

CLASSIC DRIVER

On two wheels and talking watches with Vertex-heir Don Cochrane

Lead

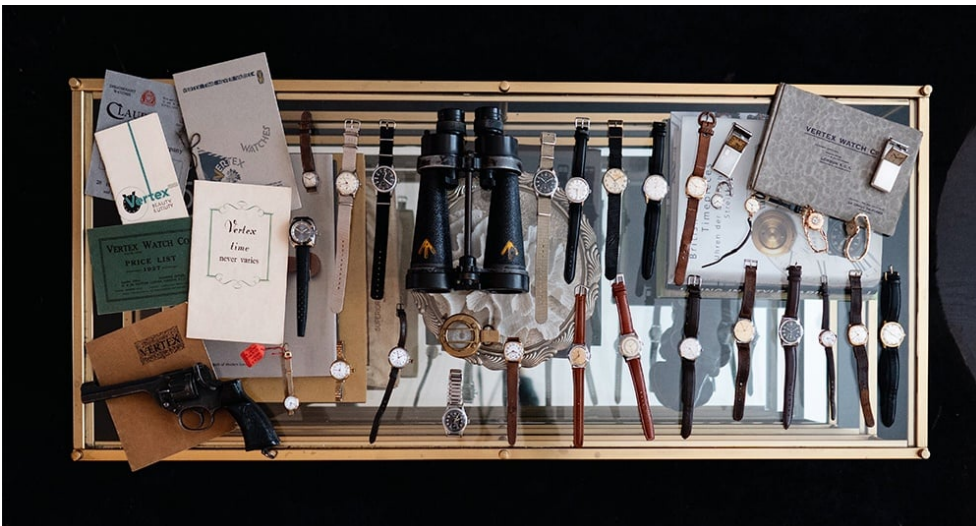
In the commonplace worlds of watches and cars, Don Cochrane stands alone as a gentleman of unique horological and automotive stature. The great-grandson of Claude Lyons, who founded Vertex Watches in 1916, it's fitting that cars and bikes are the only passions that excite him with the same fervour...

Cochrane's illustrious career is dusted with the special and the sublime. Beginning in advertising at Ogilvy & Mather, he was quick to rise through the ranks. "Fairly quickly, I became Production Director and was actually making ads and campaigns for many companies, including Ford," he recalls as we settle down at his home in Fulham. Around the same time, one of Cochrane's friends was working in Formula 1 management and required someone to help with the live feed at the 1997 Spanish Grand Prix. "Though the system was new to me, I quickly figured it out and was asked to continue for the rest of the season." At just 26, Cochrane was directing the entire Formula 1 television feed.



"People assumed that I was the best in my business because I worked for Formula 1 and it granted me the opportunity to do many other things," comments Cochrane. "But the most life-changing thing happened when I was at Ogilvy." Ford was still a client at the time and had begun its first electric car project through a partnership with the Norwegian company Th!nk. Cochrane was thus one of the first people involved with the emerging EV market. "At the time, I must have been one of the only people driving a properly homologated electric car around London and this was back in 1996 – anything before was deemed a 'quadro-cycle'."

A chance encounter with Richard Branson at a party led Cochrane to develop a plan to attract support from Virgin's £2bn green initiative. And though unsuccessful, he'd learned so much about the industry that Th!nk asked him to join them permanently. "I went from being an editor and director to the sales and marketing director for a car company, which was really cool," he continues, with a beaming smile.





As Th!nk began to slow, Cochrane met Elon Musk and his team at Tesla. “I got chatting to them because I had the skills they needed, so they asked me to join. This was in 2007 when nobody knew anything about them, but I could see that what they wanted to achieve, and the car was *very cool*.” However, as Tesla grew and transitioned from the Roadster to the Model S, Cochrane was being pulled to the USA. Staunchly against the idea of leaving Blighty, another chance encounter, this time with Aston Martin, saw his position change yet again.

“During one of the many car shows I attended with Tesla, I bumped into the prototype Aston Martin One-77 and thought it was the most stunning thing in the world. And I was fortunate enough to be offered my dream job, managing the One-77 and VIP sales for Aston’s customers. I went from one of the most environmentally conscious car companies on the planet to one of the most un-environmentally friendly cars: a naturally-aspirated 7.3-litre V12 hypercar.” He laughs.



And while he personally oversaw the One-77 and V12 Zagato programmes, it was the access he was granted to prized Aston Martins that remain fondest in his memories. “Sometimes I’d have to take one of the legacy James Bond cars to a meeting to show somebody, and I got to drive the Casino Royale DBS a number of times, and the V8 Vantage from The Living Daylights. I remember taking the DBS to a meeting once and I had about 500 yards to the hotel, but I put my headphones in, played the James Bond theme, and rove around the mews several times feeling like the king of the world. It was awesome!”

