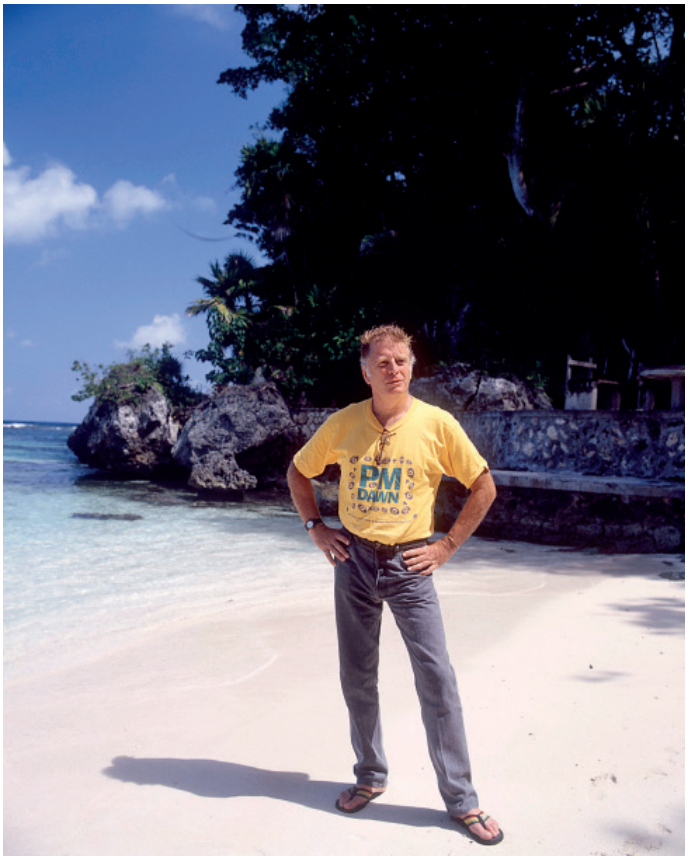


Clockwise from top: Chris Blackwell with (from left) Junior Marvin, Bob Marley and Jacob Miller in 1980; on the beach in Jamaica, 1994; with Richard Branson and actress Caterina Murino in 2006; with former Island artist, the singer Joe Cocker.

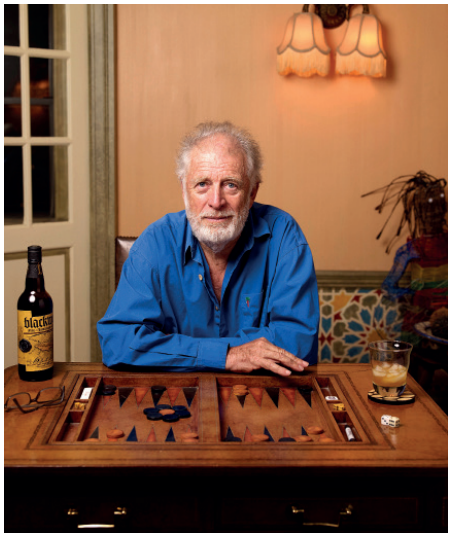
"THE **BUSINESS** WAS FULL OF **MISFITS** AND **MAVERICKS,** AND THAT'S WHAT WAS **GREAT** ABOUT IT"

From fighting with Errol Flynn to making superstars out of Bob Marley and U2, Island Records founder Chris Blackwell is a true original. Now owning hotels in Jamaica and selling rum, he talks to **Jonathan Wingate** about a life lived like no other

Nobody, least of all Chris Blackwell himself, could have predicted what would happen when he founded Island Records in 1959 with £1,000, selling his wares from the back of his Mini Cooper. Thirty years later he would sell the independent label for £190 million.

Blackwell, now 81, introduced the world to reggae music and made Bob Marley a superstar. He discovered an array of legendary artists including Steve Winwood, John Martyn and Grace Jones, and nurtured the idiosyncratic talents of Nick Drake, Cat Stevens and Roxy Music. He signed U2 in 1980 when no other label would touch them, and watched them conquer the world.

Below: Chris Blackwell today, aged 81



Columnist Nigel Dempster once described Blackwell as "one of the Top 10 most attractive men on the planet"; a tough and canny businessman, in the music industry he is known simply as 'The Croc'. Under him, Island was known for combining commercial success with real artistic integrity. He embodied the independent spirit with his belief in giving his musicians the space and the freedom to develop in their own way and reach their potential.

"Major labels have all these layers that often put artists in a box that they really don't want to be in," he says, when we meet at Boisdale of Mayfair. "If an artist wanted to do something that I didn't like, I'd say so, but I wouldn't stop it. The main thing was the artist succeeding and doing what they wanted to do. I signed artists on instinct and my feel for people. If you get a feeling that they are bright and serious, then let them express themselves. I think it worked for me, and it definitely worked for the artists."

