

INSIDE THE MAD GENIUS

THAT IS GREUBEL FORSEY



*Greubel Forsey's Invention Piece 1
with inclined tourbillon.*



The Greubel Forsey Double Tourbillon 30 Secret.



Stepping into the world of virtuoso watchmakers Robert Greubel and Stephen Forsey is not easy, but I had an in. I made the trip to Neuchâtel to interview the reclusive Greubel, then rode up to La Chaux-de-Fonds to meet Forsey, the other half of the duo. I also made a trip to Greubel's family farm and was assured that I was the first journalist to set foot on the farm (it was my Harley that got me through the door—Greubel had just purchased a custom Harley and wanted to go for a ride).

One thing I am sure of is that these guys are crazy. Crazy enough to hand-finish every part that goes into their watches, on every side, even the sides that no one will ever see. Crazy enough to employ thirteen people in the finishing department, hand-finishing when most companies are happy with machine finishing. Crazy enough to try to push the boundaries of watchmaking, challenge convention and win. Crazy enough to build a company that employs dozens of people and only makes about 80 watches—and succeed. Yeah, these guys are crazy—crazy like foxes.

The Greubel Forsey partnership was formed in Le Locle, when both of them were working for Audemars Piguet's movement creation shop, Renaud & Papi. Greubel, who was heading up the company at that time, hired Forsey. Several years later, they decided to form their own company, and the rest is history. "I didn't actually plan on coming to live here," Forsey admits. "I was working with Aspry in London, restoring antique timepieces, which was the best job I could find in England. Then I realized that if I wanted to learn more, I had to go to Switzerland. It seemed like a dream, because for a watchmaker to come to Switzerland to work was difficult. The idea was to come here for a while then go back to England. Once I got here, I discovered the quality of life, the great job at Renaud & Papi, the countryside, skiing in the winter; there were so many things to do, and on the professional side, there was always a new challenge."

"Robert and I are both professional watchmakers; that is our

continued on page 106



*Robert Greubel
and Steven Forsey*

TALKING TIME WITH ROBERT GREUBEL

According to the Greubel of Greubel Forsey, the company began as less of a commercial enterprise and more of a “think tank” for advanced watchmaking. “There is not really a mission, but a way of thinking, a passion, for our company,” he says.

Greubel Forsey was launched in April 2004, and five years later, Greubel is surprised by how difficult it was to get to where they are now. “In the beginning, we thought it would be easier,” he explains. “We had worked four and a half years before launching, and we were totally convinced of our success; after all we were coming out with inventions that had never existed. However, the message is quite sophisticated, and there is a gap between being convinced that what you have is full of substance and having the people in front of you understand the difference. The reception has always been positive, but we have to make people understand what is so

special about Greubel Forsey. That message is not easy to communicate. It’s not necessarily always understood as it should be. We are not there yet. We still have to find our own way of communicating. The challenge is enormous.”

The way that the company creates its inventions is a challenge just for Greubel to articulate. “First and foremost, we are guided by the inspiration and the desire to create something within this moment,” he tries to explain. “Sometimes, it’s even hard for me to tell someone why we do things that way, because it seems so natural. That’s why we worked on the Double Tourbillon 30° Secret, because with a tourbillon the tendency is to show off, but I felt the need to express the Greubel Forsey philosophy through a beautiful dial. Then we have the extreme of the Invention Piece 1, where you can really see the invention in full view.”

“Watchmaking is in my genes—my father was a watchmaker, and I remember him working late at night at his bench,” he adds. “There is a mix between conscious and unconscious creation. I have always been curious, making a conscious evaluation of what exists and what is still to be done. I am always thinking about what I can do to go further. Where I live, in the middle of nature, enables me to create. I have been living here on the farm for five years. I ride horses, bike, play tennis, walk—my life is oriented to nature.”

Greubel is doing exactly what he wants to, and he is enjoying his work. “I am having a good time,” he says with a smile. “There are always challenges. We have not chosen the easiest path, and there are moments that are hard, but we are having fun. When you can see what has been accomplished, you can tell we are enjoying ourselves. The watches speak for us.” ♦

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY: STEVEN FORSEY

Steven Forsey is the opposite of his introverted French partner, Robert Greubel (who has lived in Switzerland for more than 20 years). A Brit, Forsey came to Switzerland to further his watchmaking career, then met Greubel and decided to stay. Why Greubel Forsey instead of Forsey Greubel? I asked him.

“For the name of the company, it was a logical choice to put his name first, because it sounds better,” Forsey says. “We were just looking to fund the next stage of our ideas. We had to come up with a name, so we used our last names, because Steven and Robert’s watches didn’t sound serious enough.”

Forsey loves living in Switzerland. “The climate is so different from central London’s, but for me it’s a great

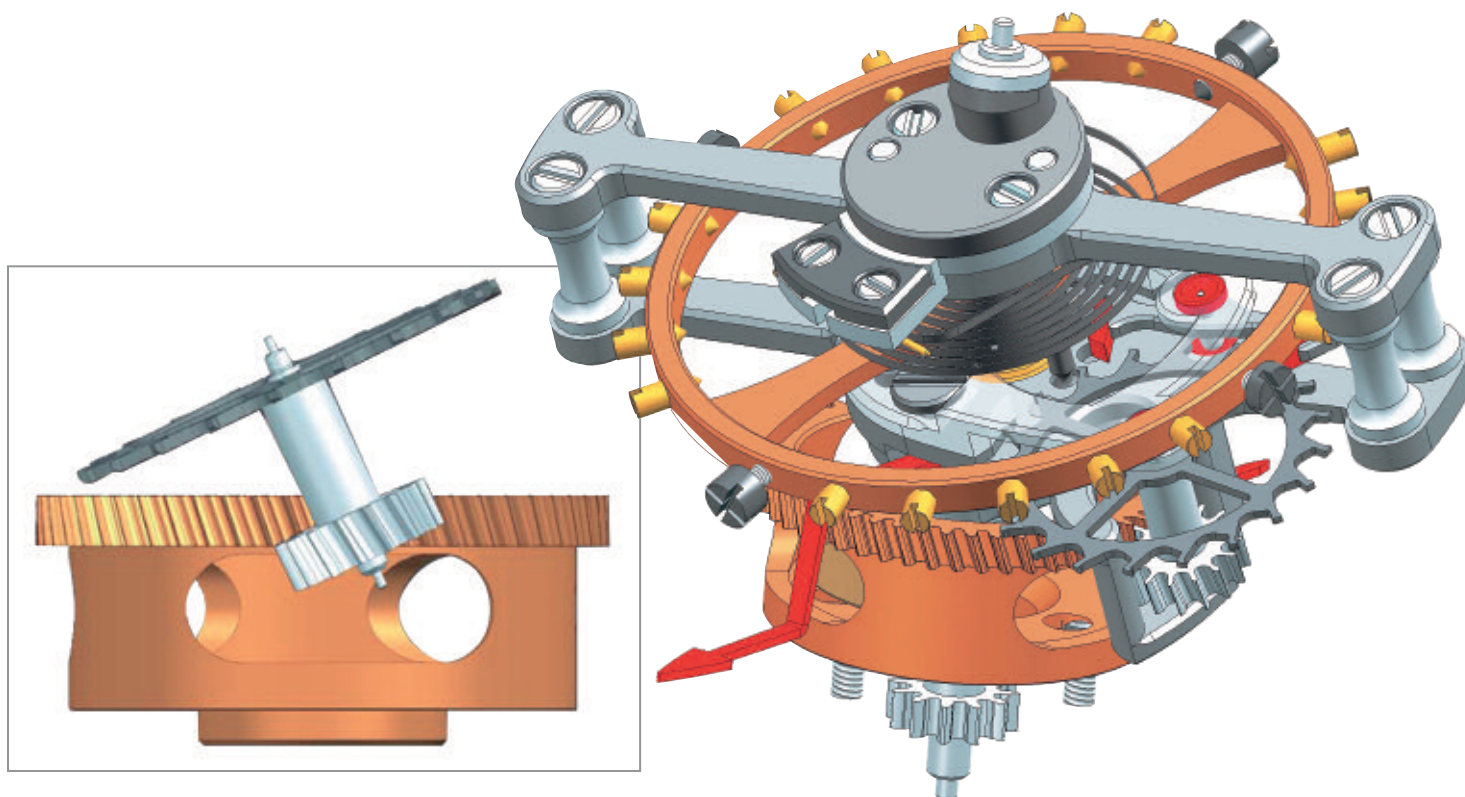
environment,” he explains. “We are centrally placed, close to Geneva, Bern, Zurich. If you want to visit a big city, it’s not far away. There’s such an infrastructure and culture here; there is everything you need and not too much of what you don’t need. I have been in Switzerland for sixteen years.”

Forsey is quite a student of watchmaking history. “When I look at what was done two centuries ago, it is humbling, and we want to do it at least as well,” he says. “To see a nineteenth-century Breguet tourbillon is fantastic. If ours could last as long and mark what we are able to do today, that’s something worth doing.”

Given the amount of work, it’s easy for Forsey to get over-involved with the day-to-day operations of the business, letting the details overwhelm the bigger picture. “I

do try and plan at least one spot during the week to think,” he says. “If you are looking for a solution for a particular problem, it doesn’t always work to sit there with it in front of you. Often, I do something else, and it works in my mind; then my mind throws out useful bits. You can’t order good ideas—you can’t plan them. You just have to wait and be ready when they happen. It’s usually the worst moment when they come to you, and so you have to look like you are paying attention.”

“We don’t have much time to spend working at the bench—I would like to spend more,” he concludes. “We have chosen the path of sharing our ideas with our team. I want people to continue the adventure in this spirit. It’s never too early to plan for the future.” ♦



chosen profession, but from that starting point, we have taken slightly different paths,” he continues. “In 1999, when we decided to really work on the tourbillon as a subject, we wanted to fix centers of responsibilities for each of us. I looked after the technical side, the movement design and construction and development, up to the finishing and actually making the watches here in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Robert oversees the creation side, the design and the strategy, which projects to work on. He has the final say for that. We discuss each thing. A basis of respect and trust enables us to move forward and know that each one is taking the responsibility for the company.”

Both Greubel and Forsey approach their work as watchmakers, not as business people or marketers. Luckily, they have people who do that work for them so they can concentrate on problem solving and pushing the boundaries of horology. “We both believe that as contemporary watchmakers we can come up with new solutions, and watchmaking can evolve,” says Greubel.

“From the beginning, we have reinvented certain quality criteria,” he continues. “We went to our suppliers, and they had never done this quality of finishing, so we had to work closely with them. Sometimes it’s difficult to make them understand what the requirements are, so it’s easier to bring that work inside. That’s why we have a staff of 41 people today. There is a great concern about the overall quality that is needed at every stage; that’s why we manage the finishing aspects. That’s been our real key point.”

From the very start, both Greubel and Forsey have been committed to not following the accepted way of doing things. “I think what’s been important for Robert and myself, from the beginning of our adventure in 1999, is trying to see if some new pages could be added to what already existed,” says Forsey. “Time has gone

really quickly. Sometimes I wonder what I have been doing for nine years. We’ve made some good progress. One of the interesting things has been that we have been able to come up with some new tourbillon systems and actually see the finished watch and share the story with people. Just as important for us has been to build a small team of dedicated professionals. There is a shared passion and motivation for watchmaking, for the traditional finishing and the pursuit of excellence.”

When Greubel Forsey got started, the brand decided to focus on the tourbillon, considered by many the ultimate in watchmaking. The tourbillon was designed for pocket watches, which were often kept in static positions, which made compensation for the effects of gravity a necessity. Because watches worn on the wrist don’t face this problem, the tourbillon is, in essence, superfluous. Greubel Forsey is out to change that. The manufacture wants to prove the tourbillon can improve the precision of a wristwatch, while at the same time being beautiful and representing the height of complicated watchmaking. Forsey explains, “Inclining the cage, we used gravity to our advantage to average it out. We have three isolated attempts to improve the precision of the tourbillon. Each second we gain becomes exponentially more difficult. Four seconds out of 86,400 is ludicrous, yet we still do it.”

“This is not a commercial enterprise; it’s invention driven,” states Greubel. “It’s about the passion. There is no logic as in a normal venture. We don’t think about the market. There is no marketing-driven strategy—taking a movement, making a dial, getting a box and selling it. We said that we could do things differently. The products have to be commercially viable, but the invention aspect is what drives us. Together, we have over 40 years in the high-level complication field of watchmaking. There



The Tourbillon 24 Secondes Incliné and close-up diagrams of the tourbillon components (opposite).

are other brands that are marketing-driven; our strength is in invention and in our long-term vision. We have a precise path and not moving off that path, we know where we want to go.” The incredible creations from Greubel Forsey speak for themselves with stunning innovation, remarkable finishing and the highest attention to detail. To date, the inventor watchmakers have produced the following—The Double Tourbillon 30°, Double Tourbillon 30° Secret, Tourbillon 24 Secondes Incliné and Invention Piece 1.

The future holds much more invention, much more research and much more hard work for the pair. “There is loads to do,” Greubel says. “If you are an artist, and you are painting, you are doing what is inspiring to you. You are not following trends. In a way, we are artists, and our expression is through our watchmaking.” The company will open a new facility just outside La Chaux-de-Fonds, which will bring all of the scattered workshops

together under one roof. “The fantastic reception we have had to our timepieces gave us the motivation to expand,” says Forsey. “It took three years to get a larger team together. In 2007, we were able to make more timepieces and, we delivered 80 timepieces.”

“What really limits our production is the hand-finishing,” he continues. “That is already our biggest department. The new building will improve our efficiency and the interaction of each department. We have seven different workshops, which are spread out in the city, so it’s essential to bring them all together.” Don’t expect production to go through the roof—you can count on these watch world “mad scientists” to continue to push the limits of watchmaking while at the same time making no compromises when it comes to quality. After all, good things come to those who wait. ❖

By Keith W. Strandberg, international editor. To learn more about the brand, telephone 310.271.0000 or visit www.greubelforsey.ch.