

SPECIAL: 36-PAGE GUIDE TO SPORTS WATCHES

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# WatchTime

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WATCH ENTHUSIAST PETER FONDA

Through Fonda's eyes, Nicolas Hayek Jr. and his father Nicolas Hayek and is a member of the board of directors of the Swatch Group USA, he continues to sing Casio's praises, adding, "I should be put on Casio's board. They're so damn accurate, a Casio is a marine chronometer on your wrist, and it's less than \$40. Right now I'm wearing my made in Montana watch, model 1915 with an ETA movement, and I do enjoy it. But for sheer precision, the Casio is the most accurate for navigating time." Ever striving to know more about the planets, astrophysics, and his "place on the planet," Fonda confesses, "I read a lot of eclectic magazines. I'm one of few peo-

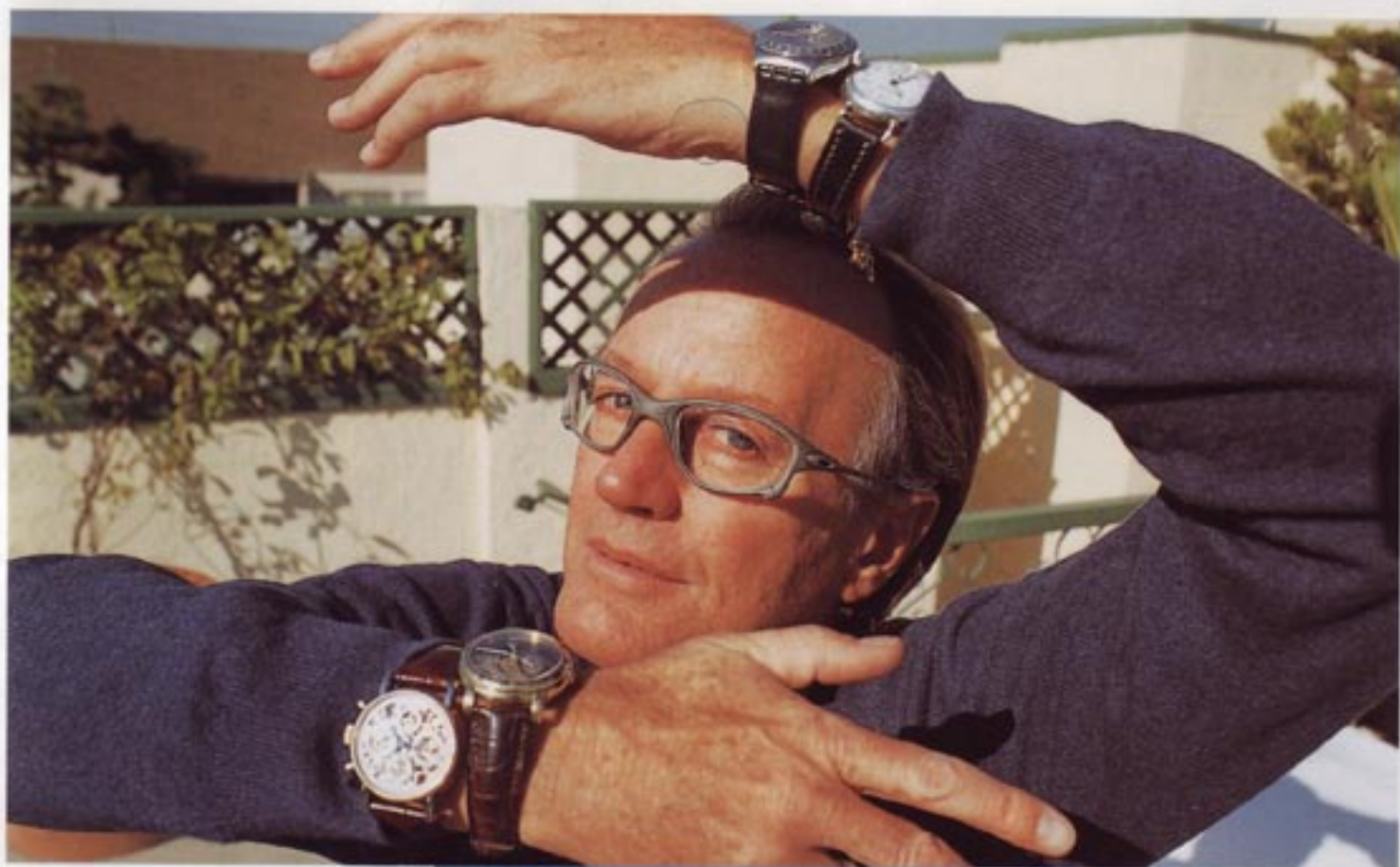


PROFILE: PETER FONDA

# PLANET RIDER



Deep inside the Los Angeles barrio, outside the La Contenta café, the snow begins to fall. As a gang of threatening Mexicans looks on, Captain America snorts the powdery white stuff, and nods to his longhaired sidekick Billy (Dennis Hopper).



