

DÉBUT ALBUM



Roger Dubuis, Peter Spake-Marin, Christopher Claret



West Coast man Steven Holtzman appears to have mastered the horological equivalent of herding cats with 'Maîtres du Temps - a series of heavyweight collaborations involving 15 independent maestro watchmakers, and counting. QP learns how Chapter One came to fruition.

Alex Doak



MAITRES du TEMPS

GMT

DATE

SWISS MADE

TUESDAY
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“These guys are the rock stars of horology!” enthuses Steven Holtzman

Chapter One features central hands indicating hours and minutes; central chronograph counterpoised second hand; 60-minute counter at 12 o'clock; retrograde date at 3 o'clock; retrograde GMT at 9 o'clock; one-minute tourbillon at 6 o'clock; moon phase indicator at the top of the case and day of the week roller at the bottom.



“These guys are the rock stars of horology!” enthuses Steven Holtzman, on the phone from LA. “Let them get up there, bathe in glory, sign autographs! After all, the concept behind *Maîtres du Temps* is to let them show off, to showcase their individual talents. I’m putting myself at the forefront as the guy who’s bringing them together, but let’s be clear – my thing is marketing and distribution; it’s the watchmakers who are the stars of the show.”

The showbiz metaphor is apt, even in the quiet world of watchmaking. If *Maîtres du Temps* is a horological supergroup, then Holtzman could be Brian Epstein. A high-end watch distributor of 25 years, he has switched from playing middleman to the Swiss factories and US retail outlets, to working at the coalface with some of the most talented men wielding tweezers in Switzerland today. ‘Chapter One’ – the epic brainchild of veteran Roger Dubuis, techno-guru Christophe Claret and British prodigy Peter Speake-Marin – proves that, even in the traditionally closeted Swiss industry, egos and agendas are still surmountable – even if it does take an American to organise it all.

Bring the noise

“I know these two guys in the Vallée de Joux, for example,” says Holtzman, referring to a picturesque hotbed of watchmaking, deep in the Swiss Jura. “One of them *makes* certain components, and the other *needs* certain components – but neither have met each other! It takes a guy all the way from the USA to bring them together!”

Since embarking on his transatlantic endeavour in 2004, Holtzman has wasted little time – Chapters Two, Three, Four, Five and Six are already well under way, each involving a different collection of virtuosos, which he takes great pains to combine correctly. Every melding of minds could be considered a relative coup, testament to Holtzman’s diplomatic, business-savvy approach. For the nature of independent watchmakers is, unsurprisingly, independence: strong willed and at times stubborn. The chocolate-box Swiss scenery and delicate mechanical artistry belies a fiercely competitive industry, ruled by brands whose position at the cutting edge is entirely dependent on a few genius artisans. Increasingly, these lodestars are realising they can strike out on their own, satisfying a keen collector’s market with low-production, even one-off timepieces executed with painstaking attention to finish and precision. And solo success can soon breed a certain personality.

"Putting several independents together, where everyone has their own solutions and style, is obviously a challenge," admits Holtzman. "A big part is simply picking which guys we use for what. But with three different styles, and three different nationalities there was a brand new perspective."

Despite the prolific progress, the fact that Chapter One alone has only just commenced delivery is testament to just how careful Holtzman is being. It's not only his enviable Little Black Book that is getting Maîtres du Temps off the ground, it's his years of dogged experience in after-sales and servicing: knowing just what can go wrong with a watch and how best to avoid the problems. After all, even from a brand-new watch company, you'd expect an awful lot from a watch bearing a \$400,000 price tag.

"The idea from the start was to work with the very best - there's nothing risky there. However, the big risk is when you have something great horologically, but not commercially great. You have to ask 'is the distributor right, are adequate after-sales services in place, does the watch feel right?'"

The right moves

Comparison to those other 'supergroup' watch projects, Max Büsler's MB&F and his original brainchild, Harry Winston Rare Timepieces' Opus, is inevitable. But there are two big differences. The first is that, unlike Büsler, Holtzman is not placing himself at the fore of Maitres du Temps - he's putting his star recruits there instead, and quite right too. The second difference is that Holtzman appears to be planning MdT with a far more coherent arc of brand and product evolution in mind, in contrast to the erratic one-offs of MB&F and the ongoing (dragging on?) Opus series.

The fact that the next five Chapters are well under way, and that Vaucher will be taking the roller-bar concept forward with Chapter Two, but in a watch over \$200,000 less expensive than Chapter One, all goes to show that Holtzman has the "mass" market in mind, rather than the few Asian collectors queuing up at the moment. Holtzman even admits to have taken cues from the execs at Cellini, who said, "not to put all my eggs in one rectangular basket." A round version of Chapter One is therefore imminent, to satisfy that 70-80% chunk of the market who prefer their cases circular.

