful.

Today, with AI deepfakes, we face a similar challenge: how can you truly know the identity of the person you're interacting with or who created a piece of content? By spreading the responsibility for verification across the community rather than relying on a central authority, we can build a more reliable foundation for digital identity.

Jonathan: Can you describe the blockchain underpinnings of SureMark?

Scott: Sure. Again, this is work with my longtime collaborator, Dr. Haber. The breakthrough that made blockchain trustworthy was the creation of a network of witnesses so broad and interconnected that everyone could rely on a single source of truth.
Now we apply that principle to identity. Instead of verifying whether a signal is "real" or "synthetic," we verify the creator. The system makes it nearly impossible to forge an identity or fake a conversation.

Jonathan: As a lawyer, I can see the value immediately. My work depends on trust—verifying wire instructions, client identities, and authorizations.

Scott: Exactly. You don't analyze the signal—you confirm the sender. Our approach ensures you're "pretty darn sure" that the person you're interacting with is who they claim to be, employed where they say they are, and authorized to act.

Jonathan: Can you describe the tech stack—what users actually interact with?

Scott: The key is that both ends of the communication have trusted software that performs independent verification. Whether it's on your desktop or phone, it lets you test someone's claim of identity against a universal ledger where many others have vouched for that identity.

If you and I are on a call, I can challenge you to perform a calculation that only you—Jonathan Bench—could complete. If the result checks out, I know it's you. The same applies to content: anything you create carries a sort of digital passport verifying it truly came from you.

Jonathan: That connects directly to your other use case—media authenticity.

Scott: Right. Imagine reading a story about you in the *Wall Street Journal* and realizing it contains an error. Instead of haggling over a buried correction, you could immediately post a verified "setting the record straight" note that appears beside the original article for anyone using our verification software.
This has major implications for public figures and global organizations where false or manipulated information can have serious consequences.

Jonathan: So you're not trying to outsmart deepfakes—you're bypassing them.

Scott: Exactly. Instead of trying to detect whether something is fake, we make authenticity provable. If a piece of content carries a verified credential, it's real. If not, you can't trust it.

Jonathan: Let's pivot for our final minutes. You've mentored many people. How do you think about teaching and guiding the next generation?

Scott: I see mentoring as providing a lens of experience—not telling someone what to do, but helping them frame their choices differently. It's a Socratic process. The best moments are when something clicks and a person says, "I'd never thought of it that way before." You've given them a new tool, not an answer. That moment never gets old.

Jonathan: Last question—what advice do you have for young entrepreneurs, especially those raising capital for the first time?

Scott: Investors want evidence that you're creating something people will pay for. It sounds simple, but that's the heart of it. Demonstrate real value—why people are paying or will

pay—and show that those early adopters represent a much larger market. Everything else—execution, competition, team—flows from that.

Jonathan: Thank you, Scott. It's always a pleasure to talk with you and gain new perspectives. I hope we can connect again soon for an update on SureMark.

Scott: It's always a pleasure.