

# SMALL-TIME PLAYERS

THOUGH THEY BE BUT LITTLE, THESE MICROBRANDS ARE FIERCE

BY JOHNNY DAVIS





On the corner of a high street with four shops, by the River Adur, in a village called Upper Beeding a few miles from Brighton, a middle-aged man with a luxuriant beard is showing me his “showroom-type office”. In the back, there’s a room containing his desktop, high-end hi-fi and wall charts outlining the year’s orders. In the front, there’s a retail space — decorated like “a 1930s posh dress shop”. “A lot of pinks, a lot of Terrazzo tiles. I built all this myself,” he beams.

Giles Ellis, who has also built everything from music amplifiers to mountain bike parts, is showing me around Schofield Watch Company, the independent business he founded in 2011 out of “vanity”. “I wanted a nice watch and I couldn’t afford one,” he explains. Since then, things have turned out pretty well. “I’m not necessarily a big fan of people,” Ellis says. “I’m completely not interested in what the watch industry does. I’m a proper independent here. I do everything myself. Even when I’m not selling watches, I’m busy designing the next one, or doing service and repair. I’m not after global domination. As long as I can pay my mortgage, I’m a happy man.” Two days a week, he teaches CrossFit at the local gym.

Schofield is sometimes called a microbrand. These are defined as making 200-300 watches a year, and often a lot fewer than that (three in its first year, in Schofield’s case). As a sector, it is in an unprecedented purple patch.

That is true of the broader luxury-watch business, too. Bloomberg reported in August that Swiss watch exports are approaching record levels, having reached \$2.3 billion the previous month — surprising even the most optimistic industry analysts. Record profits at Rolex, Omega and Vacheron Constantin were singled out in particular. Total Swiss watch revenues were £19 billion last year, an increase of roughly a third on 2020.

As any of the millions of people who saw the vast digital-advertising takeovers in London’s Leicester Square (for Audemars Piguet) and New York’s Times Square (for Breitling) this summer will confirm, the top-table watch brands aren’t short of a few euros.

Why now? Lockdown is one reason. That gave a lot of people — OK, a lot of men — time to sit at home with the internet and gen-up on their watch knowledge, window shop in online boutiques and realise that, with the pandemic scuppering that year’s family holiday, and possibly next year’s too, they’d effectively had a windfall. And what better use for a “spare” £5K could there possibly be than that IWC Schaffhausen Pilot’s Mark XX that had caught the eye?

While the pandemic has meant it has been a great time to be in the luxury-watch business, and has given deep-pocketed consumers some lovely new toys, it has been a good time for watch brands that are the opposite of those global powerhouses, too. For many, it proved the perfect opportunity to launch their businesses.

“Covid and social media have made people realise that it’s important to do what you love in life,” says Jonny Garrett, founder of William Wood Watches, a British microbrand started in 2016 that creates high-quality watches from upcycled firefighting materials in

dedication to Garrett’s grandfather, who won medals for bravery in the British fire service.

“There’s a low barrier to entry now. You can find a graphic designer on something like Fiverr [the online marketplace for freelancers], start sharing those designs in a watch forum and set up your own paid Facebook account. You can start serving ads to people for £1 a day, if you want.”

Lockdown gave William Wood Watches quite a specific boost.

“It was the turning point for the business,” Garrett says. “We launched our first [non-quartz] mechanical watch. We also launched our first upcycled firehose strap. That was at a time when people were trying to give back to the NHS and emergency-service workers. So you could buy one of our watches without that feeling of guilt [the company donates a portion of its proceeds — more than £88,000 so far — to international firefighting charities]. Our turnover increased seven or eight times in 12 months.”

Microbrands are not new. The British company Christopher Ward, founded by three friends as an online-only business in 2004, is often cited as a pioneer. But over the past few years, crowdfunding, social media and the advent of e-commerce platforms such as Shopify — tools enabling low-volume, low-cost production and direct-to-consumer sales — have redrawn the watchmaking landscape.

If behemoths like Omega and Rolex have built their businesses on making incremental tweaks to a tight portfolio of design classics — a Rolex Submariner bought in 2022 looks virtually identical to the Rolex Submariner launched in 1953 — then the microbrand space offers flexibility and fun. It’s here that you will find a watch to suit every taste.