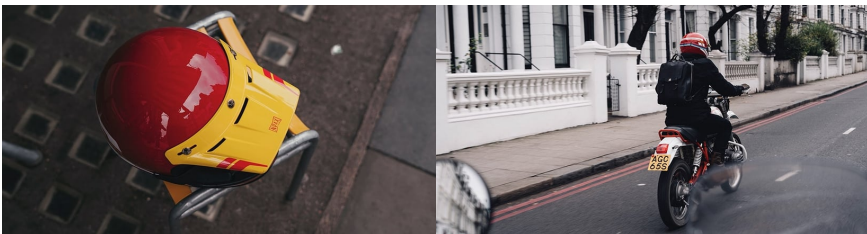
Though he’s now the president of VistaJet, the world’s largest private jet company, Cochrane’s connection to the motoring world has never waned. “The nice thing about being out of the car industry is that I’m now into it purely for pleasure, which is much more fun. I’m on good terms with the Goodwood estate, so you’ll often find me there, but also with some of the collectors who bought One-77s or Teslas, or people I met on the Grand Prix circuit. We’ve all remained friends and it’s a lovely community in which we all love one thing: cars.”

That leads us on to Cochrane’s original passion for the world of motoring. His earliest memory is watching Derek Bell racing his Porsche 924GT at Brands Hatch as a seven-year-old, where a business partner of his father arrived in a Lamborghini Countach. “He gave me the keys and just let me go – I spent the day sitting in this Countach and feeling like a king!” Over the years, he’s owned numerous notable vehicles” a British Racing Green Lancia Beta, a three-door Range Rover Classic, a silver Porsche 911S, a split-screen VW Camper, and a *dubonnet rosso* Aston Martin DB4 that he purchased for just £28,000. But it’s not all cars. Far from it!



It was also with his father during a family holiday in France that Cochrane first fell in love with motorcycles, while watching the Paris-Dakar rally. “You couldn’t be in France at the time without knowing about the Dakar. This was during the Thierry Sabine years and I really fell in love. I absolutely loved the Dakar, especially the bikes.” Indeed, his first motorcycle was a big single-cylinder KTM. “It made the same noise as the Dakar bikes and I loved it for that,” he recalls, “I’ve had eight KTMs and only recently started dabbling in BMWs.”

We grab our helmets and head outside – it’s high time for a ride. Before us lies the beauty of his 1978 BMW R100 RS. “It’s an HPN BMW – HPN made all the Dakar bikes for BMW – so it’s quite special and rather rare. It just makes me so happy!” Major work carried out to the bike includes the six-inch extended rear swingarm for better traction on sand, a Husqvarna front end, and a twin-shock conversion for more strength. “What I love most is that it’s 40 years old but rides like a normal bike. Yes, it lacks some of the torque modern bikes have, but it works fine for riding in and out of London.”



We eventually stop for a coffee in Marylebone, the HQ of his newest venture: Vertex Watches. When his grandmother died a few years ago, Cochrane wanted to commemorate her by reviving the watch company her father had founded in 1916, but which had ceased operations by 1972. “As a child, I’d only heard stories of how hard the watch industry was and how little fun by grandfather and uncle had towards the end. But I started researching the good stuff about Vertex and discovered it had an amazing story and narrative.”

After a battle that included the reacquisition of the Vertex trademark, Cochrane re-incorporated the company in 2016, exactly 100 years after his grandfather founded it, and started work on his first watch, a commemorative piece in honour of the WWW Cal 59 Nav model made during World War 2. “What I love is that the watches weren’t designed to be fashionable – they were created to do a job, to be strapped onto the wrists of soldiers who were then thrown out of a plane over France and left to fight towards Berlin. You can’t ask much more of a watch than that. That DNA is so powerful that it

made sense to base our first watch, the M100, on the original.”



True to the original, the M100 features a manual movement. “That’s very important to the story. I love the fact the watch doesn’t work unless you make it work, and it’s the same reason we drive classic cars and ride old bikes: we feel them, and we interact with them. They’re not automated, they’re working with you.”

Before long, business calls and Cochrane clambers back onto his BMW, strapping his aptly named Desert Race helmet firmly in place. With a flick of the button, the 40-year-old boxer engine rumbles to life, and with a raucous twist of the throttle, he bids us farewell and tears off through the streets of London. At just 46 years old, he has already achieved more than most in their lifetimes. And with Vertex Watches alive once again, the future looks bright and bountiful.

Text: Hugh Francis Anderson / Photos: Alex Fleming for Classic Driver © 2019

Gallery

Source URL: <https://www.classicdriver.com/en/article/watches/two-wheels-and-talking-watches-vertex-heir-don-cochrane>
© Classic Driver. All rights reserved.