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MB&F's Maximilian Büsser
Incredible Journeys &
Chic Destinations

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ALFRED DUNHILL
Dark navy wool blazer; light blue
cotton shirt; MB&F Legacy
Machine No.1 dual time zone in
18k red gold with alligator strap

MAD MAX

Disarmingly forthright and charming, Maximilian Busser proves to be as engaging as the audacious time machines that his company, MB&F, is well-known for

PHOTOGRAPHY Eric Chow/Blink Studio STYLING Sarah Saw
GROOMING Annie Goh/Artist At Work HAIR Jane Choo/Wenawave Salon

On the surface, the man and his machines couldn't have been further apart. Looking immaculate in a well-tailored suit jacket, shirt and a pair of his favourite dark blue denim, Maximilian Busser conforms to the conventional image of a globe-trotting businessman, albeit one who is also obviously a sharp dresser. The only thing that betrays his geek background is the thick black-rimmed glasses that he dons this morning after a sleepless night.

On the other hand, his watches, or what he refers to as horological machines, created under the aegis of MB&F (short for Maximilian Busser & Friends established in 2005), are confounding works of three-dimensional mechanical engineering that shock and titillate at the same time. Intimidating, yes, but also irresistibly captivating whether it is the Horological Machine No.1 (HM1) with its four-barrel movement or last year's HM4 Thunderbolt that resembles an aircraft. (For all its engineering and design might, Maximilian proved that he could be whimsical when he added a white gold panda riding the HM4 Only Watch edition like a jet earlier this year.)

Never one to shy from springing surprises, Maximilian, 44, recently unveiled not another oddly shaped instrument as one had expected but a seemingly common round watch. The classical-looking Legacy Machine No.1 is the first in a new line of watches that pays tribute to the innovators of traditional watchmaking; even then, it has the 3D effect of MB&F's rebel stamp from the large balance wheel that hovers above the dial to the vertical power reserve. In this interview, the remarkably candid Maximilian offers more than a peek at the man behind the enfant terrible of watchmaking.

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Men’s Folio: You obviously have very bizarre ideas when it comes to watches. What is a watch to you?

Maximilian Büsser: It used to be a practical object because it was the only way we could tell time before. Now I see it as a work of mechanical art, a kinetic sculpture. We deconstruct and then reconstruct watchmaking into these crazy machines of time. Telling time is no longer what’s most important – we can find out about the time from our mobile phones or any quartz movement. Do I call myself an artist? Yes, if by artist you mean using the watch as a canvas to create mechanical sculptures.

Let’s backtrack to the beginning. How did you get started in the watch business?

I fell into it by chance. I was 24, fresh out of school and about to join a major corporation when I met Henry-John Belmont who was the managing director of Jaeger-LeCoultre at that time (early 1990s). I remember that he told me, “Do you want to be one of 200,000 people in a big organisation or one of five people who are going to relaunch (Jaeger-LeCoultre)?” I was instantly persuaded. The seven years at the company was incredible. I started off as a product manager and Henry-John would take us out to dinner every evening. For most people, it’s a nightmare to go for dinner with your boss but for me, it was an extraordinary experience because Henry-John was not only inspirational but a visionary as well. We talked about strategies, sketched new pieces and spent all our time working on how we could rebuild the company. Until today, I believe that it’s very important to work with people who inspire you.

How do you think your time at Jaeger-LeCoultre cultivated your interest in horology?

It was the first time that I saw engineering with emotions. In all my five years of schooling in micro technology engineering, it was always about equations and problems - it was absolutely unemotional.

Then you left to join Harry Winston Rare Timepieces as the managing director at the age of 31 in 1998.

They told me at the interview that I was 10 years too young but offered me the job anyway! To tell you the truth, it was a surprise that they even called me at all. When I first arrived, I knew that it was not in a good shape but I didn’t realise how bad it was. In the first year, I worked 17-hour days with a tiny team and developed a massive ulcer, and we had no help from New York (head office) at all. Nevertheless, we managed to save it after a year.

My father once told me that you don’t know what you’re capable of until you’re in the middle of a battle. It took me awhile to understand what he meant but that was my ‘battle’. I learnt what I was capable of, what I was good at and what I was not. I finally understood myself well enough to go after what I wanted.

What did you learn most about yourself?

I think I’m pretty good at inspiring and engaging people. I just don’t like managing them, which is one of the reasons why MB&F will always remain small. I don’t like to deal with all the issues of a growing company. As a small company, I can create only what I believe in even if it means that the production output is limited. My team will never go beyond 15 people. When it’s a small team, everybody works as if it’s their company and you have incredible efficiency and flexibility.

One of your most significant accomplishments at Harry Winston was the Opus range, which can be seen as the precursor to MB&F. Can you elaborate on this?

It was a tentative step to do something different. The tipping point, however, was when my father passed away. I realised that nothing was more important than the last two hours of your life because if you couldn’t be at peace with yourself in those two hours, everything that you had done before would have been for nothing. I didn’t know my father very well because we rarely talked and I had no idea if he had any regrets, but (his death) jolted me into thinking about the age-old debate of life and death. It made me reevaluate my own life.

For 14 years, I created watches to please other people and the market trend. By contrast, Opus was about the watchmakers expressing themselves and being true to their souls. Working with them made me see what I wanted to be. What I craved most was the freedom to create only what I wanted and what I believed in. And for that, I needed to be the owner of my company. I began imagining what my dream company would be like.