These days, the man who brought reggae to the world concentrates his energy on a different Jamaican export: rum. He launched Blackwell Rum a decade ago, a return of sorts to his family roots, and an early life that was like something from an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. Born in London in 1937, he came from a prosperous family who traded in rum, sugar, coconuts and cattle, and much of his childhood was spent in Jamaica. There, his family would mingle with the glamorous likes of Ian Fleming, Noël Coward and Errol Flynn.

"When I was 18, I stole one of Errol's girlfriends," he grins. "He was the only person who has ever hit me in my life… so far. I first met him in 1949, just when my parents were breaking up. He fancied my mum, so he was especially nice to me. He used to allow me to go on his yacht. When he arrived in Jamaica, he was in really bad shape and he was drinking a lot. He'd lived a lifetime before he was 20."

Throughout our conversation, Blackwell drops a seemingly never-ending procession of famous names without even a hint of a clang. His

easygoing charm is infectious, and he remains perfectly matter-of-fact describing an extraordinary life that has zig-zagged, Zelig-like, through the recording studios, concert stages and A-list parties of Jamaica, London and everywhere in between.

In his teens he boarded at Harrow, where he was caned for selling booze and cigarettes to his fellow pupils. Although he was never expelled, his headmaster simply said, "Christopher might be happier elsewhere."

"I went to a posh school and I got every opportunity to have a good education, but I was totally useless," he admits. "I got five O Levels at three attempts, which is valueless, really. I was originally supposed to inherit the family rum business, Wray & Nephew. After my grandfather died, my two uncles f****d up the business, so when I left school and came back to Jamaica, that future didn't exist for me."

He finally found his first employment in typically glamorous circumstances. "Noël Coward invited me and my mum to a party at the Dorchester given by Elizabeth Taylor and Mike Todd. My mum was talking to Sir Hugh Foot, the Governor of Jamaica, who asked how I was doing, and she rolled her eyes. He said, 'Maybe I can give him a job.'"

Blackwell worked as Foot's "civilian aide-de-camp", until the diplomat was posted elsewhere. After stints as a water-skiing instructor, renting motor scooters and running his own jazz club, he started a small business selling jukeboxes. This gave him direct access to Jamaica's local music community as he toured around hilltop bars and little fishing villages.

"Most of the bars were whore houses," he recalls. "I'd drive around Jamaica with the jukebox maintenance guy and I'd see what music was being played the most. Everybody in the area would crowd into a tiny room, and if I put on a record they didn't like, they'd all come in shouting and screaming. If it was something they liked, they'd shout – 'Tune!' It was fantastic."

In 1959, 21-year-old Blackwell launched his music business career with the release of *Lance Hayward At The Half Moon Hotel, Montego Bay*, an album of jazz standards by the blind Bermudan singer/pianist. Since Jamaica produced very little homegrown music due to a lack of recording facilities, he had a captive audience.

> "Suddenly I was hanging out at Ready Steady Go or at the BBC with Brian Epstein and all of the top guys"

Other avenues beckoned, however. In 1962, shooting began in Jamaica on the first James Bond film, *Dr No*. Bond's creator Ian Fleming was, naturally enough, a close friend of Blackwell's mother, and got him a job as a location scout. Soon, the production team offered him a career-making permanent position. Unsure whether to go into the movie business or continue with his nascent record label, Blackwell took the only sensible route, and saw a fortune-teller. The advice was to stick with music.

So it was to be. Blackwell set up his new company with £1,000 – the proceeds of his *Dr No* earnings and a parental loan – and named it after Alec Waugh's novel, *Island In The Sun*. He quickly released a run of singles that tapped into Jamaica's vibrant musical spirit, and enjoyed his first hit with Laurel Aitken's 'Boogie In My Bones'.

"The first three records all went to Number 1, not because they were the greatest records, but because it was the first time people were hearing Jamaicans singing something other than calypso, mento or folk," he explains. "It was a bit like New Orleans shuffle music. What became ska was based on Fats Domino, because all his stuff had that kind of shuffle."

In 1962, the year of Jamaican independence, Blackwell relocated to London, where he sold records from the back

GETTY IMAGES; REX; NATHALIE DELON

DESERT ISLAND DISCS: THE BEST OF ISLAND RECORDS

TRAFFIC
TRAFFIC
(1968)

Traffic's eponymous second album is a heady cocktail of psychedelia, rock, soul and folk that laid out the blueprint for numerous other artists to follow.

