

# Make Some Noise



Iconic watches have a way of obscuring a manufacturer's other accomplishments. They can be both a blessing and a curse for medium-sized houses. Doxa has its orange-dial diving models, Glycine its Airman, Hublot its Big Bang. For Vulcain, it's the Cricket. But if you're going to have a signature model that dominates your reputation and image, what better than one worn by presidents?

Ken Kessler

Far more than being the world's first alarm wristwatch and the choice of a handful of American heads of state, the Cricket is also noteworthy for another achievement: it is a true "manufacture" piece. This alone is enough to distinguish Vulcain from the vast majority of watch producers, all of which now chase the "manufacture" accreditation in the way that an actor chases an Oscar. In this area, Vulcain's status has never been in doubt. As Vulcain marks its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the Cricket – as has always been its *raison d'être* – will alert watch lovers to the company's impressive resumé, not least because the celebrations include all-new, in-house calibres.

## New home

Immigrants, especially the numerous Huguenots who fled to Switzerland seeking refuge from religious persecution, provided a direct and immeasurable impact on watchmaking in the host country. Not least among their ranks was a family named Breguet – France's loss and Switzerland's gain. So, too, did Jewish refugees find relatively greater freedom from anti-Semitism there, Switzerland then being one of Europe's less hate-filled countries.

Among the Jews escaping to Switzerland was a merchant named Jacques Ditisheim, who moved his family first to Hegenhem, then to La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1858. His family would form an important horological dynasty, if smaller and less well known than the illustrious *famille* Breguet. In addition to establishing Vulcain, the Ditisheims would create Movado, Solvil and other brands, while gathering a host of awards along the way. Amongst Jacques' descendants would be Paul Ditisheim, a watch maven described by that illustrious authority Lucien F. Treub as "one of the greatest horological geniuses after Breguet."

With their new-found freedom to enter into trade, the Ditisheims set up in La



Extreme GMT



Revolution Dualtime



Cricker Calibre V-20



Top left and right:  
The Cloisonné enamel  
aviator collection

Above: Aviator GMT

Chaux-de-Fonds, with sons Maurice listed as a “watch broker” in the tax rolls and Gaspard as a “watch finisher”. Swiss citizenship was bestowed upon the family in 1872, after the brothers had demonstrated a level of honesty and integrity in their business dealings. It was Maurice who realised that the next step was to market their watches globally.

Maurice purchased the factory from his brothers in 1886, immediately setting about establishing the brand as an international player. Then as now, the best way to call attention to a watch brand was to exhibit at a major event; for Maurice, it would be the 1889 Paris World’s Fair. His display pointed out

that the company produced chronographs, perpetual calendars, repeaters, chronometers “and other complications”, in base metals, silver or gold. Equally revealing was the statement that the company produced 40,000 per year.

A smaller stand and less exhibits had dampened enthusiasm, but Ditisheim still walked away with a Bronze Medal. The piece that earned it was the exquisite “La Vallée de l’Arve”, watch No. 2259, breathtakingly decorated with enamels on the case’s front and back, encircled by two rows of set pearls. The delicious miniatures barely indicated what lay within: a 20-ligne calibre addressing far more than hours, minutes and seconds. Its complications

included grand strike; hour, quarter-hour and minute repeater; and perpetual calendar with month, days of the week, moonphase and date. Powering these was a movement wound with a crown – a feature adopted early by Ditisheim – possessing 30 jewels, a double roller Breguet overcoil spring, compensating balance and other details that are the province even today of true *haute horlogerie*.

Alas, Maurice’s health deteriorated not long after, and he handed the company over to his son Ernest-Albert in 1891, who was only 20 years old.

