

Diamond Geezer

The rock'n'roll jeweller's gothic-chic watches



With his longish hair, small hoop earrings and all-black ensemble, Stephen Webster could well be a rock star. He is, in fact, one of the UK's leading independent jewellery designers. And he does, at least, make for the rock'n'pop world: wedding rings for Madonna and Guy Ritchie, for David and Victoria Beckham, an engagement ring for Christina Aguilera, paparazzi gleamers for Cameron Diaz and, inevitably, Elton John. So many names grace his client list that Webster has come to be known as the rock'n'roll jeweller. It is a label that has not done his business any harm. And one that should stand him in good stead with the launch of his new watch collection, Libertine No. 1. *QP* witnesses the birth of brand.

Josh Sims

(Left) An all-diamond version of London jeweller Stephen Webster's new ladies' watch, the Libertine No. 1. Available in 15 references, including a two-time-zone model, using ETA and Ronda movements.

(Far left) Stephen Webster, outside his boutique on Duke Street, London. He now has boutiques in Moscow and Seoul too, with over 60 concessions in the US and Japan. (Photo: Amelia Troubridge)



(Above) Stephen Webster's new range, which was unveiled at Basel in April, will be officially launched later this year. There are pink (left), purple (centre), plain (right), and black dial models, all featuring the ornate 'thorn' bracelet in steel or gold, with or without diamonds. Prices will vary between £1,300 and £19,500.

(Above left) An 18 ct white-gold 'Bullet Haze' pavé ring with Chrysolemon and Quartz (£3,900). (Above right) The Wild Rose bracelet design (£15,100) nicely illustrates how the similar thorn-work of the new watch bracelets allows "an easy step" from Webster's jewellery.

"Increasingly in the Far East, they don't consider a jewellery brand complete without a watch."

"People say I look a bit like Keith Richards. But 'the rock star of jewellery? Well, it couldn't be more inaccurate really," says the youthful 41-year-old, constantly sliding his new all-black Panerai back up his wrist. "I'm always getting people asking me when I got out of the music business. And I don't even play an instrument. But jewellery is a very conservative industry. And if you're the one called the rock star of jewellery, you stand out..."

It has helped. Business in the US, where Webster is in demand, has rocketed, with recent sales up over 2,000%. He now has his own boutiques in London, Seoul, Moscow and, most recently, Tokyo, and is about to launch both a diffusion line and his first megabucks diamond collection. Against the morass of me-too, lookalike pieces around, his jewellery is now readily identifiable as being his own: it tends to make a statement, being bold and highly colourful, creating glamour out of clever combinations of materials that in themselves are not glamorous, using coloured gems but in a different way. His designs have won him the UK Luxury Jewellery Of The Year award for 2005 - not to mention that of 2004, 2003, 2001 and 2000.

Which begs the question: why is he now stepping out of a very comfortable comfort zone to launch his first watch? Major jewellery houses such as Cartier or Bvlgari may now be as well

known for their watches as their baubles, but for a relatively tiny company such as Webster's to look beyond the confines of his West London workshops to the big industry of Switzerland must seem like a leap - especially given that, as he puts it himself, "there has been this habit with medium to small-sized jewellery companies wanting to launch a watch to basically pick a generic style, tweaking it very so slightly and just put their name on it, which is crap really. No-one really ever wants them, apart from real fans of the jewellery brand perhaps. It's hard to build a watch business, so jewellery companies are cautious..."

Audacious start

Consequently it is a move Webster may not have made had he not given the opportunity to see how his talents played in other disciplines: special items commissioned by the likes of Dom Perignon and Perrier Jouet, as well as, late last year, a watch completely unlike his own style for Audi. Vorsprung Durch Tick-tock, if you will.

This Swiss-made quartz chronograph with date was designed using the same CAD-CAM software and rapid prototyping systems used to create its four-wheeled friends, and is even made from the same kinds of materials: titanium finishing, straps using the same coloured leather from Audi's Quattro

range, with a distinctive, outsized shape that echoes Audi's new grill, coming through on all of its current cars, including the recent A4. Far from being a mere brand merchandising exercise, each costs around £1,500 - if you can get hold of one, that is. Only 50 have been made and the brand does not even appear on the face. Instead, rather wittily, four overlapping chronograph dials make a passing reference to Audi's badge.

"Actually the design side of jewellery and watches is quite similar, even if the process is different," says Webster, who considers himself a moderate watch fan, with the aforementioned Panerai, a Bedat No. 8, a long-lost Ulysses Nardin, a pink-gold Frank Muller Isaac Newton and a rarely worn 'fully loaded' (which is to say, diamond-smothered) Turet in his collection ("Striking, but not a comedy watch," Webster insists).

