

# All That Jazz



A visit to the Oris stand at this year's Baselworld revealed not just a new watch in the brand's long-standing 'tribute' line, but also led to the discovery that jazz maestro Oscar Peterson was an incurable horolophile. Here, Peterson's widow talks exclusively to *QP* about his mania for fine timepieces and the limited edition watch designed in his honour.

## Simon de Burton

If you like watches and you like jazz, you'll probably know about the association that Oris has established during the past 15 years with some of the world's most celebrated musicians. Since the brand sponsored the London Jazz Fair in 1996, it has produced regular 'tribute' watches inspired by names such as Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker - but it is the latest in the series that, to me, seems not only the most imaginative but also the most legitimate. Like its past 'culture' watches, the Oris Oscar Peterson is a simple three-hander, but it has been linked to the man they call 'the Maharaja of the Keyboard' with some neat design features that are subtle enough to make this watch discreet but also - when you know what you're looking for - a fitting tribute to the late OP who many regard as the greatest jazz pianist of all time.

Close examination of the centre of the dial, for example, reveals it to be a faithfully grooved miniaturisation of an LP record - a nod to the vinyl era throughout which Peterson rode the crest of a wave; the black and white indexes, of course, are intended to be redolent of a piano keyboard; the small Roman numerals on the outer edge

are there because they were Peterson's favourite type of hour marker; the number VIII is highlighted in gold to mark the eight Grammy awards he picked-up during a career that spanned more than 60 years. Other touches include the signed dial and a caseback that carries the pianist's cartoon lion logo, alluding to his Leo birth sign.

## A history of time

But what makes this watch stand out above many other tribute pieces is that Peterson was a genuine, dyed-in-the-wool horolophile. Timing was everything in his profession, but even before he decided to make music his career it was probably an unusually important element in family life since his father worked as a porter for the Canadian Pacific Railway in Montreal, where Peterson grew up and, somewhere in the firm's archives, is a photograph of a teenage Peterson conspicuously sporting a man's wristwatch.

It was at around that age that Peterson's sister, Daisy, persuaded him to audition for a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) national amateur contest



The Oscar Peterson Date model, which will be limited to 1925 pieces, representing the year OP was born). £1,180.



Images from the Peterson family's private collection showing OP with his pet dog (photographer A Stone), in his studio and with Kelly, wearing a different watch in each shot. Courtesy of the Peterson Estate.



As well as OP's distinctive signature, the Oris watch bears indices reminiscent of piano keys and a dial centre that is decorated with grooves similar to those on an LP record. The VIII index is gold plated in reference to the eight Grammys he won during his lifetime.

which he subsequently won, opening doors to performances on a weekly Montreal radio slot called *Fifteen Minutes' Piano Rambling*. Later he performed on a national CBC programme and eventually dropped out of high school to become a full-time musician.

And as OP's fame and fortune grew so, it seems, did his life-long love affair with watches. In an exclusive interview with *QP* carried out at Baselworld, his widow, Kelly, explained just what an important part watches played in Peterson's life. The couple met in 1981 when Kelly was the manager of a restaurant in Sarasota, Florida, where Peterson was playing a concert. "I was already a big fan of Oscar's music, but I couldn't go to the concert that night because I was working," she recalled. "What I didn't realise was that he never ate anything before he performed, only afterwards, and, that night, my restaurant was the only one open late. As a result we met, which we certainly wouldn't have done if I had been able to go to the concert. My life suddenly took a very different path.

"Oscar's enthusiasm for watches became apparent not long into our relationship. By the end of his life I should think he owned around 50, although he had given many away over the years to people he liked and who had been involved with his life or career. He was certainly not alone among the jazz community in loving watches, and that is partly to do with the particular importance that timing plays in jazz music."

### Substance over style

One of Peterson's favourite watch shopping destinations was Chronometre Bayer in Zurich, a shop he always visited when

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travelling to Switzerland on tour. But, according to Kelly, style and quality were more important to him than brand names. "When he looked at a watch he always examined it in search of something slightly different but, equally, he didn't like anything that was too far out. The manufacturer didn't really matter - if he liked the look of something, he would buy it but he did favour round or square cases. Rolex, Patek Philippe, Corum, Girard-Perregaux, TAG Heuer, Breitling, Seiko, Movado, Rado. He had them all, and would change them to suit his mood."

In addition to buying watches for himself, Peterson also received them as gifts on regular occasions. In recognition for writing the score for the acclaimed 1978 Canadian crime film *The Silent Partner*, for example, director Daryl Duke gave the musician one of Corum's early, square-cased Admiral's Cup watches. But it was his manager, the impresario Norman Granz, who proved to be the most horologically generous.

"Norman was also a major watch fan and he often gave nice timepieces to the musicians he worked with," Kelly explained. "There was one occasion during the early 1950s when he took Oscar watch shopping with one of the other jazz greats whom he looked after, Ella Fitzgerald. Oscar chose a rose gold Patek Philippe chronograph which he cherished for the rest of his life." One especially wonderful story that Kelly related was about a Patek Calatrava that Granz gave to Count Basie. When Basie died, the watch was offered for sale by his estate and Granz bought it back and gave

it to Oscar - the caseback is engraved: 'To the Count, from Norman' and it remains one of the most important pieces in the collection.

Evidence of Peterson's love affair with wristwatches can easily be found by viewing him performing in the dozens of pieces of footage posted on the internet. But while the watch seems to be different every time, the item of jewellery that adorned his right wrist remained a constant from 1952. "That was a gold identity bracelet that Oscar was given by Fred Astaire after he played piano on the *Astaire Story* album. It was engraved: 'With thanks from Fred Astaire, 1952' and every member of the band was given one. Oscar always wore his, and he willed it to our daughter," says Kelly.

## A fitting tribute

And what is the inside story behind the Oris 'Oscar Peterson' tribute watch (available in both a date and chronograph version)? "Well, the conversation about creating that began while Oscar was still alive," says Kelly (he died in December 2007).

"After his death, Oris showed me various drawings for alternative designs and the company was very open to my thoughts on how the watch should look. I liked the idea of the piano key hour markers, the lacquer-like coating of the outer dial, which is reminiscent of how a piano is finished and the 'record groove' centre. I think the finished watch is truly wonderful - and I'm sure Oscar would have felt the same and been very proud to have worn one." 🕒



The case back carries the Oscar Peterson lion logo - a reference to his Leo birth sign.

## OP Facts

- Peterson was born on 15 August 1925, in the predominantly black suburb of Little Burgundy, Montreal, Quebec, where he grew up surrounded by jazz culture.
- He began playing trumpet and piano aged five - but stopped playing the former after contracting tuberculosis.
- His sister, Daisy, taught him classical piano and, for most of his life, he practiced for up to six hours per day.
- During his 65-year career, Peterson completed more than 100 world tours.
- He performed duets with Count Basie, Herbie Hancock, Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles and Louis Armstrong, to name but a few.
- He suffered from arthritis for most of his life - yet it did not appear to reduce his remarkable dexterity at the keyboard.
- His favourite piano was a special Bosendorfer with a 97-key keyboard, nine more keys than standard. He first played one during the 1970s at a concert in Vienna, Austria, where Bosendorfer's are made. He was so impressed by the sound that he turned to Norman Granz and said: "Dammit, Norman, where does this box go? I also gotta have such a thing!"
- A serious stroke in 1993 affected Peterson's left side, preventing him from playing in public for two years.