Money was a problem though. I had some set aside but it wasn’t enough. So I shelved the idea and continue to drive Harry Winston but I would often go back to that ‘shelf’. It became an obsession. Finally, I called it quits after we presented Opus V (in collaboration with Felix Baumgartner) at Basel – you stop when you’re still at the top of the game. The hardest part for me was leaving the team that I’ve built over the years - they were like family to me.





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Was it hard to keep the faith in the early years of MB&F?

I never had a doubt. Even when we nearly went bankrupt before we delivered our first piece because one of the suppliers was bought over by another company, I never once thought I would go back to another job. It was very easy in the beginning because it was all about creating. I was ecstatic that I was able to be rebellious for a change and rage against the machine.

How do you assemble your team?

They are the best in what they do. More importantly, they have to be great human beings. When I say “friends”, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they are the people that I hang out with. They are people who share the same values as me, who I admire and who also respect me for who I am. What connects us is trust. Trust that the product will be great, trust that everyone will do what they say they are going to do and trust that we are there to help each other.

Most of the team members are independent entrepreneurs. A crucial member of the team, however, is Serge Kriknoff who is the COO, the technical director and also a company shareholder. Without him, MB&F might not have seen the light. Another crucial member is Eric Giroud who’s an incredibly talented designer. There is no ego issue between us and we understand each other perfectly.

How do you always manage to top yourself each time?

When I created HM1, it was the best that I could do but after I finished it, I realised that I wanted to do more. And so HM2 was created and so on and so forth. When it came to HM4 Thunderbolt, I thought I might have gone too far because I didn’t even dare to wear it on the streets. But everyone jumped on it – so far, we’ve delivered 43 pieces with only three left on the retail shelf. It’s response like this that gave me the confidence to say, “Oh, so you’re ready to go that far.” Our clients, who are rebels like us, allow me to push myself further. Our motivation comes from accomplishing something that everyone thought was impossible to do.

This energy has also opened up new horizons. For example, we opened an art gallery, MAD Gallery, in Geneva recently. The gallery is centred on the concept of machines as how, for example, a Beijing artist, a German lamp maker or a Slovenian designer perceive it. I’m excited about it because it allows me to meet more interesting people.

What inspires you?

As far as my creative process, it’s the way I used to dream when I was a child. As an only child who spent a huge amount of time on his own in his room, I had an incredibly imaginative life. I recapture that spirit when I thought everything was possible, and translate it into my work now. In a way, MB&F is my psychotherapy; the entire HM series was created by revisiting my childhood.



MB&F Legacy Machine No.1

"What would happen if I had been born in 1867 instead of 1967?" The question that Maximilian Büsser asked himself back in 2007 has now been answered in the form of Legacy Machine No.1 (LM1). An extraordinarily ordinary looking timepiece by MB&F's standard, the LM1 is Max's ode to the trailblazing watchmakers of the 19th century. "For me, the real watchmaking era was between 1780 and 1870. Every single complication that we know today – the perpetual calendar, tourbillon, chronograph, split second chronograph, minute repeater – was invented then. Isn't it weird that they were making all these beautiful complications 150 years ago when half of the era didn't even have electricity?" Max exclaims.

He elaborates, "The 19th century was a time when the machines were the stars, as opposed to now when they are just tools we use to manufacture things. When I think of that period, I think of Jules Verne and his stories about rockets to the moon and submarines under the sea before they even existed. I think about the extraordinary structures like the Eiffel Tower and the Golden Gate Bridge that were built then. I basically wanted to design a three-dimensional machine that gives time from the 19th century."

For this project, Max engaged the talents of Chronode's Jean-Francois Mojon, winner of Best Watchmaker at the 2010 Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Geneve, to develop the movement and Kari Voutilainen for the design. The watchmakers shine the spotlight back on the balance wheel – which Max describes as the soul of a watch – and imagined it in a massive 14mm diameter that beats at a leisurely 18,000 bph - the same amplitude as a 19th century pocket watch. More interestingly, the balance wheel with Breguet spring is now positioned above the dial, held together by twin arches and

made to look like it's hovering in the air. According to Max, a perfectly vertical stainless steel connects the balance with the movement inside.

"It's the precise machining that we have today that enabled us to have exactly the right dimensions to be able to adjust this big flying balance wheel as well as developed a perfectly vertical axis with zero angle distortion for the rod that connects the balance with the movement," Max explains.

The engineering wizardry continues in the movement that allows for completely independent adjustment of the two time zones including the minutes, which is highly unusual. "It's actually not as complicated as it sounds. We basically have two gear trains instead of the usual one."

What is truly amazing, however, is the vertical power reserve indicator that seemingly slides up and down a track at '6'. Max notes, "When we started working on it, we had one rule and that was to use only technology and materials that were available in the 19th century. We have to make an exception for the power reserve (up to a maximum of 45 hours) because we needed to find a way to power it without consuming too much energy. To do this, we used ceramic for the ball bearing system as the material produces the least friction and thus doesn't require much energy."

The other exception to the rule is the use of sapphire to create the dome that protects the dial. "It's treated with anti-reflection on both sides so that when you look at it flat, you virtually don't see the glass. But when you look at it from the side, you see this three-dimensional 'city' encased in a glass." Superlative finishing such as the Geneva waves, hand engravings and polished bevels faithful to the 19th century style gives this time machine a final flourish. **MF**

