

Eclectic Electric

⌚ For some, the electric watch was the first step down the path to the Dark Side, away from the purity of mechanical timepieces. And they have proven to be not a few in number, given the revival of the mechanical watch when quartz should have nailed, if not superglued, the coffin shut. But before quartz, there was a brief dalliance with a less precise, electrically driven mechanism. And first on the scene, exactly 50 years ago, was Hamilton's Electric, iconically styled by Richard Arbib as the 'Ventura' - the most enduring of over 70 outlandish case designs that emerged from 1957 to 1969. Still a headturner, still ahead of its time, this year's anniversary reissue of the Ventura is fitted with a decidedly analogue automatic movement.

Ken Kessler

If the 20th century was surely the era of electricity, and it pervaded every single facet of modern life, then why should the watch be any different? Purism aside, there's no denying that watches with teeny batteries can be found on more wrists than spring-driven timekeepers ever were, providing ultra-precise timekeeping for everybody. And Hamilton was the pioneering make that first put batteries on millions of wrists. But, like the saying goes, pioneers are the ones with the arrows in their backs.

After World War II, this planet rebuilt itself, as peacetime projects should, with new technologies developed in the heat of war. Everything from the transistor to the computer to radar to tape recording to transport was born, developed or matured during WWII. The decade that followed, with allowances for austerity in Europe and Japan, was fundamentally optimistic. That optimism was spurred-on by the first taste of outer space as something more than the stuff of science fiction. It was the Russian satellite,

This year's 50th Anniversary Ventura from Hamilton (E485) with a skeletonised dial revealing an automatic ETA 2824-2 movement - ironic, given the Ventura's original 'Electric' format.



From *The Watch of the Future* by René Rondeau

The only surviving Ventura with an undeniable link to Elvis Presley is this white-gold model bought at auction for Hamilton's museum, along with the jeweller's original 1965 invoice. Venturas were never sold with bracelets, so Elvis had his jeweller fit one from a Savitar II Electric. From *The Watch of the Future* by René Rondeau.



Sputnik that infected the world - and the USA in particular - with a hunger for the future.

Hybrid

With electricity, or more precisely, electronics as the wave of the future, the more commercial watch manufacturers investigated the possibility of applying the technology of electric clocks to wristwatches. The advent of tiny batteries and miniaturised electronic components would make this possible, and both Hamilton and rival brand Elgin were among those eager to produce the first battery-powered wristwatch.

It was the understandable drive to be the first that handicapped the Hamilton Electric. So concerned were they that Elgin would beat them to the market, Hamilton rushed its own development. What was produced, at first, was an electro-mechanical hybrid complete with recognisable bridges and balance wheels, Incabloc shock-protected jewels and other elements lifted straight from existing mechanical designs. It was only after the problems of the earliest production models proved so prevalent, numerous and costly to rectify that Hamilton was driven to produce more modern, dedicated parts. Incidentally, when the improved Electric movement arrived on the market in 1961 (see box), commentators observed that had Hamilton spent a little more time developing the first version, the competition would have still been beaten.

But the trials, testing, prototyping and other obstacles were behind-the-scenes concerns. What mattered most to the retailers and the public was the need to satisfy their hunger for the new, the revolutionary. Relatively speaking, the campaign to launch the Ventura ranked with the debuts of the Walkman, the Playstation 3 and the iPhone. And to ensure that the Hamilton Electric caught everyone's imagination, it had to look like no timepiece that had preceded it.

With hindsight, we know that Elgin didn't produce an electric watch for commercial purposes. We know that the first Electrics were unreliable, a pain to service, and met with resistance from many retailers. Moreover, they would cease production in January 1969, when Hamilton stopped manufacture not just of the Electrics, but of all watches in the USA, moving production from Lancaster, PA to Switzerland, where competitive and profitable production could be maintained (cheaper Swiss parts and whole movements had been imported increasingly since the early Fifties). Quartz was on the horizon, Timex owned the entry-level sector, the Bulova Accutron was a huge success - and it was far more radical than the Hamiltons ever were. The Ventura and the other Hamilton Electrics proved to be a *cul de sac*.

But that omits something far more important, which one admits at the risk of inciting purists: the Hamilton Electric, especially the triangular Ventura, became an icon; a design milestone that transcended its intrinsic horological worth.

Hidden Spark

'Transducer' is the generic term describing any device that converts one form of energy to another. An easy example to grasp is a hi-fi loudspeaker: an electrical impulse is fed into the speaker, which converts it to mechanical energy. The mechanical aspect is the movement of the speaker cone, which in turn moves air, which finally creates sound waves.