**He hands over a thick wad of cash** to a black-suited dealer, takes control of the cocaine, and proceeds to his next rendezvous with a nerdy-looking character played by 1960s rock-n-roll impresario Phil Spector. Their dirty business is done quickly, as the coke is parlayed into an even taller mound of C-notes. Then Captain America, wearing motorcycle black leathers and a stars-n-stripes helmet, lines a plastic tube with the money, and stuffs the score into his Harley Davidson red, white and blue gas tank.

Now all is set. The Captain, as played in 1969 by Peter Fonda, is ready for his hallucinatory *Easy Rider* odyssey into a cultural divide, the straights versus the hippie, freedom-loving ideal of the 1960s. But before gunning his bike to the Step-penwolf beats of "Born to be Wild," Fonda blasts away at the American bedrock with yet another defiant act. Sitting astride his cycle, staring at the desert highway that he hopes will lead him to the Promised Land, he rips off a Timex prop watch with a gleaming Speidel band, and throws it to the ground. The cameras zoom in, focusing on the watch for several moments to drive home a very 60s-and none too subtle-message. Lib-

His "moveable feast," is an Italian burl wood box stuffed with his favorite timepieces. It often turns up in different parts of the ranch house.

erated from the tick tock status quo, the disarmed Fonda is now the tradition-defying renegade, free and very dangerous.

"A watch is the most widely-accepted measurement of our lives, and here I was, oh god, after dealing hard narcotics, committing a further outrage," laughs the 62-year-old Fonda, who belongs to the royal Hollywood family of Henry Fonda (his father starred in *The Grapes Of Wrath* (1940), *Mister Roberts* (1955), *On Golden Pond* (1981) etc.), sister Jane, and daughter Bridget. "I was leaving structured society with a gesture that said 'I don't need this, forget mankind, I'm on my own.'" Looking out a window at towering blue spruce trees that dominate his 200-acre

Montana ranch (a spread not far from Ted Turner's), he further recalls, "When I wrote *Easy Rider* I wish I was smart enough to think of all this broad symbolism, the hippie thing. But I just thought at the time that throwing the watch away was a natural extension of my character. At the moment it seemed as if I was breaking away from the shackles of time, that I didn't need consensus reality anymore. People didn't know that under the biker garb I was wearing a gold Rolex GMT Master, a pro-

totype I bought in Paris to celebrate my writing a story on gold watches."

Still rebelliously going his own way, the youthful-looking, lean and muscular Fonda now wears the same Rolex in tandem with a \$35 Casio, and a Ulysse Nardin Astrolabium Galileo Galilei, or with two of his 200-odd Swatches. Other full armament statements are made with a skeletonized ETA-Valjoux 7750 Chronoswiss Opus, a Patek Philippe won in a card game, a titanium Omega Seamaster Professional Diver with a helium escape valve or other timepieces that are proudly displayed in an Italian burl wood box. Fonda's version of "a moveable feast," this sumptuous box with butterfly drawers often turns up in different parts of his ranch house, and is filled with symbolic treasures.

"I don't pay attention to (watch) models, that sort of thing, but that gold Rolex GMT is special, very ceremonial," insists Fonda, currently looking for a script that will recapture the "magic" of his playing Ulysses Jackson, a laconic and troubled bee-keeper in *Ulee's Gold*, (a role that won him a 1997 Academy Award nomination for Best Actor). "It was the watch that accompanied me on my first sea-going trips (from the early 1970s to the mid 80s, he was again a veritable Captain, the William Bligh variety, sailing on an 82-foot yacht to the Marquesas, Tuamotus, Bora Bora, and other South Sea retreats). I dreamed of going to sea ever since I was 10, and once I wrote *Easy Rider* in western France, I went to Paris looking for the world's most accurate navigation watch that wouldn't corrode. It was my first great watch, and while people said 'that's a lot of gold there,' I knew that if all fell to shit, this Rolex would get me and my family across any border."

Surrendering such a prize wouldn't be easy. Not after he endured a traumatic youth, a famously icy relationship with his father, and a string of such B-grade movies as *Dirty Mary Crazy Larry* (1974), *Fatal Mission* (1990) and *Deadfall* (1993). (Besides being derided in Hollywood as "Peter the Lesser.") For that Rolex wasn't just representative of financial independence and newly found freedom. Even more important, it was also a ghost slayer. Arguably haunted by thoughts of "the one that got away," Fonda still bristles when talking about

"It was just a far out, remarkable instrument, a watch that incredibly gave you the stars."



the stainless steel Rolex his mother bought him during his childhood. He got to see the timepiece, and immediately fell in love with it. But before the watch was given to him, she died, and he never got to wear this stunning timepiece with its oyster case. "I was absolutely fascinated by this watch at age 11," he sighs, irritably, "and it certainly was heirloom quality, a watch to be passed from one generation to another. But according to my rulers, the people who were deciding what I was and wasn't after my mom died (socialite Frances Seymour Brokaw Fonda committed suicide in 1950), I wasn't old enough, or reliable enough to be trusted with such a fine watch. In my desire to have it, the watch became an object of abstractness, symbolic of the way my family dealt

with reality. It was so beautiful, so striking. It's just a shame that the watch was burned in a fire."

