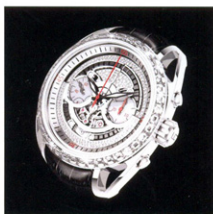


# State of Independents



The last decade has seen a veritable explosion in independent watchmaking, with many watchmakers launching their own brands and a few having undertaken the considerably expensive and demanding task of developing their own movements: George Daniels and Roger Smith (Anniversary), Peter Speake-Marin (Thassala), the McGonigles (Tuscar) and the Grönefelds (One Hertz) to name just a few. And we ain't seen nothing yet. **Ian Skellern** ■



The term "independent watchmaker" can mean somebody who just changes batteries; a watchmaker with his own brand featuring a self-designed case/dial and an off-the-shelf ETA movement (or similar) inside; an extremely skilled watchmaker developing prototypes, or assembling kits of complicated movements for high-end brands; or a highly skilled watchmaker who has developed the vast majority – inside and out – of his own watch to an extremely high standard. It is this last type, the rarest of them all, that I am referring to here as independent watchmakers.

What makes their watches so special is that developed in small quantities, they can be self-indulgently uncompromising regarding horological excellence, whereas watches – even *haute horlogerie* watches – manufactured in large numbers have to be developed with

production efficiency at the fore, because any small cost multiplied by thousands become a large number.

Independent watchmakers are no new phenomenon. For centuries the vast majority of the most talented and inventive watchmakers developed and created movements and complications that were destined to be hidden under dials signed with the name of a retailer or brand. Then, as now, creating watches and selling watches were two very different industries requiring very different sets of skills. Independent watchmakers have always needed to be extremely innovative in order to survive, but today they need to be much more than that: to great watchmaker we must add businessman extraordinaire, top accountant, marketing expert, IT specialist and project manager.

**Opposite page and top row.** Winner of the first GTE Super Watch Award, Frédéric Jovenot's Helios features a unique time display without the use of hands, numbers or discs. **Middle row,** in pink or white gold, Jovenot's Automatic Chronograph Evolution, has the rotor placed dial-side, allowing the sapphire caseback to reveal the chronograph in full glory. **Bottom row,** Jovenot's ACE Diamond featuring classic chronograph movement with column wheels, exclusive automatic rewinding system and patented face.

## State of Independents



Urwerk was born from a meeting in 1995 between two brothers, Felix and Thomas Baumgartner – both gifted watchmakers – and talented artist and designer, Martin Frei. Urwerk's newest timepiece, the UR-110 features a secure titanium case and three hour satellites that take turns to indicate the time as they pass the 60-minute track. (See page 64 for more details.)



### Beyond watchmaker

In the words of Stephen McGonigle: "Today's 3D software made the R&D for our new Tuscar faster and easier than ever before. Indeed without it our watch as it is would be practically inconceivable. As an independent watchmaker, creating a great watch, regardless of its complexity or beauty, is simply not enough. Business savvy, a good understanding of the various media and being able to develop relationships with potential clients are all essential to success. Like it or not, to be a successful independent watchmaker you have to be much, much more than just a watchmaker."

Of course, few watchmakers have all of those skills and fewer still have the time to practise them all effectively. So what often happens is that once a budding independent decides to sell more than a handful of watches per year he (and unfortunately, at present, there are no successful female independent watchmakers) all too frequently looks for a business partner to provide funding and handle the management side, leaving our hero to concentrate on making watches. It sounds like a match made in heaven but, before taking that leap, it might be worthwhile asking Daniel Roth, Gerald Genta, Jorg Hysek or Martin Braun – all of whom lost control of their brands – if they would follow that route again.



Englishman, Peter Speake-Marin began his horological journey at London's Hackney Technical College in 1985 and then continued his education at WOSTEP. Following time working as a restorer at London's Somlo Antiques and at Renaud & Papi, he collaborated with the likes of Harry Winston, MB&F and Maitres du Temps. His latest piece is the manual-winding Marin 2 'Thalassa'.



From 1967 – when Dr George Daniels decided to teach himself the then forgotten art of creating a timepiece from technical drawings on paper and milling components from bars of metal, thereby inspiring and teaching (with his books) others to do likewise – to 1985, there were probably less than 10 successful independent watchmakers signing their own high quality wristwatches in the whole world (more were making pocket watches and clocks). And they were virtually unknown outside of an extremely tight-knit group of collectors (who, in that pre-internet era, presumably communicated using Morse code and carrier pigeon).

These days it is hard to read a magazine or internet forum without seeing either a talented new independent launching his own brand, or a new watch by an existing independent. What has changed drastically over the past decade is the sheer number of independent watchmakers who have gone from working behind the scenes for major brands, to creating and marketing their own watches.

In 1985, after appealing worldwide for interested horologists, two independent watchmakers, Vincent Calabrese and Svend Andersen, launched the AHCI – the Académie Horlogère des Créateurs Indépendants – with a grand total of eight members (including



New kid on the independents' block Karsten Fraessdorf (above right) is a talented watchmaker who has so far worked mainly behind the scenes for other manufacturers. But he has now moved from his native France to Neuchâtel, where he is the head watchmaker for Heritage Watch Manufacture – a new firm in private hands that caused a big stir at this year's Geneva Time Exhibition – where he works alongside designer Eric Giroud (above far right).

themselves), many of them clockmakers. Today, 26 years later, the academy boasts around 35 members, with many more independents operating outside the AHCI. With no money for glossy adverts, pre-AHCI independents had virtually no media exposure at all and were invisible and unknown to the vast majority of collectors, let alone the public at large. The AHCI provided a cost-effective platform for independent watch and clockmakers to exhibit at Baselworld (the only game in town) and, for the next 15 years, that was just about the only marketing option available to them.

