



THE OUTER LIMITS

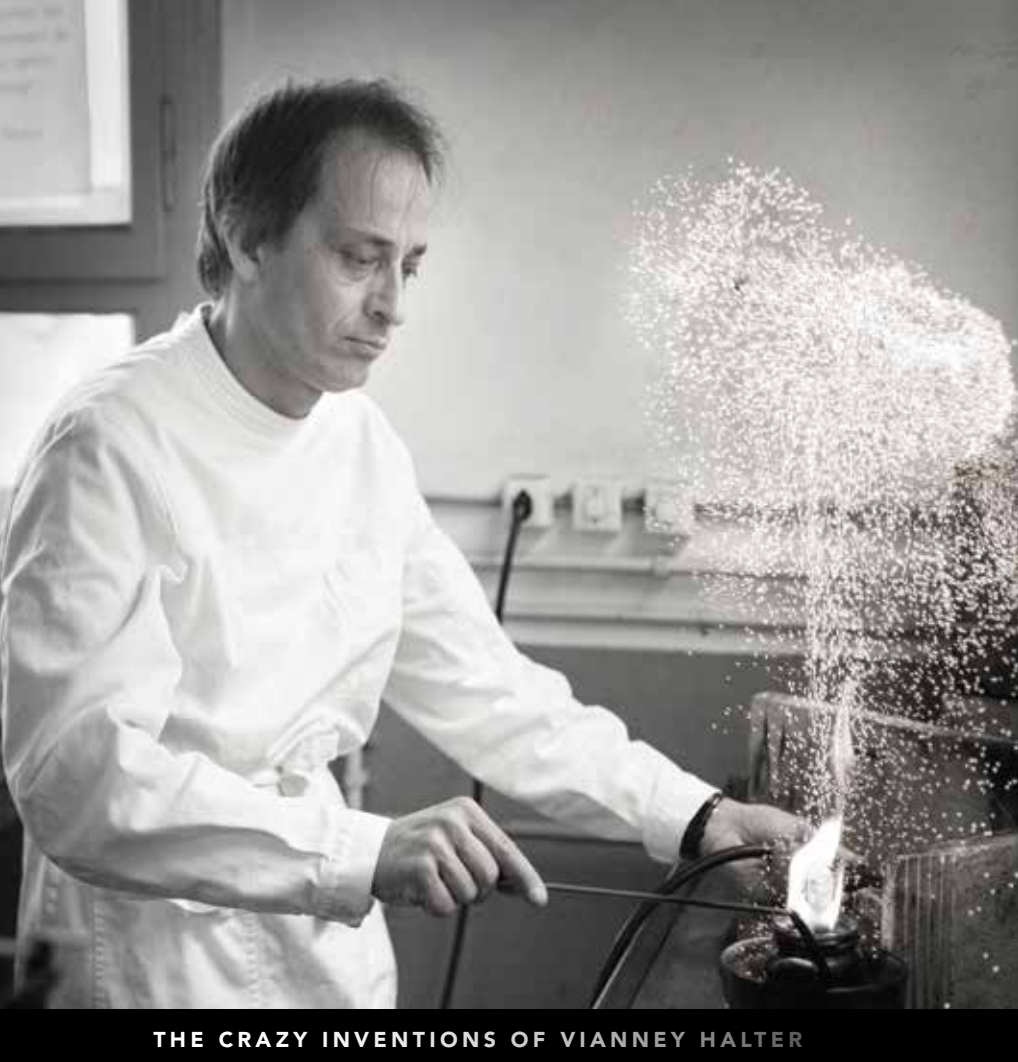
With his first watch in seven years, independent horology's prodigal son has simultaneously come back down to Earth and ventured far into space. *Elizabeth Doerr*

The Deep Space Tourbillon, unveiled last year by the 50-year-old watchmaker Vianney Halter, is a watch that looks like no other, and has a story like no other. A herculean timepiece with a triple-axis tourbillon at its centre, peripheral hands, and an appearance suggesting all manner of sci-fi connotations, it was justly awarded the Innovation Prize at November's Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève. It marks the triumphant comeback of one of the most influential and innovative horological artists of his generation, who had not produced a watch in the previous seven years.

Perhaps most strangely of all, it was *Star Trek* that partly inspired his return.

In the early years of the new millennium, Vianney Halter was hailed as the definitive new talent entering the world of independent watchmaking. Halter had followed his friend François-Paul Journe to Switzerland from Paris in 1990, where the pair, both experts in restoring old masters, worked alongside Denis Flageollet (now De Bethune's technical director) and other talented watchmakers in a think-tank for complicated watchmaking called THA (Techniques Horlogères Appliquées SA). It was rivalled in those days perhaps only by the Audemars Piguet-backed studio, APRP (Audemars Piguet Renaud et Papi).

