

WHEN I HEAD UP TO CHRIS BLACKWELL'S HOME in the Cockpit Mountains in Jamaica, it is late at night. I cannot see very much at all, although I am aware we have gone off-road because of the humps and bumps of the last 20 minutes in a four-wheel drive. For some time now there have been no other cars or houses, only the heads of some white Brahmin cattle illuminated by our headlamps. We pass by an imposing great house, once the largest sugar plantation in Jamaica – and keep on wending our way up through the mountains.

When I finally arrive, I am surprised at the modesty of the man's style. Chris Blackwell is universally regarded as one of the most influential men to have entered the music business in the last 50 years; with his second career in hotels, he has gone on to change the way the world views Jamaica. Within three years of hearing the blind pianist Lance Hayward – the first artist Blackwell ever recorded, with an LP of jazz standards released in 1959 – Blackwell was in London, and the company he'd started, Islands Records, was humming with the likes of Jimmy Cliff and Millie Small introducing a whole new audience to the music of Jamaica. He famously launched Bob Marley on the world, the list of artists he went on to sign becoming a roll-call of all the musicians that have mattered in the last 30 years, Steve Winwood, Cat Stevens and U2 among them.

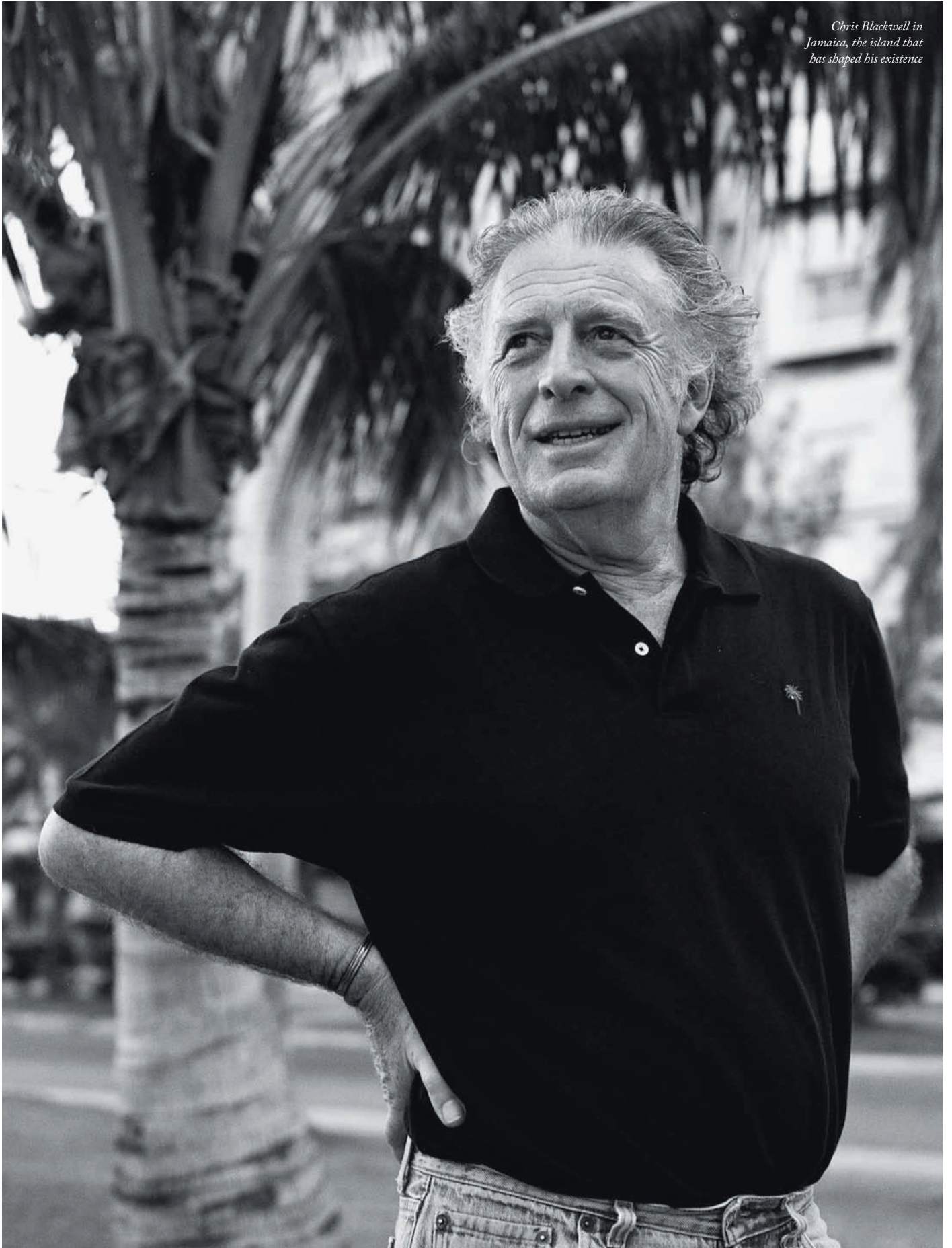
The big time came when Blackwell sold Island Records for a reported £272 million to PolyGram in 1989 – not that he hadn't already had a taste of the good life. Born in 1937, Blackwell enjoyed a high-society childhood in Jamaica, hanging out with the likes of Bond author Ian Fleming, who lived at Goldeneye, and Noël Coward; he was educated and expelled from Harrow, while his mother's family, the Lindos, were once among the