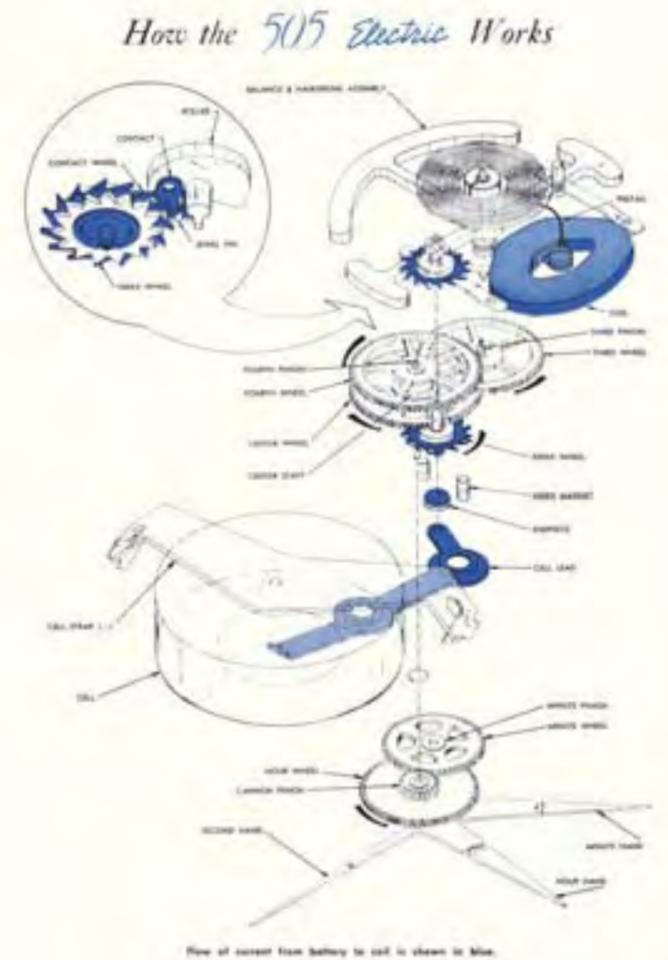
Mechanical watches, though, are not transducers: they're mechanical from start to finish, with the unwinding of a coiled spring supplying the power to move the hands at the correct rate. OK, as a pedant would point out, it's true that the energy from a hand or wrist movement is needed to wind a watch in the first place, but within a watch's case, it's wholly machine-driven.

From the time that it came into use, especially for driving motors, it was clear that electricity could provide any number of advantages over the mechanical: greater accuracy, no need for winding, less frequent servicing and other benefits (which, by the way, still have yet to close the coffin on mechanical watches). Hamilton's electrical-to-mechanical 'transducer' used an Energizer battery (in itself a chemical-to-electrical transducer) as a substitute for the mainspring; the heart of the watch remained almost unchanged from traditional mechanical watches. The current passed down the gear train via a contact wheel, into a wire coil soldered to the balance wheel. The balance assembly sat above two magnets, which elicited an electromotive force and thus oscillation. In a bid to be the first electric watch manufacturer, Hamilton rushed development of its first movement, the 500, which suffered from fragile contact wires and a contact system that was practically impossible to adjust. Four years later, in 1961, the 505 was launched ("World's Most Advanced Watch!") with its contact and index systems combined into a single unit, requiring no adjustment.

Eventually, Bulova's Accutron and quartz watches, using high-frequency tuning devices, would provide the greatest accuracy and dependability while still powering hands to show the time. It would take 'digital' watches with an LED or LCD read-out to eliminate the mechanical element in its entirety.

Nothing Ventura'd...

Hamilton launched the Ventura at a press conference in New York's Savoy Plaza Hotel on 3rd January 1957, described by observers as "a massive and flamboyant occasion". After the event, the company was rewarded with over 500 press articles in the US media, and it wasn't simply because of the technology. Hamilton had wrapped the button-sized battery and hybrid movement in a gorgeous case designed by Richard Arbib, the hero of this saga.



From *The Watch of the Future* by René Rondeau

With hindsight, it's evident that Hamilton could have short-circuited the electric watch's development in the early 1950s by thinking 'outside of the box' with completely different applications of electricity and small motors. Had the boffins at Hamilton only exploited the expertise of audio companies including Decca, Ortofon, Shure and others with ultra-precise microscopic motors, able to handle frequencies above 20 kHz, the history of the electric watch might have ended up rather differently.

Arbib studied at New York's Pratt Institute, commencing his long career in industrial design at General Motors, while also finding time to produce covers for science fiction magazines such as *Galaxy*. Over the years, he designed car fins, radios, vacuum cleaners, boats and boat motors, dirigibles and a number of watches for companies including Omega. But if you Google 'Richard Arbib', a number of the first sites to appear will link him to what is probably his signature design: Hamilton's Ventura.

The Watch of the Future: The Story of the Hamilton Electric Watch

By René Rondeau
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So great is watchmaker Rondeau's passion for the Hamilton Ventura that he was compelled to devote decades to learning all there is to know about Hamilton's most memorable timepiece. Fortunately for us, he was also compelled to spread the word, first publishing this study in 1989 and updating it three times since. In the interim, he has written articles about the Ventura and related watches for various publications, as well as producing a guide to collecting Hamiltons.

Rondeau knows how to avoid putting an audience to sleep, so he balances the hard facts and the straight history with incisive observations and, blessedly, a critical eye based on experience. You get the impression that he's been inside more Hamilton Electrics than anyone dead or alive. But he is not so slavishly devoted to the watch that he dares gloss over the painful birth, the problematic evolution and the eventual realisation - thanks to the arrival of the Accutron, and then quartz - that the watch was a dead end. But it was, and remains, a milestone watch and that too is a crucial part of this story.