Many of THA's maverick watchmakers have since set out to create their own brands, Halter included. He settled in Sainte-Croix, where THA – which has belonged to Carl F. Bucherer since 2007 – is located, and there established his small manufacture, Janvier



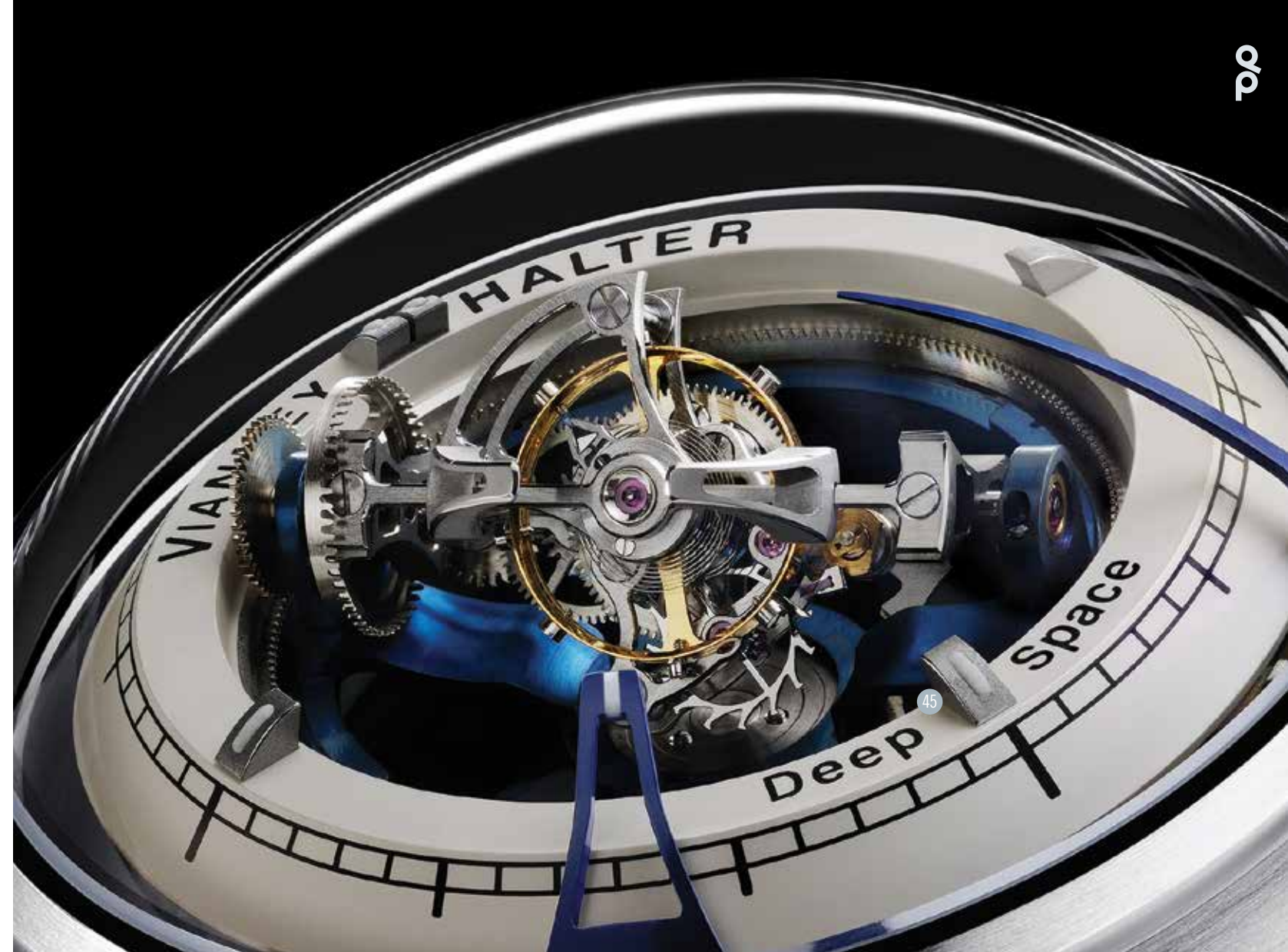
THE CRAZY INVENTIONS OF VIANNEY HALTER

PICTURE © RALPH BAUMGARTEN



CABESTAN (PROTOTYPE, 2007)

Halter completed the functional prototype of a watch, conceived in collaboration with TAG Heuer V4 mastermind Jean-François Ruchonnet, that incorporates constant force through a chain-and-fusee mechanism. As with the Opus 3 (and the V4), it took some years to be successfully produced in series, though in this case the reasoning was more to do with brand ownership issues than impossibly complex mechanics.



ANTIQUA (1998)

Halter's first independent watch was a perpetual calendar and the founding piece in his Futur Antérieur line, his vision of a modern-day marine chronometer. Its case alone comprised nearly 100 individual components, including solid-gold rivets.



HARRY WINSTON OPUS 3 (2003)

A simultaneous triumph and disappointment, this remains the most mysterious, magical and meaningful of Halter's creations. Six 'portholes' reveal a digital display of the hours, minutes and date, with the last four seconds of each minute counted down. The blue daytime hour numerals differentiate from the night-time numerals, which are hollowed out. At midnight, the date numerals jump instantaneously, along with the minutes and hours. Limited to just 55 pieces, eventual owners had to wait more than seven years to take delivery.



