

CLASSIC DRIVER

Watches and cars aren't just hobbies for Ben Clymer, they're a lifestyle

Lead

Hodinkee founder Ben Clymer isn't just a connoisseur and a timepiece guru, he's a lifelong car fanatic. We sat down with Ben for a discussion on cars, watches, and his approach to collecting.

Cars and watches go hand-in-hand, and very few people are as passionate about both as Hodinkee founder Ben Clymer. Not only is Ben the custodian of one hell of a car collection, but he's also the mastermind behind a slew of collaborative timepieces between Hodinkee and some of the biggest names in horology. Off the back of a recent collaboration between Ben himself and Casio, dubbed the G-SHOCK Ref. 5600 By Ben Clymer, Remi Dargegen spent the day with the American connoisseur for a chat about what makes Ben tick.



Ben, thanks for chatting with us! To start, what's your oldest memory relating to cars?

As is often said, some car people are just born with the gene. My mother and father had interesting cars in their lives, but long before my sister and I were born. So the exposure to cars came really from TV and film — and most prominently, the all-time classic, Herbie the Love Bug. That film was my absolute favourite for many years of my life – the Beetle is just such a warm, wonderful shape, and I was in love with Herbie. Early on, I even asked my mom to make a VW Beetle Halloween costume for me, which she lovingly did. It was that car that made me a car lover forever.

So Herbie was the spark that ignited your love for cars?

It was. That and my maternal grandfather's two Mercedes-Benzes, which I got to see maybe once or twice per year. He had a 560 SEL and a 450 SLC – they were just so painfully exotic and cool to me. He was the same man who gave me an Omega Speedmaster when I was 16 years old – which led me to start Hodinkee – so his influence on me was very real.



And what type of collector are you now?

As I get a little older (I bought my first classic car at 28 years old - I am now 41), I am far more reasonable than ever. There were years of my life where I'd spend way too much time, money, and effort finding and keeping a great car. Now, my children get that attention, and I am more than happy about that. But the things that always will get me excited are original owner, preferably original paint, well-documented beautiful cars. If I can meet and speak to the original owner, even better. I often look for cars that I think I likely would've purchased when new, had I been around at the time. My 1967 911 S is that car - for example. The M1 is too. I want things that are generally part of a larger culture - thus my interest in Porsche, BMW, et. al, but fall outside the norm. While my friends were mostly interested in 993s and 964s, I went for early SWB 911s (1965, 1967 S). While my friends were looking at late-model BMWs, I went for a 2800CS and M1. The culture means a lot to me, and if I can find a great, organic-feeling car, I'm all in.



And your grandfather was also responsible for instilling your passion for watches?

My grandfather wore a slim gold Patek and a Day-Date. He was my only exposure to “nice things” as a child and, again, the attraction was organic. I had no idea about the money it would take, I just knew that these watches (and cars) felt different to me in my hands. They were heavier and stronger. And they didn't need a lot to keep them going - so before long, each time I would see my grandfather, I would get to touch and feel a nice car, and a nice watch. And that was really formative for me.



When and how did you decide to turn this passion into your work?

I was working in finance as a young man in NYC - which everyone seemed to do in the early 2000s. But I hated it. So I'd spend my free time looking at watches for fun, and writing about what I learned. Then I started taking pictures of the watches, then recording short videos about them. Eventually, my blog attracted 10 people in a day. Then 100. Then 1000. Now we see about 3 million people a month, all reading about, loving, buying, sharing, and insuring their watches. It's been 16 years of work - this is not an overnight success story - and I am very proud of that.



For the people who don't know it yet, can you tell us more about Hodinkee? How did it start and what did it involve?

Hodinkee is all things watches. We produce the best content - ranging from thoughtful reviews, to breaking news, and even celebrity interviews - plus we offer pre-owned watches on the web, all certified and guaranteed. We're also an authorised dealer for over 40 brands, we sell accessories and even offer insurance (the best there is! Trust me). We are not unambitious, you can say that. I think it's fair to say Hodinkee is at the centre of watch culture, and everything we do, we do for the greater good. It's been a very long journey, with many ups and downs, but ultimately, it's about fostering both community and culture via content and commerce.

In your eyes, what do you see as the future for Hodinkee?

At this point, we want to keep pushing. Watches have changed a lot - and it's incumbent on us to continue to try things, which we will. People think we are a large company -

and we are not. What we are is a very hard-working, dynamic, thoughtful company. You will see more of the content that made us, including more things that I host personally.



For this portrait, we asked you to pick just one of your cars, and one (or a few) watches. What did you choose and why?

First, the car. This is a 1972 BMW 2800CS. It is decidedly not a 3.0 CS, or CSL. It pre-dates both of those, just slightly, but to me is just a quintessential coupe from the period. The E9 itself, all of them, remains one of the most lovely, versatile coupes of all time and I think there should be more love for them. They are incredibly comfortable, amazingly well built, and absolutely beautiful things - not to mention great to drive. In many ways, they take what people love about a 911, and take it even a step further. They are two cars in one - at low speeds and low revs, it's remarkably subtle and elegant. But when you let it rev, it can explode and surprise a lot of people. I can keep up with some great 911s in this car, easily, and put four adults in it comfortably.



The watches I chose to go with it were picked for a few reasons. First, my AP Royal Oak Jumbo. This watch, when new, was shown in the same year as the car — 1972 — and the dial of mine works very well with the Sahara Beige colour of my 2800. Next is another sports watch from the same period, a Double Red Sea-Dweller from Rolex, then some modern favourites: a Hodinkee-designed IWC, which in particular is like the 2800CS: sporty and beautiful without trying too hard. Lastly, I've selected a collaboration chronograph we did with a favourite young brand, Autodromo, whose founder, Bradley Price, is a good friend and someone who was an early car friend in the area.