To escape those "rulers" and the disputes with his father ("Henry considered me a grenade with the pin pulled. My hippie look, my anti-establishment films, my open use of drugs and my condemnation of the U.S. government were a constant sore spot for him"), Fonda adventurously explored the Pacific. Living on a boat for years, he went from one exotic Polynesian lagoon to another, well out of earshot of those critics who dismissed him as Hollywood's "wayward son." During this Paul Gauguin styled period of self-exploration, Fonda was armed with more

than a Rolex GMT. He also discovered the joys of another "incredibly accurate watch."

"On most of my Pacific crossings, when I needed an extraordinarily precise instrument to know my position on the planet, I used a Casio, a watch that had a tiny calculator on it," explains Fonda, who sailed about 100,000 miles before selling the *Tatoosh* in 1985. "I didn't give a rat's ass about the calculator, but I took the plastic bands off it and put a Velcro sweat band on each side, and wrapped it around the bottom of my sextant when I would take my star shots. I'd look at planets, stars, then punch the Casio, do my 214 (a way of doing celestial navigation without using a GPS). A watch to me is more than a beautiful adornment. It brings me close to the solar system, gives me a means of understanding my place in the uni-

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verse, and I trusted that sextant, along with my Casio, explicitly."

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In 1987, while reading the *In-*

*ternational Herald Tribune* in Rome, Fonda made his own stunning discovery. Spotting an ad for a Ulysse Nardin Astrolabium Galileo Galilei (which purportedly touted the timepiece in stainless steel), he immediately longed to own this "astrolabe on the wrist" (along with supplying information about the constellations, moon phases and solstices, this device measures time by gauging the height of celestial bodies above the skyline of the horizon).

"It was just a far out, remarkable instrument, a watch that incredibly gave you the stars," recounts Fonda. "Now Rolf Schnyder (the president of Ulysse Nardin) says it wasn't ever offered in stainless steel. I had people go back into the *Tribune's* files to find the advertising. I told Rolf never question me about a watch. If I've seen it, studied it, I know everything about that timepiece." But Fonda could only admire and "intensely covet" that six-figure gem. Hardly a "hot" Hollywood star in the 1980s [after appearing in such low-budget films as *Mercenary Fighters* (1987) and *Dance of the Dwarves* (1983)], he "couldn't excuse the cost of such a pricey watch." This story ultimately had a fairy tale ending. Recently, on his 60th birthday and after a bravura performance in *The Limey* (as a "slimy" record producer-cum-drug trafficker), his wife Becky bought him the Astrolabium Galileo Galilei (the purist, always regarding watches as "ceremonial, trans-generational objects that carry great meaning," he gave her a stainless steel and gold Rolex when they got married in 1975). Now Fonda is quick to point out that the Astrolabium has an ETA

Watches clockwise from lower left: Ulysse Nardin Astrolabium Galileo Galilei, Chronoswiss Opus, Swatch Body and Soul, the Montana Watch.

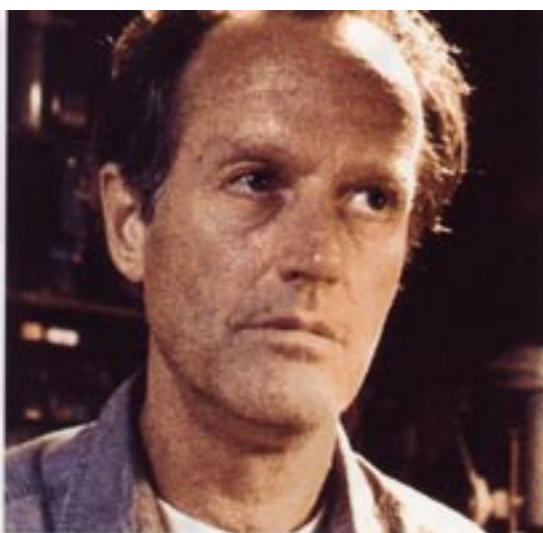


base movement that's made by the Swatch Group ("It's still in the family," he laughs, mindful of his special relationship with the Hayeks), and adds, "I really hope to get the other two watches (the Planetarium Copernicus and Tellurium Johannes Kepler) to complete the trilogy. They are expensive buggers. I don't go to watch shops, I know I could easily drop 50, \$60,000 on watches. For \$65,000 I could invest in this terrific Panasonic Super 16 Aton camera." Fonda shares that love of film and cameras with Swatch's president/their-apparent, Nicolas Hayek Jr. Calling him "a frustrated movie director," he recounts their first meeting at a 1990 Zurich news conference, when Hayek was preparing to direct Fonda in *Family Express* (1991), a story about an Italian street urchin's picaresque adventures.