CLASSIC JANVIER MOON & SUN (2007)

An homage to Halter's favourite watchmaker Antide Janvier, this was strictly limited to just 12 pieces in platinum. Containing both moon phases and the elusive equation of time, it was outfitted with a transparent rotor for automatic winding that nonetheless allowed full view of the lovely mechanics.

SA, named after the 19th century watchmaker Antide Janvier, his idol. Halter introduced the first watch bearing his own name in 1998. A daring perpetual calendar named the Antiqua, it set the tone for much of his outlandish, retro-futuristic work to come, and laid the base for a line of steampunk-ish *haute horlogerie* watches that he christened Futur Antérieur.

Halter had made a splash, but it was the Opus project with the then-fledgling Harry Winston Rare Timepieces that was to push him further into the limelight. Spearheaded by Max Büsser, CEO of the jeweller's watch division at the time, the Opus project would engage a different independent watchmaker each year to break new horological ground, and was in many ways the forerunner for Büsser's transparently collaborative brand, MB&F.

MAGNUM OPUS

The Opus 3 can be considered a turning

point for Halter, Büsser and the Opus project in general. Picking up where his own marine chronometer-inspired timepieces left off, and quite unlike anything seen before or since, the Opus 3 was a mechanical-digital masterpiece with portholes displaying individual numerals for the hours and date. As so often happens inside Halter's unfathomable mind, however, things got complicated. The development became far pricier than originally thought, and production became seriously delayed. It would eventually take seven years, and the involvement of APRP, to complete the watch according to Halter's original designs.

It should perhaps come as no surprise that, as a particularly gifted artist in his chosen field, Halter's emotional world is a bit more acutely coloured than some. Like so many noteworthy poets, artists and writers, his creative output has always effectively been controlled by his temperament.

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In 2000 Halter produced a contemporary rendition of a classic marine chronometer, the Classic Janvier. In 2007 he completed a more complex version, the Classic Janvier Sun and Moon, complete with equation of time and a spellbindingly mysterious rotor. But Halter, like all luxury watch manufacturers, was hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis. Despite comparatively brisk sales, the original Classic Janvier had set him back financially and timing of the new model was disastrous. His once-buzzing Janvier factory slowly became practically devoid of employees, and production ground to a halt.

“Indeed, I was exhausted, as I had produced a tremendous amount of work for years and years,” he says, recounting the elements that sent him spiralling into a period of self-doubt. It brought on something akin to writer’s block. “During such a period, you question yourself about your work, your life, your path, your target, their meanings... and, at the end, the Deep Space Tourbillon was born during this transformational time.”

A NEW DAWN

What pulled Halter out of his funk was a rather unexpected turn of events. Though he had not launched a new watch since 2007, the 2011 jury of the Grand Prix d’Horlogerie de Genève awarded him the ‘Best Watchmaker’ prize (the award can, in fact, be seen as a tribute). “It reloaded me, infused me with energy to work on the Deep Space Tourbillon,” he says.

In fact, Halter’s inspiration for this spirited timepiece occupied a rather more ignoble place on the cultural map than the marine chronometers and historic timepieces that had previously fuelled his vision. In his time of reflection, Halter had watched in its entirety the *Star Trek* television series *Deep Space Nine* (1993–1999). It reminded him of his love of science fiction, and took him back to his ingrained set of ideals.

“I wanted to explore a new style instead of carrying on with the *Futur Antérieur*,” he explains. The Deep Space Tourbillon, therefore, is both a departure and a continuation. Like his previous timepieces, it uses a horological device from the annals of traditional watchmaking, but features it in a contemporary manner. “I had to surprise my followers, not disappoint them. This was a challenge, but the solution was just to work hard on it.”

SPACE ODDITY

Here’s how it’s constructed: the large, central, triple-axis tourbillon is firmly ensconced within a type of patented cradle supported from the bottom only, on a single ball bearing. With this core concept, the tourbillon had to remain light so as to minimise its energy requirements. The movement, with peripheral hands that curve over the ring of the dial, was then designed around this mechanism, underneath a highly domed sapphire crystal. The result: an *haute horlogerie* watch with the look of a UFO – and noticeably of the space station in *Deep Space Nine*, its docking claws reaching over.

But Halter says the Deep Space Tourbillon is not, in fact, a technically oriented watch.

“In my opinion, the most interesting part is that the tourbillon is used not for its alleged advantages in terms of accuracy, but for a more subtle and powerful purpose.”

Instead, he sees the triple-axis tourbillon as a type of kinetic sculpture. For him, the tourbillon’s three simultaneous rotations (of 40 seconds, six minutes and 30 minutes) make a philosophical notional literal: “They translate the conceptual idea of the three dimensions of space, surrounded by the fourth dimension – time,” he says.

“The target of the Classic Janvier was a kind of tribute to Antide Janvier, and also to show the level of my work,” Halter sums up. “And the target of the Deep Space Tourbillon is a way to share my philosophy.”

