



## INTERVIEW: VIANNEY HALTER

*By A Collected Man*

In any given industry, the phrase ‘true original’ is applied to a great many, who aren’t necessarily deserving of the title. One such watchmaker who truly fits this description is Vianney Halter, both for his weird and wonderful creations, but for his character also. A great admirer of thrill seeking pioneers, ranging from sound barrier pilots with the ‘right stuff’ to NASA astronauts, all the way through to fictitious adventurers. We sat down with Vianney in his remote atelier to talk all things time travel and watchmaking.

**Walking around your workshop, it’s quite clear that you’re taken by unusual machinery and imaginary things...**

*Yes, I like that mix between science fiction and real life experiences. I’m obsessed with this kind of thing, futurist dreamers and imagination, because it influences real life. I’m curious as to what the future will be like, and that feels like a window into it.*

**So, time travel and that sort of thing is something you’re interested in too presumably?**

*For sure, you know, when I started watchmaking school, the transportation to get me there was extremely complicated. It would take two hours each way.*

**Wow, that’s not fun...**

*I had four hours a day to make use of and so I started reading books, purely because I had the time to spare. A friend of mine was really into science fiction and he had advised me on a few books to try, and then I was transported to a different world. These books opened my mind to the prospect of something further, something outside of our small world, a vision.*

**Right...**

*At this time in history, these notions of space and future were very prominent, so there were plenty of new films and books for me to look at.*



**When was this roughly?**

*The '70s. I saw movies like Forbidden Planet, or War of the Worlds; these kinds of global scale disaster type films. I think my brain was bent and built out of these concepts.*

**This imaginary world gave you a sense of escapism from the mundanity of life?**

*Yes, definitely. My world was very basic, my father was a steam train driver but I found myself in this iron built, mechanical environment with him sometimes, which was fun for me.*

***”I wanted to discover the world, a new city, parties, girls [laughs].”***

**And where did you go to study watchmaking?**

*I went to Paris to study, which was a totally new world for me. I wanted to discover the world, a new city, parties, girls [laughs]. I wanted to explore alternative culture and underground scenes. Between this experience, the science fiction books and the films, it helps in creating, not my personality, but...*

**Your vision?**

*My vision, exactly. Or my feeling for the world and human life.*

**So, these experiences developed your imagination in a sense?**

*Well, I remember imagining my life between reality and the characters in these books who would always be operating some kind of otherworldly machinery and being fascinated. Whether it was a machine to move in space or travel time, there was always a fantastic machine involved. This notion of building these machines is something that came about in the last part of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th, one genius building a time machine [laughs].*

**[Laughs] Right, because it's always the odd genius in the shed with all the levers and the...**

*[Laughs] ...Cogs, yeah. Something indicating the date on there too. This kind of thing is a little old fashioned now, but for me, this opened my mind to another dimension. When I'm making a watch, I'm working on this small dream and even if it's not possible to travel in time, with this tool, or instrument, you can dream. When you look at that machine, it reminds*



*you that you are human, and it stresses the importance of time. It's also a little reminder that your dream is not too far away. These things aren't merely for telling the time of day, because time is very futile these days.*



**It's interesting that you phrase it that way, do you think that the romance of time has become somewhat lost in watchmaking today?**

*I would say so. Time is not a fixed thing, it's the speed of light, it's the rotation of the Earth and the stars in the sky. It's a very flexible and strange concept, because we all experience it, but we live in our own little versions of it. For me, it's fascinating that because of my brain, I am not a dog or a cat; I'd like to be a cat, because that would be cool.*

**[Laughs] OK...**

*At the end of it all, life is a dream, it's not so serious. I am free because I am a dreamer, it's important not to forget that. Life is short and very futile. These moments where you learn to ask questions, why this, why work, why eat, why sleep, why do you get older, they're very poignant things to consider.*

***”I was a simply spirited young man with a lot of questions.”***

**Do you feel as though you had an impulse to question everything from a young age?**

*Yes, though it wasn't as clear in my mind back then. I was a simply spirited young man with a lot of questions.*

**Philosophical questions?**

*Yeah. I think this tendency came from my ancestors and my parents, this inquisitive nature. For a lot of people, these bigger 'life' questions, they want to avoid it altogether. These things are important for human growth, to live and grow together without being afraid.*