"I was wearing four or five watches that day, including my Cartier Panthere, and while I'm sitting there next to Nic Jr. (who recently won a Cannes film prize for his documentary *Land of William Tell*), I told a reporter I'd come to Switzerland to buy a lot more watches," quips Fonda. "Nick had no idea I'd talk like that. I really didn't know anything about him or Swatch until then, that he's doing this watch presidency thing, but really wants to direct films. As he showed in *Family Express*, he's cool with actors. A fabulous person, he just knows how to handle actors brilliantly." Now, as a member of the Swatch Group USA's board of directors, Fonda frequently communicates with the Hayeks, and voices opinions about the design of new Swatches.

"I love the Irony models, the Body and Soul in particular," says Fonda passionately. "A piece of genius in a stainless steel body, the Body and Soul is incredibly well-made, a beautiful concept. It has luminous hands, a see-through dial, and if you look at the Ironys, they have four arms or pins like all Swatches, that prevents them from ever coming apart. It's just a fabulous piece, but each of my Swatches, and I have hundreds of them, are wonderful."

As Fonda caresses those Swatches with his cobalt-blue eyes, and talks about the timepieces he's given to his two sons, he leaves little doubt about the depths of his watch enthusiasm. He's addicted. Make no mistake about it. Yet how does one explain this all-consuming metamorphosis from a Timex-despoiling Captain America (and hippie freak icon who dropped acid with the Beatles and David Crosby) into a three-at-a-time watch maniac? Can this almost-religious horological conversion be simply attributed to losing that Rolex at age 11? His squaring some psychological hurt? Or does this "watch thing" speak to some other inner fire, like his fascination with the scientific, and his long time quest to figure



Fonda garnered a Best Actor Oscar nomination for his work in *Ulee's Gold* (1997).

out his place on our watery planet?

"Whether it's the Irony watches, my Chronoswiss Opus, or the Astrolabium Galileo Galilei, they have beauty and soul, just ingenious engineering and bewitching wonderment," explains Fonda. "In a place like Montana you feel very removed from time, so it might seem like a contradiction to be so enthused about watches. Yet it's fun to pull time off your wrist. Even at age six, when my mother had this watch cased in a big glass ball, I was so fascinated with the gears and moving parts, I had to make sense of it. That mechanical wizardry is trying to define our lives, and this is extraordinary since we can't find such meaning and logic." But that same emotional pull has also hurt Fonda. Revering watches as "part of a family's religion, the most passed along gift between fathers and sons," he bitterly recalls the wrangling over an 18-Kt. gold Day-Date Rolex "President" that had been given to his father by Bill Cosby.

"When my son Justin graduated from high school my father's last wife came out to give him his grandfather's gold watch, an idea I really liked since it fulfills the concept of continuity in a family," says Fonda. "Yet instead of the 'President' she wanted to give him a Rolex that had been pushed out by Busch beer, a watch he got after doing something for Busch. I told her to stop the fucking shit, 'that's not grandfather's gold Rolex.' She didn't want to give up the Cosby piece, which on the back says 'to Hank, all my love Cosby.' But I wouldn't let her off the hook. I forced her to cough it up, and got a lot of satisfaction from telling my son, 'there's a lot of history for your wrist.'" This sensitive, engaging eccentric, who dissed the American establishment on a Harley, also made history. *Easy Rider* is on many cinematic Top 100 lists, and is one of the few films in the National Treasury. And while Fonda never speaks to Dennis Hopper, people regularly come up to him, saying 'Peter, you greatly changed my life.' When they do that he shoots back, "really? Did you become a pedophile?"

In that male-bonding biker movie, Fonda was a metaphor for the 60s, crashing and burning after a drug-addled dose of carnal delights. He also hit his share of bumps in real life, dogged by the long shadow of his father. Yet unlike most of his hippie/anti-establishment admirers, who ultimately wound up bowing to the "system," he's continued to sing freedom's song. "I talked the talk, and wound up walking the walk," he insists. "So few people, one tenth of 1/10th of 1/10th will ever sail a large wooden ship on the amount of water I have. I wasn't claiming land for the Queen like John Cook. I was just being free. I've really lived the dream."

Ed Kiersh

Can his almost-religious conversion to horology be attributed to losing a Rolex at the age of 11?