

Roger Smith, Watchmaking Revolutionary



By Hannah Elliott | Forbes – Wed, Aug 17, 2011

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Roger Smith is a watchmaker in the grandest of British traditions. A 41-year-old specialist living in the Isle of Man, Smith distinguished himself under the tutelage of legendary horologist George Daniels (Daniels invented the co-axial escapement).

R. W. Smith watches are known for their pocket-watch-inspired character and technical elements birthed by traditional English watchmaking. Smith spends months, even years, on each one--and with his team produces maybe 12 annually. As he says on his website: "A watchmaker working in this manner will have direct control and responsibility over all the aspects of the watch.... This is perhaps the greatest and clearest distinction between a hand made watch and the rest: all of these decisions will have been made by only one artisan; an artisan who has become a master of several inter-related disciplines."

Naturally, an R.W. Smith bespoke pieces costs between £100,000 and £300,000 (\$165,000 - \$495,000).

We spoke by phone recently about his work. Here's part of our conversation:

How do you explain what you do - what is an independent watch maker?

Certainly my personal experience of knowing other independents is that everyone is so individual. I think that's the real ethos.

I delivered a watch to a client yesterday. We were chatting about independent watchmakers, and to me what comes across is basically when you buy whether it's one of Max Büsser's watches or Philippe Dufour you really are buying a chunk of the person. Even though my approach to watch making is totally different from everyone else's and vice versa – Peter Speake-Marin's watches are totally different than mine – you really see the personality of the watchmaker coming through in the watches. That's really creates the true independents. It's not a huge brand, it's not marketing people, it's the person. That's what people buy into.

It's almost a philosophy.

Yes. That's why people buy my watches. Yes they are different visually, technically and so on, but ultimately they like what I do, and I think that is a big part of it.

How would you describe your philosophy?

A lot of it has to do with the craftsmanship. George has always said you cannot begin to make handmade watches or any type of watch until you've created a handmade watch. I think that the person who bought this knows that I've done this. He knows that the dials have all been handmade and engaged. They're buying a level of quality that you just simply can't get in mass production because it's too time consuming.

To what do you attribute your success as a watchmaker? Is it skill? Stubbornness? Luck?

I'm not a great one for luck – I think you do make your own. A lot of it is determination. I don't like to fail. What I have found is that over the years as I've taught or trained myself to make a handmade watch, the more you do it the more obsessed you become about it and the more you become aware of failure around you. Or you become aware of pieces or things that don't meet what has now become a very refined appreciation. Yeah, it's very obsessive what we do. Totally obsessive.

It takes a certain type of person.

Definitely. Without a doubt.

What type is that?

You'll have to speak with my wife about that [laughs].

It's perseverance. People ask, what other watch do you like out there. I do like other watches but ultimately what I'm making is my ideal watch. You're constantly striving for perfection and improvement.

Do you own any watches yourself?

No, I don't. I mean I have a watch which I wear daily but I haven't had the chance to wear one of my own pieces yet. I don't have the luxury of being able to afford the time of it. But you know just making them is my passion, I suppose.

I'm constantly trying to refine it--the Series 2 I started in 2006--and what I enjoy is the constant refinement of it.

We are still only making 10 pieces a year, but every single piece is different, and we're constantly refining it and trying to improve it, and that for me is the thrill of watch making. It's trying to create the ultimate piece. Every watch we finish has been the ultimate piece until we get to the next one.

It's just an obsession really, isn't it?

So it seems. When you were a boy were you fascinated by watches?

Well really it was anything practical. I was always making models. I was pretty hopeless at school. I didn't really understand the point of it. I was always making models and would really become absorbed in that. And certainly my first day I went to horology school in Manchester and the first day it was just like an awakening, really. I didn't believe education could be that interesting or exciting, you know. It was certainly my best day of education.

What compelled you to go?

I was fortunate really – it was my father. He sort of pushed me in that direction. He knew I was very practical, and he had heard about this course and he told me to go along. I went along and it was really a moment of fantasy – I just loved it. It was an incredible world to come into.

Now seems like an especially good time for independent makers – is this a growing trend?

Well I think it's personally a breath of fresh air. When I started on this road, which is over 20 years ago now, I was busy making or trying to make handmade pocket watches. Following George's [Daniels] watch-making book I started to realize that the modern mechanical wristwatch from its very earliest conception which was the early 1900s has always been a mass-produced item, and you've never had the sort of individuality in the wristwatch that I'd seen in the great pocket watches, which had been made in the past by I suppose independents: people who had their own philosophy and put their own stamp on the watches. With these independents, a lot of them have worked in the industry, and they're tired of the industry because of the sameness. So I think it's a great period because people are realizing that you can make things outside the industry.

I certainly know that when George Daniels started making his watches back in the 1960s it was unheard of, just to say, let's make pocket watch. People would say it's impossible, you can't do it. Only huge workshops can create pieces like that. But he proved them all wrong, you know.

What has led to success of some independents while some have failed?

I might be outside of it in the Isle of Man, but certainly the Internet has played a huge part in what we do. You have to be very good at putting the information across: Telling the customers to read the website. Why the watches that I make are different from everyone else – you know the quality and that. The Internet has played a massive part in it. A massive part.

Could you have done this 20 years ago?

No. without a doubt, no. I would have had to have had huge amounts of money behind me, and I would have had to have had a Bond Street retailer in London or similar in New York. The money would have had to have been there.

People knew about me when I was working on my early pocket watches and then my work with George Daniels. People knew that I had done that work and as soon as I finished with George I started my workshop here. I created a new watch and put it on the Internet and had orders from around the world--people who knew my history knew about me and I had orders in a few days. Incredible!

What is amazing is I don't know whether these people are being brave or whether the Internet gave them confidence or whether they are gambling people, but you know really to stick their necks out it is incredible.

They're having to wait a considerable amount of time to get their watches, aren't they?

Yes. Some years, maybe a year or two for the Series 1. It's very brave. Very brave, the customers.

Is there a certain type of collector who buys your work?

Yes, I would say that probably all are self-made. All created business and wealth. I think I've met all of them, and they're all really fascinating. I get as much enjoyment meeting them as they seem to about receiving the watch. I really enjoy meeting the customers. It's an understanding I think. Very much so.

What will you be doing 10 years from now?

What I want to do is still be making the very bespoke pieces that we do. At the moment we have our Series 2, which is our core watch. But I want to increase that. I have a 10-year plan which we're a couple years into now. The plan is to have half a dozen, six pieces, in the overall collection. That'll be a pocket watch, a clock and several wristwatches.

I want to be making very small numbers. I think that is what our forte is. I still only see in 10 years time making a maximum of 30 to 35 pieces in total. Just always keeping the attention to detail and craftsmanship. If we increased the numbers I think we'd lose what I set out to do initially. I think that'd be the wrong move, really.

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