"You obviously have to consider what a brand like Audi stands for - its sportiness, build quality, the fact it's probably regarded as younger and a bit more hip than, say, Mercedes - and reflect that in the watch. It was surprisingly easy to adapt that to a watch. The design goes into a computer which effectively generates the watch. Once you're happy with the dimensions and further tweaks, it goes straight to a working prototype, and even then changes are possible. That degree of the hi-tech is unusual in jewellery, which remains more crafts-based."

Going solo

Indeed, while Webster had designed for Audi in the past (their association began when Webster created a towering, 18-inch

silver champagne flute for Audi-sponsored professional polo events), the experience of designing this watch confirmed a long-held idea to create his own and to create one faster than might otherwise have been planned.

Webster has hand-made one-offs before. But he has now teamed up with Swiss-Italian manufacturer Stilnovo Project & Trade Srl to make his first production model, the Libertine No. 1. From first sketch to working prototype, the process has taken about a year. And the result is certainly a departure from the Audi piece ("Everyone kept telling me that even that watch looked a bit safe for me..." Webster jokes). His is an opulent woman's watch - a squared ellipse dial and a case with a hidden crown set onto a strap that is part-bracelet, cut through with some of Webster's signature 'thorn' work, and part-leather, stitched with the same pattern.

"The dial has taken the most consideration, because you have to do something new with it," says Webster. "Look at most brands' models and even if the markers or the numerals have been altered in some way there is something about it that suggests that brand. Picking just the numbers and the hands can be key, otherwise it won't be different enough. There are a million and one nice watches, but not many are memorable."

His watch launches this summer, in steel from £1,300, with several variations of the one model (rose gold, white gold, steel with diamonds, diamond-covered versions etc. are also available). Crucial to the success of such a project is distribution, which will



(Above) From late 2004, Webster's first venture into watch design: the Audi watch. Though unbranded, the case shape and clever arrangement of the four subdials emulate Audi's grille and logo perfectly.

be through Webster's international accounts - many of which are champing at the bit for it. "Increasingly in the Far East, they don't consider a jewellery brand complete without a watch," he notes. Interestingly, his watches will also be made available through dedicated watch shops, which is a first for his brand.

"For a company of our size to launch a watch is a big step," continues Webster. "Such companies don't usually take it seriously. And some developments are only possible if you're working with a big-enough watch manufacturer with the expertise to make the jewellery brand's watch design happen. But it has been amazing how willing they are to solve problems of the kind we created through presenting quite complex designs."

Indeed, not all manufacturers would have contended, Webster believes, with a bracelet-cum-strap that is both steel and leather, or with Webster's belief that the crown ruined the line of the case. And then there is the first men's model, among others to follow. A design for an automatic, fully mechanical men's watch has already been sketched-out, with launch planned for 2007.

It is a heavy-duty but refined oblong case on a leather strap, with, for the moment at least, a touch of the Frank Mullers about it, "because a man's watch has to look like a man's watch, doesn't it? More functional than fashionable," says Webster. "But what I'd like is to wear my own watch; a watch I'm proud of, with 'Stephen Webster' on it. Like a lot of guys, I love watches..."

Getting the look

It could yet go through dozens of permutations before the first prototypes. Certainly finding the balance between jewellery sparkle and timepiece functionality has not been easy. But what makes Webster's first watch stand out is its dual role as a piece of contemporary jewellery, as well as a timepiece, allowing him to bring his expertise to the fore. Webster's credentials are top-notch: he trained at Medway College of Design, then at Saunders & Shepherd and under esteemed jewellery designer John Donald, before launching his own goldsmith's studio 25 years ago this year, initially in Canada, then California, before setting-up in London.

His pieces are widely recognised for their innovation. One of his most popular creations, Crystal Haze, has become Webster's bread and butter: it bonds a high dome of faceted rock crystal over a thin layer of natural precious stone, such as turquoise, to produce a holographic-like haze of colour.

"I have to say that for me, at the moment, the watches are mostly about the way they look," he admits. "It would be madness for my first watch to be a minute repeater or have some complication. But I do think you can go to that kind of product very quickly. To be honest that's not so important in a woman's watch - and I think the market knows that. A watch can look super-complicated but be quartz..."

A clever stylist, perhaps this alone will be enough to guarantee the success of Webster's watches. But then there is always the 'rock'n'roll' jeweller's publicity-winning skills to help him on his way. How long before Christina or Cameron is spotted wearing one? Or before his own growing celebrity makes his watch a must-have? "A piece of jewellery or a watch is often hard to promote because it has no story. Pushing that chirpy, cocky London fella has helped. I don't force it, but as weird as it sounds, in some places it's really quite exotic. Sometimes I think I ought to get my Fender out and give everyone a song." ◊

(Right) Design diagrams from the Libertine's final development stages. The 'Away Time' and 'Home Time' dial text was eventually removed, and '3, 6, 9, 12' indexes were added to the away-time subdial.



Further information: www.stephenwebster.com