

STILL TICKING: THE G-SHOCK AT 25

Benjamin Freeland celebrates a modern classic



WHILE IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT necessity is the mother of invention, there are some inventions that are less a product of necessity than of sheer grim determination. Such was the case with the Casio Corporation's iconic G-Shock watch, the impetus behind which, explained its inventor Ibe Kikuo at the G-Shock 25th Anniversary Media Roundtable event held at Casio's Shibuya headquarters, was an upsetting incident in his youth wherein he dropped a valuable watch given to him by his father, which shattering on the floor. "From that time on," declared Ibe, "I dedicated myself to designing an unbreakable watch." Five years after joining the engineering division of Casio Computer Co., Ltd., in 1976, Ibe began work on development of a shock-resistant watch, a process that would culminate in the original G-Shock timepiece in 1983, a watch renowned for its ability to survive being dropped from a third-story window. While its development process proved to be a long and frustrating ordeal, Ibe's efforts clearly paid off in the long run. In its 25-year history, over 70 million G-Shock watches have been sold worldwide, and its parent company has in large part become synonymous with this legendarily tough timepiece.

Prior to the advent of the G-Shock, Japan, while already a world-beater in most fields of technology, remained something of a laggard in the watch industry, overwhelmingly dominated as it then was by the European (particularly Swiss) industry giants. The G-Shock (whose "G" stands for "gravity") was instrumental in giving Japan a leg up in a sector in which it is now a powerful player. Upon entering the watch business in 1974, Casio made a conscious decision to eschew the classic styles favored by their European competitors in favor of futuristic-looking designs, an approach encapsulated by the company's inaugural digital watch, the Casiotron Electronic Wristwatch, a radical new design in its day. It was the G-Shock, however, that was largely responsible for elevating Casio's name to one of the major players in the watch industry. Based on a "triple-protection structure," with a layer of rubber protecting the electronic components, urethane resin enclosing the module containing these components and the watch case itself providing the module with additional protection, the "G" remains the toughest, most durable watch on the market, and has long been favored by people in physically grueling professions such as firefighters and military personnel. Further boosting the watch's popularity in the subsequent decade was a surge in popularity in extreme sports, notably skateboarding, a domain in which the "G" would become a ubiquitous presence. With the motto "All-Around Tough," the G-Shock would emerge

as the Volvo of watches, with a brand personality much akin to that of the Swedish automotive giant, based on utilitarianism, cutting-edge technology and, of course, indestructibility.

While the G-Shock's popularity in Japan has proven somewhat mercurial, it was its stunning success in the U.S. that truly made the watch into an icon. Following its birth in 1983, the G-Shock was almost immediately marketed there, at a time when an advantageous dollar-yen exchange rate allowed it to be sold at the remarkably low price of \$39. By 1990, over two million units had been sold in the U.S., with sales in Japan considerably slower. It was not long thereafter, however, that the G-Shock took off in the country of its birth, ironically as a result of its popularity in America, with its newfound status as a skateboarding icon making it a must-have fashion item among many Japanese youths. Sales grew steadily through the 1990s, tailed off somewhat in the early 2000s (a period coinciding with an overall decline in the sale of wristwatches), and began picking up again in the mid-2000s, with the advent of new designs and a shift in marketing emphasis from "functional" to "emotional" value.

Among the more recent variations on the G-Shock theme have been the "Frogman" series, a diving watch water-resistant to up to 200 meters, the mud-resistant "Mudman" series, and the rust-resistant titanium-embellished "Gulfman" series. The G-Shock's most recent and important breakthrough, however, has been the incorporation of radio-control technology allowing the watches to adjust themselves by way of time calibration signals from six transmission stations worldwide (two in Japan and one each in China, the U.S., the U.K., and Germany). Casio can now tout the G-Shock as not only the world's toughest watch, but also one of the most accurate.

Given its relatively inauspicious beginnings as a small-time entrant into the watch industry, the astonishing success of the G-Shock has far exceeded its creators' wildest dreams. A recent 25th-anniversary event in New York was attended by numerous dignitaries (including filmmaker Spike Lee), featured a performance by Kanye West, and saw the unveiling of a line of commemorative models designed by the renowned American graphic artist Eric Haze.

"Had I known that I would be here 25 years later talking about the G-Shock, I would have planned further ahead and come up with something grander," exclaimed Ibe, apologizing for the relatively small-scale event. However, considering the toughness and enduring popularity of his invention, Casio's prodigal inventor can safely begin planning for a 50th-anniversary celebration, knowing full well that the watches will still be around. **KTC**