Was buying this BMW the obvious choice when you discovered it? It was delivered new to Geneva — arguably the global capital of watches — making it the bridge between your two passions, right?

Yes, yes it was. I had wanted an E9 from the minute I first saw one. Before I bought my first car — a 1962 Porsche 356 — I test-drove a (terrible) E9. It was on the list from the beginning, but because of their history, you often find cars in really rough shape, so I just never found a good one. And then I did. This car was sold new in Geneva, Switzerland (my second home, in many ways), but came to a small town in Connecticut (my actual home), in the late 90s. It never left the original owner's family, ever, until I drove it away in 2021. It was clear this car was the pride of the family — it had never seen rain in 50 years! That is actually true — and what's amazing is that the original owner kept every piece of documentation for the car, including sales receipts and service details. I've never seen a better-documented car in my life, and the mileage — around 30,000 — is real. This car was an absolute no-brainer for me, and I love it for many reasons — it's just elegant and simple and doesn't try too hard. It fits in my life perfectly.



It's no secret that you also have a legendary BMW M1, with which you won Best in Class at The Quail in 2022. Can you tell us more about the incredible history of this specific car? Would you define yourself as a true BMW lover? In addition to your 2800CS, you also have an E39 generation M5 as a daily driver, so what makes this brand so special for you?

Here's the thing. I am not a BMW guy, really. But when they get it right, they get it really, really right. The E9 is perfect, so is the M1, and so is the E39. There have been some dogs around these three, but anyone who says these three cars aren't all-time greats isn't seeing straight. I will say that there is a small personal note to my interest in BMW, which is that my mom drove a 2002 in 1970 — her father bought it for her as one of the first in the USA. So there is a personal appeal to BMW because my mom had one, and

then my parents had a Bavaria shortly thereafter – which is a nice thread to my own cars.

The M1, the E9, and the M5 were all one-owner cars, all original, and documented, and all represent very, very different eras of car design and manufacturing. My M1 is probably the most incredible of the three because, well, it's an M1. I had long wanted one after a friend (the artist Phil Toledano) lent me his for many drives during a summer when my Porsche and Lancia were resolutely in the shop. But, again, finding a good example is so hard and I was not going to do red or orange. So when I found this dark blue car — coming from a prominent Englishman living in the USA – it had to happen. The E39 M5? Well, that's simply an argument for the best all-around car ever made. I cannot say enough good things about it – and it was the car I dreamed of owning in high school. I will say it felt great taking delivery of that when I did.



If we compare cars and watches — automobile engineering with watch complications — what is the most remarkable car in terms of engineering, and the most remarkable watch in terms of complications and/or craftsmanship?

I am a very simple man, really. The greatest car to me is the 901 series Porsche 911. It was a revelation, and I've spent years writing about it as a true step change in car development. I also happen to think the 992 Carrera T is a future great. I have owned GT3s and trust me when I tell you, the Carrera T is more fun to drive 98% of the time.

And for watches? It's very different than the 911 because it is modern — but it harkens back to the vintage era — and that is the Rexhep Rexhepi Chronomètre Contemporaine II. Again, I know the maker of it in Rexhep Rexhepi and that plays a part, but even if I didn't, I've not been more excited about a modern watch like this one in years. Having said that, a 1963 Rolex Daytona 6239 is hard to beat.



Ben, you've already got some amazing cars in your garage, but is there a car out there that you would dream of owning one day?

For years I lusted after the Alfa Romeo TZ. I had the chance to drive and buy one in late 2022, but things changed. I realised it just wasn't for me, at least in the version of life I am leading now. It's too aggressive, too racey, so I was able to pull that off the list and refocus on cars that I can enjoy with my family, or at least my wife, without causing

stress in any way. As boring as it is, a 1973 RS is on the list, or a great 300SL, but right now, I am feeling very happy with the cars that I own today. I am in a good spot, and maybe I'm just refocusing on cars that I can use more. Don't tell the BMW guys, but I drive a 1992 Mercedes 500E more than my M5 right now! And don't tell, well anyone that reads this site, but I drive my Taycan 4 Cross Turismo more than all the other cars combined!



And as for watches, is there a timepiece that you would dream of owning one day?

The split seconds complication is my favourite – the way those movements are engineered allows them to have a three-dimensionality that doesn't exist with other complications – tie that to the motorsport connection and how could it not be my favorite? I own a few of them, but I have never owned what I think is one of the best – a Patek Reference 1436 split seconds. I would love to find an original owner example – and they are quite small and quite expensive — so I hope there wouldn't be too much competition for one, but a great 1436 is on the list. Or a watch owned by legendary American racer Briggs Cunningham. I had a few cracks at one of his Pateks and do regret not going for it when I could.



Finally, do you consider yourself a Classic Driver?

I think I do! I care about understanding things in what I believe to be an authentic and deep way. I care about what goes into making things – because I make things all the time – and nothing is more frustrating than when someone says, “How hard is it to change the colour and put Hodinkee on it?” after we've spent months, or in some cases years, considering every minute decision of the design. That attention has trained me well, and so everything I do, I try to do with such consideration, and that includes which cars I drive and how I drive them. My BMW 2800CS is a prime example – few would understand why it's so special, but I believe it's simply a perfect thing.

Photos by Remi Dargegen

Gallery

