



The vintage Hamilton Ventura watch is an Elvis-endorsed slice of Americana

Made famous by Elvis Presley, the Hamilton Ventura electric watch is a collector's item. And you can buy one for less than £1,500...

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When it comes to horological innovation, it is tempting to focus on Europe and, latterly, Japan. It's also too easy, in fact, to overlook the key and often disruptive influence of the US. America had honed its mass production skills – and learned the benefits of replaceable parts – in its federal armouries and these factory methods supercharged the US watchmaking industry in the 19th century.

Although Japan sold the first quartz wristwatch in 1969, the first quartz clock was built in the States by Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1927. Digital quartz watches, which proved to be the true blow to the Swiss mechanical hegemony, were first developed in America and before quartz there was electronic – in the form of [Bulova's Accutron](#). Today, of course, [Apple Watches](#) outsell total Swiss watch production annually.

But the watch that started it all in 1957 was the [Hamilton Electric](#) range and its highly distinctive “Ventura” model.



Elvis Presley's own Hamilton Ventura, purchased by 'the King' in 1965 (and bought back from the Graceland estate by Hamilton in 1999). Ventura watches were never sold with metal bracelets, meaning that the jeweller likely supplied this bracelet especially for Elvis

These electro-mechanical marvels looked similar to a traditional watch, but actually worked in reverse. In a mechanical movement, the power comes from the mainspring – released, one beat at a time, by the swinging balance wheel. The power in Hamilton's watch, however, came *from* the balance wheel – receiving a periodic “push” from its contact with a battery-powered electromagnet – and the motion of all the hands were indexed back from this impulse. The initial Hamilton Electrics – Ventura included – were unreliable, hampered by corrosion where the contact wires touched the balance wheel, which ultimately stopped the watch. A redesign of the movement (the Calibre 500 became the Calibre 505) improved matters, but by then Bulova's Accutron was dominating the market.

While the movement was ground-breaking, equal billing has to be given to the case design. American watches have always been a touch more flamboyant than their European competitors, but the Ventura's mid-century winged-shield look took things up a level. It

was the creation of industrial designer Richard Arbib, who, unsurprisingly, had achieved fame as a car designer – his penchant for V shapes most recognisable in AMC’s Hudsons. It was this ostentation, combined with the watch’s technical innovation, that found the Ventura a place on the wrist’s of America’s tastemakers, most notably Elvis Presley, who wore his own Ventura on the set of *Blue Hawaii*.



Elvis Presley wears a Hamilton Ventura

The case design has lasted far longer than the 12 years managed by the electric movement and the modern version has had its share of screen time too. As the embodiment of retro-futurism, it was the

perfect choice to grace the wrists of Hollywood's "[Men In Black](#)" through all four films. Few 1950s watch designs have survived unchanged to the present day and none as radical as the Ventura. You can find an original, Elvis-era piece for around £1,000 to £1,500, but buy a working example with some form of warranty. They are hard to get serviced and parts are rare; this is a historical artefact, not a daily beater.

If you want one to wear every day, buy the modern incarnation. While a larger version of the case now houses a mechanical automatic movement, it is the quartz model (£690, *below*) that is closest in spirit to the original. A true slice of Americana – and still available to buy new.



A modern Hamilton Ventura Quartz, £690.