**Right...**

*It's like people are afraid of a little stress. Life is stress, but stress is interesting. Life without stresses would be very dull.*



**So, you feel as though people are forgetting how to be human, in a way?**

*Yes, absolutely.*

**Your office is almost entirely covered with pictures of great pioneers, both from fiction and real life, do you feel that these pioneers were pushing the envelope for what it means to be human?**

*Yeah, I think so. I put all these people on my wall to help myself remember that some people managed to have a life which was very close to these dreams that you read about in fiction. I like machinery because it exists in three dimensions, and it's possible to explain how something works from experiencing these things. I like what they represent.*

**Are you more of a hands on type of person where learning is concerned?**

*I would say so, it's important to physically experience things, sometimes with success and sometimes with failure.*

**Right...**

*I remember one time, the teacher put a small piece of sodium metal into water and the metal reacted immediately. Straight after, I wanted to try putting in a bigger piece [laughs].*

***"He was smart though, and used it to teach us, rather than just tell us off."***

**[Laughs] Of course...**

*The teacher wasn't so happy when I threw a big piece in the water and it went crazy. He was smart though, and used it to teach us, rather than just tell us off. We learned that there is a specific amount that we could get away with, without it exploding. Direct learning. These days, this kind of thing would never happen...*

**Right, they're very protective these days...**

*Protecting the bubble of human life. Don't move, stay at home, eat only what I give you. I want to have my own experiences to understand the world, I don't want to be told about it and never feel it. It's my job to share and explain my vision, what my dream was and still is because it may inspire people to take the same approach. I try to give new generations something to think about, to have a true and deep life.*





**When was it that you realised you could turn your vision into a business?**

*It wasn't an immediate process. It became clearer the more pieces I made, each one was a development. This type of work, it's not just about money, it's about a portion of my life. Someone might come along and offer to buy something for X, but that will take six months of my life to produce, so I have to be sure that it's the right thing to do. I like to sell my work to people who truly appreciate it for what it is, rather than just whoever has enough money.*

**People that understand your vision?**

*This is true in most cases, but for some people they grow with the pieces and eventually understand. It's a lot to ask of a customer. All people are different, but I like to have a connection with these people; the experience should be positive. Even if they understand it somehow on an instinctive level, that's ok, but I want them to discover another world.*

**Did you struggle with these kinds of customers?**

*Well, there were a lot of people who didn't get it initially, but twenty years later these people have bought three, four or five pieces of mine. There's no point if they don't understand.*



***”I’ve known this guy 20 years or so, and that success and all that money just changed him.”***

**Do you find it difficult to communicate your vision to people?**

*It’s always difficult and it’s a big part of my business. I spend about a third of my time convincing people, meeting with people, sometimes without success, sometimes with success. If your heart is only in the deal and making money, well then the watchmaking business isn’t for you. Maintaining success in this world is no easy feat, it’s possible to make money to survive and then occasionally one guy will strike it big. There’s one brand in particular that blew up a long time ago, I’ve known this guy 20 years or so, and that success and all that money just changed him.*



**Oh, really?**

*The guy is completely lost, money changes people. I’ll see him from time to time and we share a few words, but I don’t recognise him.*

### **He's become detached from some basic philosophies?**

*Yeah, it's a delicate balance. I'd take my situation over his every day of the week, because some things are more important. I've met a lot of rich people wanting to buy my work and all they care about is money and the price. They're looking for a bargain and I'm not willing to give it to them. I don't understand some of these collectors.*

### **Collectors of independents?**

*Yes, because on the one hand they're supporting an important craft and then on the other they're just happy they negotiated a bargain of half price or whatever. The watchmakers just get totally shafted for big portions of their life that they won't get back, and this is something to be proud of?*



### **Right, that is a problem...**

*It's difficult to make watches, it takes time, it's delicate and it takes dedication. These people who have had success in their life act as though they want to share that with people like us, but it's just not true. I really appreciate when someone has a true understanding and appreciation of what goes into these things. I love it when a customer will send me a picture of their watch in whatever city around the world, saying "hey look at this Vianney..."*

**Oh, that sounds like it would be nice to get...**

*We like to build relationships with our customers over a long period of time. In the workshop, certain models that are being worked on aren't referred to as the model name, but who they're being worked on for. This isn't true of all of them, but for our special customers, this is what happens.*