NICK DRAKE
FIVE LEAVES LEFT (1969)

Although Nick Drake's achingly beautiful, pastoral songs failed to find much of an audience at first, this is now rightly considered one of the best debut albums ever made. Fifty years on, it still feels utterly timeless.

JOHN MARTYN
SOLID AIR
(1973)

One of the defining moments of British folk. Yet quite apart from Martyn's sublime songs, the key to its enduring appeal is his ability to dive into uncharted musical waters, stirring heavy doses of jazz and blues into his mellifluous mix.

BOB MARLEY
CATCH A FIRE
(1973)

Already established in Jamaica, it wasn't until their 1973 Island debut that Bob Marley & The Wailers managed to find their feet, perfecting a potent blend of killer songs and superb production with their trademark tight-but-loose musicianship.

ROXY MUSIC
COUNTRY LIFE (1974)

Country Life finds Roxy Music at the very peak of their powers, mixing pop and art to create a truly ground-breaking yet ageless sound that had an incalculable influence on music.

of his Mini Cooper to the West Indian immigrant communities. It was, he says, a high point in his life.

"I was driving around London in a little Mini, going from shop to shop. I absolutely loved it. I had two hi-fi systems; one for buying and one for selling," he chuckles. "The buying system never sounded great, but the selling system sounded fantastic. There was this one guy called Nat Fox who had a stall in Dalston Market. He came into the office one day, and I was on form. I had a few records, and I'm blasting them on the good sound system, and he bought everything. I saw him a month later, and he had a few that hadn't sold. He said, 'I'm not coming to your office any more to listen!'"

His first British hit single was a cover of Barbie Gaye's 'My Boy Lollipop', sung by helium-voiced Jamaican teenager, Millie Small, and produced by Blackwell himself. With the spelling altered to 'Lollipop', it reached Number 2 on both sides of the Atlantic, and became a cornerstone of the 'bluebeat' boom – the pre-reggae popularisation of Jamaican music. "I knew it was going to be a hit, and I knew exactly how it should sound," Blackwell explains. "She had this voice which made you smile, but I knew that a high-pitched voice can't last long on a record. It was one minute and 52 seconds. In and out. Boom. If it had been longer, it would not have been the same hit. It took me onto another level. Suddenly I was backstage on *Ready Steady Go* or at the BBC, with [Brian] Epstein and all of the top guys."

Soon enough, Blackwell was one of the top guys himself. 'My Boy Lollipop' sold seven million copies worldwide, by which time Blackwell had discovered the Spencer Davis Group. The band, who went on to enjoy a string of hits, including 'Keep On Running' and 'Gimme Some Lovin'', featured a young Steve Winwood on lead vocals alongside his brother, Muff, who became Island's first A&R man. In the summer of 1967, 'Paper Sun', by Steve Winwood's new band, Traffic, provided Island with its first Top Five single. The label was on its way to becoming one of the dominant forces in British music.

Opposite top: Blackwell with U2 and manager Paul McGuinness (in tie), in 1982. **Opposite bottom:** 'Black Gold' Blackwell Rum. **Below:** Mille Small, whose song, 'My Boy Lollipop', was Blackwell's first big hit

"In the Sixties and Seventies, music was a big part of the culture. I don't know whether it's as important to people as it used to be," Blackwell muses. "The music business was full of misfits and mavericks – that was what was really great about it. Freedom was essential to me, because I have my own ideas of how I like to do things. If you are able to execute that yourself, you're in great shape. In a corporate structure, people are always jockeying for position,

they've got their boss to please. But I was always doing my own thing."

And Blackwell's artist-friendly approach ensured Island's signings were fiercely loyal. "I can't sing," Blackwell laughs, "so of course I looked after the artists. I'm a fan of talent, so I was always supportive of them if I really believed in them. They were loyal to me because I cared about them and I was honest with them."