In the market for a handsome three-hander with a conversation-starting enamel dial in plum or teal? May we direct you to anOrdain, the Glasgow-based microbrand run by a former archi-

tect, whose watches sell in the £1,600-£2,000 bracket. Like cars and watches? (Of course you do.) Then why not check out Autodromo, the microbrand in New York whose owner combines know-how from his previous job in consumer electronics with a love of vintage cars, and whose designs reference particular vehicles and eras, notably 1970s dashboard clocks, with prices starting at £720. Or perhaps you’d prefer something more playful? Studio Underd0g’s line of food-themed chronographs, including the Mint Ch0c Chip (£500), Watermelon (£500) and Strawberries & Cream (£575), designed by a 29-year-old product-design engineering graduate, have proved so popular that they sell out on pre-order.

Then there are the microbrands that plug a specific gap in the market that makes little sense for the big brands to fill. Hyungsoo Kim had the idea for Eone after a blind classmate at MIT in America mentioned he felt uncomfortable using his talking watch in class. Eone’s design uses two metallic balls to track hours and minutes. The masterstroke came when Kim spoke to a focus group of blind people who (not unreasonably) said they felt just as concerned about how their watch looked as a sighted wearer. The \$285 flagship Eone

## CROWDFUNDING, SOCIAL MEDIA AND E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS HAVE REDRAWN THE WATCHMAKING LANDSCAPE



ABOVE: THE D1-DIVER BY AERA; BELOW: THE ANORDAIN WORKSHOP IN GLASGOW





Bradley is slick, modernist and was nominated for a Design Museum award. It now comes in 20 different textures and styles.

Not every microbrand is trying to reinvent the dial. Often they're started by likeminded watch fans who are as obsessed by "the classics" as the rest of us. They just figured they could offer a slightly fresher take on them. Aera is a good example. It launched this year with two models, the D-1 Diver and the P-1 Pilot. Aera makes no bones about being "inspired by the classic tool watches of the past", but the devil is in the details. Their watches feature an unusual, domed sapphire crystal that maintains its thickness along the arc of its curvature. It doesn't just make them look cool — it creates a specifically wide viewing angle. They're made from a type of stainless steel known as 904L, more difficult to machine and more expensive than the more standard 316L. Their lume is hand-applied in Switzerland.

"So many of the established brands increased their prices, leaving a space in the £1,000-£2,000 bracket," says Aera co-founder Olof Larsson. "We knew we could make a really high-quality watch for that price. Customers today are seeking out proper value for their money as well as something that's 'different'."

The microbrand space has grown to the point it can now support three watch fairs.

While the world's watch journalists get flown out to lavish annual trade events, like Watches and Wonders in Geneva or the self-explanatory Dubai Watch Week, to be presented with the latest creations by

Cartier and Jaeger-LeCoultre, this December anyone can visit WatchPro Market, a two-day event dedicated to microbrands at the Truman Brewery in London's Brick Lane, hosted by the trade magazine of the same name. (Similar events, the Windup Watch Fair and MicroLux, have sprung up in New York and Los Angeles/Chicago respectively.)

Digital native brands might have done away with the need for bricks-and-mortar shops, but it's still good to meet their customers.

"These smaller brands all have an idea of what their strategy is going to be," says Lucy Cheesewright, head of WatchPro Live. "But when they meet people and get their thoughts, so many times the feature that resonates is not the one they expected. I get that feedback all the time. It really helps in developing those brands."

How easy is it to set up your own watch brand, in reality? It depends on who you ask.

"You and I could do it tomorrow," says Giovanni Moro, co-founder of Unimatic, the Italian microbrand with a distinct minimalist design language. "It's very, very, very easy. Depending on your goal, there are white-label companies that can do everything for you. Say you want to have 50 watches that very much look like a Submariner but have 'Giovanni' on the dial, they can take care of everything, from fulfilment to warehousing. You put out a couple of alluring pictures with an Instagram influencer, and off you go. But these are hit-and-run operations. Today it's watches, tomorrow it could be sunglasses.

"Many of these companies have much better revenue than



FROM LEFT: THE MINT CHOC CHIP (GEN 2) BY STUDIO UNDERDOG; THE JAPANESE BEATER B5 BY SCHOFIELD WATCH COMPANY; THE C65 SANDHURST BRONZE SERIES 2 BY CHRISTOPHER WARD

Unimatic, so maybe they're right and I'm wrong," he says. "But I think it's detrimental to the entire industry. We make very little stock, but hopefully enough that we can survive and build a 100-year company I can hand down to my son."

Creating a microbrand properly takes work. For most people they are passion projects — they often quit their jobs to set them up, and throw in a fair amount of their own money, too.

Aera was founded in early 2018 and spent its first four years in research and development. Handle one of their watches and you get the sense that every detail has been sweated over.