In 1893, this change was marked by re-naming the company Ditisheim & Cie, “*successeurs de Maurice Ditisheim*.” That same year, the company won a Gold Medal at the International Exhibition in Chicago for another Grand Complication, and a Silver Award in 1896 at an exhibition in Switzerland, a showcase for Swiss industry. In 1898, the company was registered with the suffix “Manufacture Vulcain”. The name was a nod to the robust and powerful Vulcan, the blacksmith god of fire and volcanoes in Roman mythology (rather than any pointy-eared aliens).

Ernest-Albert rose to the occasion. Described as “an old school watchmaker” in Vulcain’s recently published history, *A Passion For Fine Craftsmanship*, his *bête noir* was automatic winding, which he believed would compromise a watch’s accuracy. “No automatics” would be a company rule that must have hampered sales, but Ditisheim more than compensated for it by building up a reputation for his devotion to horology, to the company and to scrupulously honest trading practices.

## Expansion plans

Toward the end of WWI, the company began construction on a new factory, the plans having been worked out with local government approval during the war years. It was opened in autumn 1919 on the Rue de la Paix, housing 100 employees. Business proceeded smoothly, with the company again earning honours at an exhibition, the 1929 Barcelona World’s Fair providing Vulcain with a Gold Prize for the excellence of their watches.

Around this time, Vulcain also demonstrated an early empathy with the sporting world, various



family members being passionate about cycling, tennis and football. Although ambassadorships and product placement were not conscious practice 80 years ago, it helped Vulcain in a number of markets, especially Spain, when Real Madrid's coach mentioned that a Vulcain watch had timed their practice sessions – powerful stuff when he credited it with victory in the Spanish Cup in 1934. Some 22 years later, La Fiorentina would win the Italian championship, and the team would send Vulcain a photo of the entire squad wearing Vulcain watches.

Vulcain survived both the Depression and World War II thanks to a mix of quality and sensible pricing, a basic recipe adding up to value for money. To preserve the company in the face of the most overwhelming display of anti-Semitism in history, the Ditisheims signed over the company to a non-Jewish employee, a safeguard against Vulcain being confiscated by the Germans had they invaded Switzerland. The employee, Louis Vuille, duly handed the company back after the war “without a word.” The Ditisheims awarded their employees’ loyalty with a 100-franc note each.

Around 1942, Robert Ditisheim started working on what would become Vulcain’s signature timepiece. Five years later, in 1947, the company was able to release the world’s first successful alarm wristwatch, dubbed the Cricket because the sound it produced was reminiscent of that insect. It looked like a normal sweep-second watch with only two giveaways: a fourth hand to show the alarm time, and a pusher above the crown, to set or cancel the alarm.

It was a clever design throughout, utilising an in-house movement, with every concern addressed properly, not least being the ability to ring loud enough to awaken the wearer, and the need for its ringing vibration not to have a deleterious effect on the movement – either its mechanical integrity or its timekeeping. During the five years of its development, Ditisheim and his team addressed audibility, acoustics, the power reserve necessary to power the watch and the alarm, the hammer characteristics, materials for the hammer, and a number of other concerns that do not tax the design of non-alarm models.

Now known as the Cricket Calibre, the Vulcain Calibre 120 alarm movement used the combination of a hammer, a membrane and a vented double- or triple-case back. Thanks to two separate barrels in the movement, the fully-wound Cricket could ring its alarm for a full 25 seconds. Unlike most other

Below: Vulcanographe  
Right: Panda Aviator



Above: Vulcain Barack



Revolution GMT



Classic Golden Voice

mechanical alarm watches – as opposed to loudly buzzing quartz types – the all-mechanical Cricket could actually rouse its owner from his slumber. And it was easy to use – the crown set the time in one direction, the alarm time in the other, and the pusher at the 2 o'clock position set the alarm.