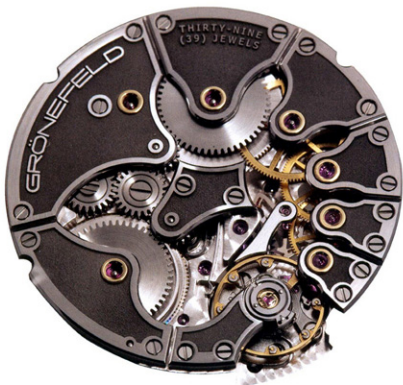
#### Computer generation

Around 10 years ago two factors, both computer related, became largely responsible for the seemingly exponential growth in independent watchmaking: manufacturing technology and the internet. Before 2000, a watchmaker from 200 years ago would certainly recognise and, with minimal training, probably manage to operate most of the tools and machines independent watchmakers were then using, i.e. technical drawings on paper and lathes. Programmers then began offering 2D design programs for movements and cases; then came 3D design programs; and now we have 3D with the capability of stress-testing components with direct connections to the CNC machines fabricating the parts.

Automated lathes became computer-controlled lathes. Simple CNC (Computer Numeric Controlled) machines morphed into complex, multi-axis machines capable of milling intricate components with minimal operator intervention and extremely high precision. At the risk of taking the means of production further away from the watchmaker, the advent of these high-tech machines made creating complex components relatively quick and cost-effective, although that is not to say that production is cheap by any means. Quality costs, as it always has and always will.

Bart Grönfeld puts it simply: "As watchmakers we initially thought that the hard part was designing and creating a watch with our distinctive style of watch and movement aesthetics. But we soon found out that that was just the beginning. It was much more difficult on nearly every level than we first expected, but we are extremely happy with the results. It is very rewarding to realise your dream."

The second revolution was the internet, which enabled relatively affordable (often free) marketing opportunities for niche brands and independent watchmakers, making it possible for them to communicate worldwide with potential clients through websites and discussion forums.



A full history of Bart and Tim Grönefeld's careers and business was given in QP46. Their latest creation, the One Hertz features hours and minutes on a sub-dial at 2 o'clock, a large sub-dial for the deadbeat seconds filling the majority of the dial with a power reserve indicator at 12 o'clock, and a setting-winding indicator at 3 o'clock. Setting and winding is ergonomically selected by pushing the crown instead of pulling it out. The quartz-like movement of the large second hand of the One Hertz subtly signals its unique mechanism, invisible to most, but obvious to *haute horlogerie* aficionados who appreciate the flawless fine finishing of the in-house developed calibre G-02.



More recently a plethora of blogs and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have made it (potentially) even easier to interact directly with collectors and aficionados and, more importantly, easier to build relationships.

When you only need to sell watches in single or double digits per year, this minimises or even eliminates the need for expensive advertising budgets. In terms of revolutionary changes in the communication landscape these new methods of communication have also educated consumers on a scale never before possible and have helped independent brands transition from being seen as exotic (and possibly even dangerous) to relatively mainstream. 'Safe' while still very rare is a perfect storm for many collectors and this has led to increasing numbers

of aficionados becoming brave enough to invest in timepieces by independent watchmakers.

#### Showpieces

Another fairly recent development has been the profusion of relatively affordable international exhibitions open to small brands and independents. The behemoths of Baselworld and the SIHH are no longer the only options with Europe alone now hosting SalonQP (London), GTE (Geneva), Munich Time (Munich) and Vienna Time (Vienna). If anything, small exhibitors are spoiled for choice.

"If a watchmaker today was thinking of launching his own brand and asked for my advice, I would probably say, 'Don't do it' as there are far easier



With their latest watch Tuscar, John and Stephen McGonigle aimed to create a time-only watch with a focus on excellent timekeeping, a substantial power reserve, reliability and with superb finishing and decoration. The design had to have a clean coherent style and the principle mechanical elements had to be visible on the dial side. Pictured here is the Tourbillon wristwatch that the brothers released in 2007 at Baselworld.

The world's greatest living watchmaker, Dr George Daniels, and his former apprentice Roger Smith unveiled their Anniversary Watch (top right) celebrating 35 years of the Co-axial movement at SalonQP 2010. True independents, both men have amassed an impressive list of work including Daniels' Space Traveller (above left) and Smith's Series 1 wristwatch (above right).

ways to make a living," says Peter Speake-Marin. "But somebody with talent, a deep love of watchmaking, a thick skin, who thrives on challenges, is absolutely passionate and is stubborn enough to defy common sense and ignore the naysayers has a fighting chance. And I wouldn't swap it for the world!"

Today's environment makes designing and producing components and watches easier and faster than ever. The internet and social media have made communication and marketing easier and cheaper than ever. And there are more and more independent watchmakers launching their own brands and new watches than ever. So where, you may ask, lies the difficulty? Well, being engineers at heart (watchmaking, at its base, is micro-mechanics) independent watchmakers naturally take to new production

technologies more easily than new methods of communication – show a watchmaker a new CNC machine and a Facebook page and guess which one excites him the most? That leads to more independents creating their own brand, but lacking the skills to market their watches effectively using the new communication tools available.

Production is outstripping demand and, while the potential for much greater demand is certainly there, until more independents realise that they need to dedicate as much energy to creating demand as they do to creating their timepieces, the state of independent watchmaking will remain as it is today: It's never been easier – it's never been harder.