Make no mistake, this is not *Longitude*, nor *The Grand Complication* and you are unlikely to stay up through the night turning pages feverishly unless you're a lunatic watch collector, or you find restoration tips gripping. Me? I read it in one sitting, poring over the stunning illustrations, cursing at the short-sightedness of Hamilton executives, marvelling at prototypes, overwhelmed by the plethora of other Electric models - round, square, asymmetric - that were overshadowed by the Ventura and the similar Pacer.

It is unlikely that you will name a single absent Hamilton Electric factoid. The book covers its development in detail, both technical and commercial, placing them perfectly in an historical context: post-WWII, a product of the vibrant 1950s economy. Rondeau uncovered posters, ads, point-of-sale material and the most comprehensive selection of prototype and production watches that any fan of the triangular masterpiece and its oddly shaped siblings could hope to study.

With publishers producing more and more one-model (as opposed to single-brand) watch histories, collectors have never been better served. And certainly, *The Watch of the Future* joins the ranks of the two Omega Speedmaster books, the Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso title, in-depth Rolex studies and a handful of others as the final word on the subject.

Rondeau is to be thanked. Not only is this book definitive, worthy of shelf space in any watch enthusiast's library, it's also a lot of fun.

His case certainly suited the watch, and the era. Today, it looks 'cool' in a retro way, its shape simply one of many - modernist but not too kitschy. Saving it from simple nostalgia is its purity and, yes, an optimism that harks back to an era when the future was primarily positive rather than dystopian. Certainly, in 1957 the press and public

loved the watch, and it would go on to sell nearly 12,000 units, while total sales of all Hamilton Electrics, according to brand authority René Rondeau, was around 340,000. Not bad for an alleged failure.

At the time, it was said that the watches could run for one year on an "Energizer the size of a small shirt button". Hamilton also boasted in its sales pitch that a Hamilton Electric watch would run for over 20 years on the energy needed to power a 100-watt light bulb for one minute. More impressively, for retailers and service departments, Hamilton pointed out that it contained a third fewer parts than automatic wristwatches, while obviating the need for a winding mechanism or mainspring.

But all of this excitement and promise was short-lived. A relatively expensive purchase, the Hamilton Electric was undercut by cheaper models from Timex, and the novelty wore off quickly. Within two decades, battery-powered watches would all but wipe out mechanical watches. What has survived in the admirable failure that is the Ventura, especially from a vantage point of 50 years, is - movement be damned! - a piece so handsome it just had to come back.

Regal endorsement

In the intervening years, Hamilton Electrics in all their outlandish case designs (Ventura, Vega, Spectra, Pacer, Titan, etc.) became highly collectable, along with locked-in-the-past watches like the rival Accutrons, plus Harwoods, Autowrists, bump-stop automatics and other technical curios. Fortunately, thanks to supporters like Rondeau, originals can be salvaged and serviced. For its part, Hamilton even managed to reassert the watch's intrinsic 'futurism' by strapping classy black-dialed reissues to the wrists of Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones for the *Men In Black* movies. And, yes, they looked so cool it hurt.

But the man who put the Hamilton Ventura on the map for the world at large is The King. Worn by Elvis Presley, at his insistence, in the 1961 film *Blue Hawaii*, the Ventura enjoyed in-your-face screen-time that redefines the notion of product placement. If it was worthy of Elvis, hell, it just had to be a watch to be seen wearing.

Now, half a century after its launch, the Ventura is back in a limited edition with a case that's an exact



An original Ventura from 1957, fitted with signature two-tone strap, designed by Arbib to complement the case shape and colour.

Relatively speaking, the 1957 campaign to launch the Ventura ranked with the debuts of the Walkman, the Playstation 3 and the iPhone.

replica of the original. Accompanying it is a brace of slightly 'modernised' Venturas (if such a word is applicable to such a prescient design) with details more in keeping with 2007 aesthetics. What's undeniable is that the new pieces attest to the Ventura's freshness... even 15 years off from its bus pass.

But the final irony, of course, is two-fold. Hamilton's celebratory trio of 50th-anniversary Venturas do not contain exact reproductions of the original, flawed motor. Instead, two are driven by the very quartz movements that signalled a sell-by date for Hamilton's original electric watch. Even more wryly amusing is the third Ventura, a runaway success that sold out on pre-order at Baselworld 2007. The skeleton-faced Automatic is utterly, irrevocably, irretrievably... mechanical. ○



The lasting popularity of Arbib's Ventura design has overshadowed the Hamilton Electric's innumerable alternative incarnations, all as wacky as the last. By 1969, over 70 designs had dressed the Electric. (Left to right) Victor II, Spectra, and Pacermatic or 'Pacer A'. Released in 1961, the latter was fitted with a self-winding mechanical movement, which didn't prove at all popular. Vintage Pacermatics are therefore very rare.

Further information: Hamilton, Tel: 023 80646 815, www.hamiltonwatch.com