"Having a realistic knowledge of watch manufacturing is a huge element," says Cheesewright. "Where do you get the parts, what are the price points, who do you do deals with, what's the waiting time, how realistic is the design? Does it take too long to manufacture? Have I created something that means I'm going to go bankrupt in a year? Knowing the right people and having the right connections, too. All of that is a huge piece of logistical work, never mind having an actual idea for the watch itself."

"The term 'microbrand' is totally accurate for what I do," says Studio Underdog's Richard Benc. "But the name has been dragged through the mud because a huge number don't succeed and disappear without fulfilling pre-orders, leaving customers high and dry."

Jonny Garrett of William Wood Watches wasn't a watch nerd (he preferred cars). He came from banking. "My attitude to design has always been 'Well, if I like it, surely the world is big enough that somebody else will, too.'"

He started with savings of £30,000. Using Facebook leads-generating ads, he created a mailing list of potential customers by offering a £50 discount or a free strap (it could fit other brands; Omega customers were particular fans). Then he raised £27,000 on Kickstarter and produced his first collection. It took him four months, and he delivered the watches in time for Christmas 2017. For the second collection he went back to Kickstarter and raised another £45,000. After that he was off — he has never borrowed money and never been in debt, and is now on collection number five, with customers in more than 50 counties. The company has also collaborated with services including the New York City Fire Department, the London Fire Brigade and the Kuwait Fire Force.

Whether a fireman-themed watch is your cup of tea or not, you can't deny it is a USP, and one that comes with a genuine family backstory.

One of the features of Unimatic watches is that they all come in small batches: limited runs of 300, 100 or, in the case of 2019's U1-SP (an "homage to space exploration" emblazoned with the NASA logo), 50.

We live in a world of limited-edition drops but Unimatic's plan was born less from the need to generate hype than pragmatism.

"We started out with very little and we tried to turn these constraints into some kind of selling point," says Moro. "There was already this idea of 'not missing out' so we tried to leverage it."

He got permission to use NASA's logo by writing and asking them.

(That watch now resells for £2,500, proving that microbrand doesn't always equal cheap brand.) Something similar happened with Unimatic's U1-SS, otherwise known as "the SpongeBob SquarePants". Being a fan of the cartoon, and realising its 20th anniversary was coming up, Moro sent an email and introduced himself.

"I had a dream to do something," he says. "I knew it was owned by Viacom, a huge corporation. I just sent an email to 'info@viacom.it', or something. I wasn't even expecting to get a reply."

But the entertainment giant loved his design, waived any minimum-order limitations that Unimatic wouldn't have been able to meet, and the resulting yellow-and-black model on a "sponge yellow" nylon strap became an instant collector's item.

"It's just about being lucky," Moro insists.

Perhaps. But Unimatic does make really nice-looking watches.

"Of course! We have a great product as well. If it were terrible and ugly and broken, maybe people would not have thought twice about it. But I know many other people who make very nice products that they struggle to get out. So we were blessed."

Meanwhile, over at William Wood Watches, after six years in existence the brand's turnover is now in the millions. When Garrett mentioned he was more into cars than watches, I assumed he meant British classics — Aston Martins or Jaguars. Turns out he's more of a Lamborghini guy.

How close is he to treating himself to one of those?

"Not too far off," he laughs.

It's impossible to know how many watch microbrands there are. But someone on Reddit called woodshores has tried to work it out, arriving at a figure of 525. "If we estimate that they produce an average of 1.5 collections of 500 watches each, that puts the volume at almost 400,000 watches over the course of several years," they write. "With an average asking price of \$250 per watch, that

would represent sales of \$100 million. That amounts to the performance of a powerhouse like the Swatch Group-owned Hamilton Watch Company in sales, and to the volumes of a powerhouse like LVMH-owned Tag Heuer. Even though this is spread across several years, it is no small feat."

As the Swiss business becomes increasingly "luxified", this has created new opportunities for the independents. Wearing a microbrand watch certainly won't give you the kudos of a Patek Philippe. But it might give you something else entirely — the cachet of wearing a cool brand few people have heard of. Plus, for anyone wanting to get into watches, the cost of entry is somewhat more accessible.

Still, not everyone's happy being called a microbrand.

"I don't like the term," Moro says. "Maybe it's because I am Italian and I think in Latin. Micro has a different meaning. But, etymology aside, I know that we have to be put in an envelope with some of these hit-and-run brands I mentioned earlier. OK. Fine. But our effort is to get out of this. So we can be the crappiest and the smallest and the poorest now, but one day we would like not to be a 'microbrand'. One day we would just like to be called 'a brand'." ●

## A MICROBRAND WATCH WON'T GIVE YOU THE KUDOS OF A PATEK PHILIPPE. BUT IT MIGHT GIVE YOU SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY