



Making Time

In a digital world, Ian Schon (ENG'12)
designs analog watches

By Megan Woolhouse
Photos by Jackie Ricciardi

IAN SCHON HUNCHES OVER A WORKBENCH in his Allston studio, holding the tiny hour hand of a wristwatch with tweezers.

He will spend hours shaping the delicate part, just a fraction of a millimeter wide. And the sliver of stainless steel is just one small piece of a mechanical watch that will take 100 hours of finger-aching work before it can be worn on someone's wrist.

Schon relishes the tedious work. "I take my sweet time," he says.

A young watchmaker is a rarity in an era of iWatches and smartphones. For every 10 watch repairers retiring in the United States, just one enters the business, according to the American Watchmakers-Clockmakers Institute, an industry group. And the institute doesn't even track

the number of people who actually practice the ancient craft of making watches in the US because they are so few and far between.

But Schon (ENG'12), just 29, is from another time zone, a millennial clinging to an analog tradition the way some people still collect vinyl records. His one-man company, Schon Horology, which he launched in 2018, creates old-fashioned, windup wristwatches. They are not powered by quartz, they do not offer a calendar or a chronograph, and they perform one function: telling time. They also sell for \$5,200 each.

A former corporate product designer, Schon says he has sold more than a dozen of his creations by word of mouth alone.

"I think in business school, they use watchmaking as a case study to talk about what not



“I wanted people to appreciate me for what I can do. Not just what I can do for them.”



Ian Schon's windup wristwatches aren't powered by quartz and they don't offer a calendar or chronograph. They perform one function: telling time.



ONLINE: *Read the full story and watch a video of Ian Schon making watches in his Allston studio at bu.edu/bostonia.*

to do, what industry not to enter,” says Schon (pronounced like “loan”). “I believe there is space for people who are willing to do watchmaking differently. And if you’re willing to do it differently, people will take notice.”

In 2013, after purchasing a watch online that was not as advertised, he began tinkering. He took the watch apart and decided to use the metalworking and machining skills he had developed as a mechanical engineering student at BU to build a new case. Soon he was making other parts, and found that he was hooked.

By day he engineered sound systems and medical devices; at night he made watch parts in his Brookline apartment, slowly acquiring the highly specialized tools he needed, like vintage lathes from the 1940s and drill bits to make holes no wider than an eyelash.

Schon has long been fascinated by tactile objects, whether the look and feel of a watch, a pen, or the frame of a bike. As a student at BU, he designed and manufactured a line of aluminum pens and raised nearly \$70,000 on Kickstarter to finish and sell them in stores for \$55 each.

That venture, called Schon DSGN, took off. His pens now fetch as much as \$188 each and are sold

in boutiques around the world. In 2017, Schon left his job as a product designer to devote himself to making pens and watches.

“I wanted people to appreciate me for what I can do,” he says. “Not just what I can do for them.”

Schon displays some of the elements from his current watch collection, The Dot, a reference to the hole in the watch face above the numeral 6 where a dot circles into view every 10 seconds to let the owner know the watch is keeping time. (There is no second hand.)

The watch contains expensive NOS Doxa Swiss-made movement, which Schon says he has obtained through industry connections, declining to elaborate. (This can be a secretive business.) He refurbishes the movement, the watch’s engine. He also designs and manufactures the face, hands, and case, which are machined in Massachusetts and then finished in excruciating detail at his studio workbench.

“It’s physical, and emotionally exhausting,” Schon says. “You’re spending so much energy making sure it’s right and as you do it, the risk keeps going up that you might ruin it. You get a scratch or over-polish it and you have to start over.”