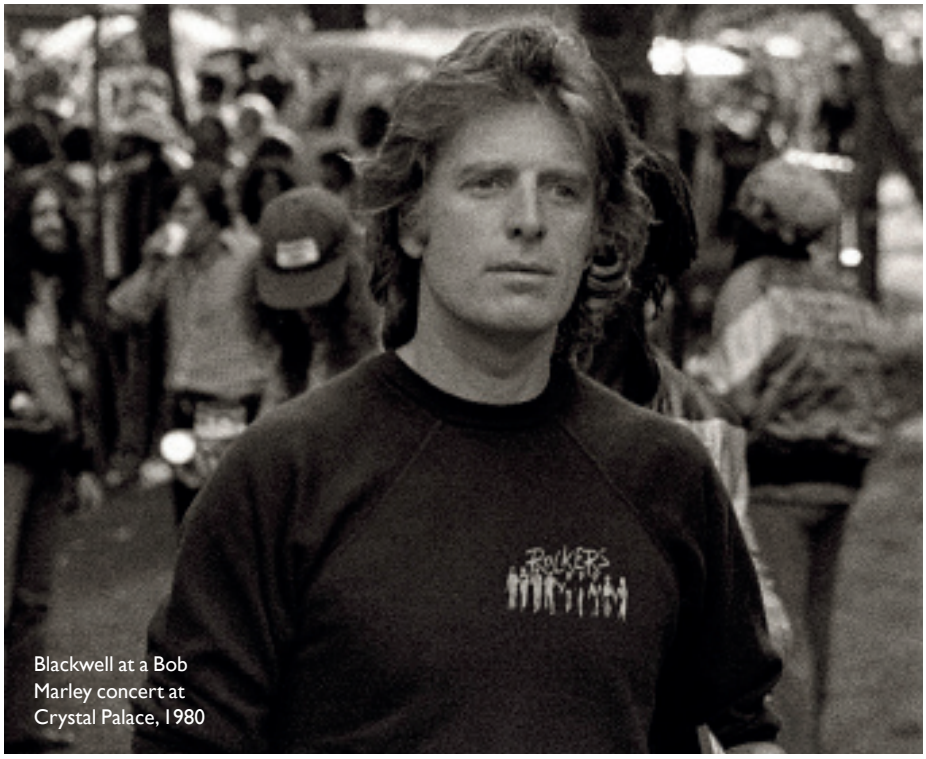
Of his own music tastes, Blackwell is candid. "I was really a jazz fan, not a pop person. With jazz, you're leaving the musicians to do what they do, because it's something that hasn't been done before."

Blackwell recalls his friendship in the Sixties with Miles Davis. "He put the 'c' in 'cool'. For some reason, he took a liking to me. I once asked Miles, 'Why do you play so many bad notes?' Trumpeters like Bix Beiderbecke or Louis Armstrong always played clean. He said he liked to play what was in his head rather than what he knew he could play. I thought to myself, 'That's true jazz.'"

In the late Sixties the label entered a new phase, enjoying global success with rock bands such as Free; King Crimson and Emerson; Lake & Palmer; and folk artists including John Martyn, Nick Drake and Fairport Convention.

Yet it is with reggae music that Blackwell's name will forever be most associated. Island Records championed Toots & the Maytals; Sly & Robbie; Black Uhuru; and numerous other reggae greats, but Blackwell's most famous signing was, of course, Bob Marley & The Wailers.

Blackwell had been focused on breaking Jimmy Cliff, but the singer left to join EMI. Just one week later, he met Bob Marley for the first time.



Blackwell at a Bob Marley concert at Crystal Palace, 1980

"I immediately knew that he was something very special," he says now. "I always go on feel and I just felt it. He had an aura about him, but not a conscious one. He was just a natural."

Blackwell gave Marley an advance of £4,000 to record the Wailers' first Island album, *Catch A Fire*, hiring London's finest session players to broaden the appeal to a white rock audience. Crossover success took time, but Blackwell's investment was ultimately repaid spectacularly. Blackwell still takes palpable pride in discovering how far Marley's fame spread.

"I was recently in a health retreat in India, and I was getting a massage from a Tibetan. He asked where I was from, and I said Jamaica. He just said: 'Jamaica? Bob Marley!'" Blackwell says. "I can't explain it, but it's unbelievable how his music has touched everywhere in the world, even in places with totally different cultures and languages."

Despite the astonishing success he enjoyed with Marley, both as producer and record company boss, Blackwell characteristically insisted on staying out of the spotlight. "On the first or second time we met, I told him that we would never have our picture taken together. There really is only one picture that people have ever seen, which a girlfriend of mine took after we'd flown back from Brazil."

In 1976 Blackwell bought Goldeneye, the estate in the small Jamaican town of Oracabessa where Ian Fleming lived and wrote his James Bond novels. After selling Island Records, it became the launchpad for Island Outpost, a group of exclusive boutique hotels.

His next entrepreneurial venture was the very first to carry his name: Blackwell Rum, launched a decade ago. "I really wasn't sure about doing it at first, because I promote other people. But I agreed to do it as long as it was made by Wray & Nephew, the company that my grandfather originally owned. So it has a story in the sense that I was rooted in this."

Inevitably, even the rum arrived into the world with a sprinkling of some serendipitous stardust. "As I was tasting the samples, Grace Jones walked into my little bar with three other girls," Blackwell remembers. "And they all picked the same one. As you can imagine, it's impossible to argue with Grace," he laughs, as he pours out a couple of generous measures, "so I went with her choice."

blackwellrum.com

"I immediately knew Bob Marley was something special. He had an aura about him, but not a conscious one. He was just a natural"