## The Watch of Presidents

Not only was the watch a commercial success, it attracted some notable wearers – in particular, enough US Presidents to earn it the nickname, “The Watch of Presidents.” While it is known that a handful of watch companies present every incoming world leader with a watch, many of these officials choose not to wear them, especially those elected in democracies full of whinging lefties, because of the implications of “receiving a gift.” (Indeed, President Nixon and Vice-President Spiro Agnew famously declined the offer of Omega Speedmaster Professionals to mark the watch’s success with NASA’s space programme. The two Omegas are now in the company’s museum.) Vulcain Crickets, on the other hand, found their way on to the wrists of U.S. presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon and Johnson – two Democrats and two Republicans.

As with a number of small-to-medium houses, the quartz crisis created a downturn in Vulcain’s fortunes, and the company was sold to Revue Thommen, which stopped production of the Cricket in 1987. (Revue Thommen had actually marketed its own alarm watch powered by the Cricket movement.) But that was not the end of the story. Vulcain changed hands again, enjoying a relaunch in 2002 with nothing less than an actual Vulcain Cricket Calibre, the V10, produced to the original design. Mr. Treub describes it wonderfully: “The Cricket certainly qualifies as the loudest and most obnoxious alarm to be found in any mechanical wristwatch and is obviously meant to wake up the dead.” There can be no better endorsement for a watch intended to rouse you from your sleep.

Vulcain, however, realised that some might prefer an alarm watch as a device to serve as reminder rather than as something

to “wake up the dead,” so it released in 2006 the deliciously-named Golden Voice, “distinguished by a new gentle and discreet sound.” Instead of the chirping of the Cricket, it merely vibrates gently, at a level “sufficiently discreet not to disturb those around you, yet distinct enough and capable of vibrating to ensure you never forget any of the day’s key events.” Manually-wound, and possessing two barrels – one for the movement and the other for the alarm – it







offers a 42-hour power reserve and a 12-second striking period.

Vulcain's new management has fitted the movement to a range of watches, along with the standard V10, so true *manufacture* Vulcains can be found as GMTs, diving watches and dress watches. The butch GMT X-TREME, launched in 2008, is water-resistant to 100 metres, and is housed in a 44 mm-diameter case made of black titanium and steel or titanium and 18 ct. rose gold. Inside is the anthracite-coated Cricket Calibre V-16. A second sport model is the Diver X-TREME with bidirectional rotating bezel adjustable by means of a screw-locked crown. It's powered by Cricket Calibre V-10, and – as we all know – sound travels best under water.

### Automatic for the people

For 2009, and at the risk of upsetting Ernst-Albert Ditisheim, Vulcain is releasing its first-ever automatic alarm watch, with the all-new V-21 calibre. Like the manual, it features two barrels, one each for the time and the alarm, it beats at 18,000vph and offers a 42-hour power reserve. As with all Cricket movements, it employs a unique Vulcain feature which – for watchmakers and truly savvy collectors – endow the brand with the sort of credibility that separates the men from the boys.

Vulcain's patented Exactomatic system is an endstone shape that equalises the friction on

the balance-staff in all positions, by angling the endstones of the incabloc shock absorbers. It's a small detail, but it results in a more regular amplitude, for greater precision and improved regularity of time-keeping. In practice, it benefits the watch both in motion or when resting on a nightstand or desk, for it places the balance staff in a more stable position – simple but extremely effective.

A new movement throughout, the V-21 features a unidirectional winding bi-metallic oscillating weight equipped with ceramic ball bearings and protected by two anti-shock devices, and a specially developed click wheel to drive the barrel ratchet. The latter enhances winding while on the wrist, and it enables smoother disconnection during crown winding. Also new is the "hammer and anvil" system designed for the alarm function, the hammer now striking the "anvil" now placed at the centre of the movement. As before, depending on the model, the watches using the V-21 will have of double or triple-backed cases is required.

For its debut, the winding Cricket Calibre V-21 movement will appear first in two models, the Cricket Revolution GMT and Cricket Revolution Dual-Time. Which one of them will be offered to President Barack Obama remains to be seen, but one hopes that politics won't prevent him from wearing a watch that's even more cool and stylish than his supporters think he is. ⌚