Holtzman is in for at least six brand-new movements with 15 independent watchmakers, which even he will admit to feeling nervous about. But his ongoing mantra is that good judgement comes from experience, and experience comes from poor judgement: "After my years in the watch distribution game, I'm tired of hearing from the Swiss that a faulty watch is down to 'incorrect manipulation' - a lot is down to the watch itself. I know what's crucial for Maîtres du Temps is softening those after-sales ripples, and I've learned the best way is to establish extensive



The Calibre SHC02 includes 558 components, with a power reserve of 60 hours, one-minute tourbillon and a 21,600-vph frequency.

The epic brainchild of veteran Roger Dubuis, techno-guru Christophe Claret and British prodigy Peter Speake-Marin

The case was designed by product designers Darren Jones and Jonathan Bowen.



quality control at many different levels. After we receive a watch from Christophe Claret's facility in Le Locle [where Chapter One is being made] quality control is conducted externally. If the movement is not quite right, it's sent straight back."

Roll call

Ultimately, Chapter One is quite remarkable - both aesthetically and technically. While its combination of tourbillon, monopusher chronograph, retrograde date and GMT indicators, and two rolling bars at either end is claimed to be a 'world's first', I suspect that anything in combination with those idiosyncratic cylinders, turning like a slow-motion slot machine, would be unique. With the exception of Jean Dunand (a brand that Holtzman himself distributes in the US) this enchanting complication is brand new to the industry, and a not-insignificant technical feat, given how unwieldy the cylinders are to manipulate, compared to normal hands. Here, they indicate the phase of the moon at the top and the day of the week at the bottom.

"I came up with the concept of the rolling bars back in 1999," recalls Holtzman. "I was with Christophe in an antique store and saw a clock using a similar system. I told Christophe right then I wanted to do rollers with different features in a wristwatch, one at each end of the case."

Despite this early conversation, the first recruit to Maîtres du Temps wasn't Claret, but Roger Dubuis, a long-retired *horloger celebre* whose eponymous brand was established in North America by Holtzman in the Nineties. "Dubuis was the first guy on the team when I wanted to do a watch with rollers. He has a real respect for the tradition of horology. He designed the tourbillon cage, the decoration, finishes, many stylistic touches."

It appears that after years away, Dubuis is filling his boots again: "It's amazing seeing him in all his glory, surrounded by all this young, respectful talent, posing for photographs with fans. He's been given a new lease of life by Maîtres du Temps - another chance to get out there. It's the same for Daniel Roth, who's getting involved with Chapters Two and Six. These old hands have so much to pass on to younger watchmakers, and I'd like to think Maîtres du Temps helps with that."

In realising the watch as a whole, Peter Speake-Marin's role was perhaps the most vital with Chapter One, bridging Dubuis' traditional approach with Claret's innovative manufacture. "He held it all together. For our first Chapter we needed a firm, steady hand; someone who could say, 'You *can't* use this material, you *can* use this material'. Peter put everyone together, presented hundreds of debates, he was instrumental as advisor, technological support, a reality check."

Taking shape

A further two protagonists - in the shadows for this Chapter at least - also played a vital role in overcoming the greatest challenge of



Chapter One: the 'packaging'. "The movement is so long that getting it all together in a case that's wearable was the real challenge! When it came back from Claret, we thought, 'This thing's a monster!'"

It was a back-and-forth compromise, but budding English product designers Darren Jones and Jonathan Bowen rose to the challenge, fresh out of the anonymous enclaves of car design. "Jones & Bowen worked a hundred times harder than typical watch designers to get it right. They're both young, and this was their first big project. In this respect it was their ignorance of the watch culture that was their biggest strength. They had a fresh approach, fresh eyes and were willing to work hard. They produced literally thousands of images of the watch, and we would just flick through them going, 'Yes, no, yes, yes, no...'"

The toil paid off. Indeed, it is quite bizarre to be confronted by a new watch brand where everything is so fully realised from the start, from the pushbuttons that curve towards imaginary points, following the graceful flow of the case, all the way to the window at 6 o'clock, which makes the tourbillon cage glow with light. This is no fluke - Holtzman's instincts appear to be as flawless as his movements' gleaming finish. But this is no marketing gimmick either - beyond the celebrity line-ups and clever logo, there lies a genuine passion for what horology is and should be; how watchmakers can excel in their respective fields and collaborate to a greater good. Indeed, this was once the integral principal that bound the Swiss cottage industry, before the big brands mopped up. It appears to have taken a humble watch salesman from California to remind us how it's done... ☺

