Alumni

This Watch Entrepreneur Turns Time into Money

By
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Ben Clymer (courtesy of Hodinkee)

There are watches, and then there are *watches*. The Omega Speedmaster MK40 is the latter — a self-winding wristwatch and stopwatch all in one, its beating Swiss heart powering eight hands that spin across three sub-dials in a riot of yellow, crimson, and white. The face — which glows in the dark, thanks to tritium-laced numerals — is protected by a dome of sapphire crystal. On the flip side rears Omega's trademark mythical seahorse — a symbol of water resistance.

For Benjamin Clymer ’12JRN, the MK40 is *the* watch, his horological Rosebud. “Every time I would see my grandfather,” Clymer recalls, “he would let me wear the Omega. And then, one day, when I was sixteen, I handed it back to him at the end of my visit and he just said, ‘You know what? Keep it.’”

By that time, Clymer, who grew up in Rochester, had already discovered what he calls his “collecting gene.” As a kid he started accumulating Bakelite rotary telephones. After phones, he moved on to radios. Baseball cards came next. “I was a really insular, introspective child,” he says. “I found a kind of sanctity and peace in *things*.”

The collecting gene is still dominant in Clymer but has found a new form of expression. Today, at thirty-nine, he is the founder and executive chairman of Hodinkee, a watch website that is at once a media outlet, an online retailer, and an insurance agency. (For the name, Clymer Googled “wristwatch in other languages” and liked the humorous, unpretentious sound of the Czech word *hodinky*.) The company started as a blog about watches before eventually expanding into an authorized dealer — and now brand partner — of dozens of high-end watch brands. Hodinkee has gained a tremendous following: over a million people visit the site each month, and last year the company raised tens of millions in venture capital from the conglomerate behind Louis Vuitton and from celebrity watch enthusiasts, including musician John Mayer. The funding round valued Hodinkee north of a hundred million dollars.

None of this was planned, says Clymer, who graduated from Syracuse University in 2005 and landed in a cubicle at the Swiss investment bank UBS. “I didn’t like working in finance,” he says. The Great Recession of 2008 came as something of a relief. Told he had six months before he would be let go, Clymer started blogging about watches.

He broke from the tradition of focusing obsessively on the cost of high-end timepieces, instead diving deep into the history of rare watches up for auction and writing nerdy dispatches on technological breakthroughs.

It wasn’t long before he started hearing from readers who were actually going out and buying the watches he wrote about. “People would say, ‘Hey, Ben, I read your story on the Paul Newman Rolex Daytona. I went out and bought one.’ It was *a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars*. And I said, ‘Holy shit, these guys are

making big-time purchases based on the word of some idiot from Rochester.’”

Evidently, Hodinkee had found an audience, but Clymer’s unemployment date was still barreling toward him. He set his sights on journalism school and Morningside Heights. With no clips to his name, he submitted some of the posts from his watch blog. It worked. “Getting into the J-school was really seminal for me,” Clymer says. “Just in terms of believing in myself.”

At Columbia, Clymer essentially lived two lives. For class, he trekked around the city, reporting on everything from triple homicides to sporting events. In his spare time, he continued to nurse Hodinkee along. Shortly after he graduated, *Time* magazine named Hodinkee one of its fifty favorite websites. *Forbes* offered Clymer a job as a lifestyle writer, but he declined: by that point, Hodinkee was making more in advertising than *Forbes* would have paid him.

“I just kind of saw the writing on the wall for traditional journalism jobs,” says Clymer. “If you want to be a journalist today, you need to create your own job.” He recently donated money to the J-school and would like to see the curriculum expand to include a course or program in entrepreneurship.

Traveling to the far reaches of the horological world (Hodinkee opened a Japanese branch in 2019), Clymer has seen them all — the watches and the *watches.* But one watch still holds great sentimental value for him: the MK40 given to him by his grandfather. For its tenth anniversary, Hodinkee teamed up with Omega to release a slightly updated version of the MK40, whose original Clymer still keeps close at hand.

“If this house were to burn down,” he says, “that would be the one thing that I would grab. That watch is my life. It gave me this life.”

Watch out! Eight of Clymer’s favorite timepieces



Hodinkee

Rolex Daytona

“Rolex is the master of pulling on the heartstrings and creating long-lasting products. Few brands have that sense of permanence.”



Hodinkee

A. Lange & Söhne Lange 1

“The Lange 1 is a perfect watch. If I had one watch to wear every day, it would be this one.”



Hodinkee

Patek Philippe Nautilus, Tiffany-signed

“As a New Yorker, I have a love for Tiffany-signed watches, and I wear this one a lot. This is a New York watch.”



Hodinkee

Vintage Longines Calatrava

“This is one of the company’s ultra-thin, manually-wound watches from the 1940s. It has such a beautiful design and I love the strap.”



Hodinkee

Jaeger LeCoultre Grande Reverso “Tribute to 1931”

“Mine’s engraved on the back with my initials. I received it the day I finished my master’s program.”



Hodinkee

Patek Philippe Chronograph Ref. 5070, Tiffany-signed

“I don’t know if I’ve seen another. It’s a badass watch.”



Hodinkee

Grand Seiko SBGW251

“When you see this watch in broad daylight — in bright light — it’ll blow you away. The quality of finishing is out of this world.”



Hodinkee

OMEGA Speedmaster

“The one I have is from 1963. It was a Royal Canadian Airforce Watch delivered to a base in Metz, France and purchased at the station store. I have the original box. You open it up and there’s the original bracelet, a sales receipt from Metz, and the original paperwork. These are the types of watches that really speak to me, because they have real histories.”

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