island's biggest landowners. Yet Pantrepant, Blackwell's home in the hills, doesn't betray any trait of some spoiled posh boy who got even richer on these formidable successes; rather, it is a modest structure built from the old Portland stone once used as ballast, the house comprising two floors with a wide verandah positioned in the middle of a grassy plateau punctuated with a few huge, wide-canopied trees.

What is overwhelmingly obvious is that Blackwell, or CB as he is called by almost everyone, is so down-to-earth that you would miss him in a crowd. He is dressed in T-shirt and jeans, which is about all he wears in the three days I am with him. He is the one standing over the old range oven, stirring a pan of chicken soup when I arrive. But for all his laid-back style, he exudes enormous presence; more unusually, he achieves this without going on about himself. 'Most people in big business live in strata,' he remarks. 'The great thing about the record business up until the 1970s was how people in music had very humble beginnings. I was working with people from the street. Or rather, I was working for them.'

We sit down and talk, with Blackwell's conversation rolling from big concepts in education, governance and the internet (he admits being addicted to TED Talks, which he watches on YouTube) to the anecdotal (he talks a little about his late wife, and how it was the tree in front of the house that they first fell in love with when they bought the farm in 1994). He is defined by innovation, choosing to surround himself with creative people. 'If you are independent you have to be counter,' he says. 'A small army can never beat a big army but a guerilla force can.' We drink simple red wine and make a plan for the next day. Even though I am here to see Goldeneye, he suggests I take it easy and spend the morning riding around

*Chris Blackwell in
Jamaica, the island that
has shaped his existence*



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the farm. 'I have been very lucky in my life,' he says, 'but this place is one of the luckiest parts of all.'

At six the next morning, I am standing atop Peter's Hill, a rise in the land that gives a sense of the fenceless expanse of this old plantation. I find that I can ride for six hours straight and still be on Blackwell's land. We see herds of red-poll cattle. We ride through dense vegetation rich with flowers and wildlife – evidence that no chemical fertilisers or pesticides have been used during the entire 17 years the farm has been in Blackwell's possession.

At Goldeneye, which is competing with the likes of the Cotton House on Mustique or Eden Roc in St Barths, there is a new airport, Ian Fleming International, opened in January for private aircraft. It's luxurious, but at the same time, Blackwell encourages guests to turn off their air-conditioning and open their windows. 'I hate air-conditioning,' he says. 'You don't feel the air, hear the birds.' At his farm, he has made a natural swimming pool from an 18th-century molasses vault, the lichen-covered sides draped in the tiny starry heads of pink and white flowers. 'I love it here,' he says, 'but I prefer to swim in the river; there's more danger to it.'

There is a reason for me being here beyond Blackwell's relaxed hospitality (entertaining comes easily to him; on Sunday, another 20 people arrive for a lunch party in the garden). He has plans to turn Pantrepant into a community of



80 private houses (the ground rent contributing to running costs) and an 800-acre organic farm managed by Jamaicans who will train here in new agricultural techniques. 'I want to find the kids who moved into the city and didn't get lucky and perhaps reverse them so they can find quality of life,' says Blackwell. 'I want to show them an alternative.'

No construction plan has yet been drawn up for Pantrepant, but already two interns from the Earth University in Costa Rica, which Blackwell has visited, are on site doing research. 'I believe in the future – the near-future,' says Blackwell. 'I believe it is now possible to live off the grid and do anything. It used to be that if you did something like this, you checked out of the world. Not any more.' I worry about mentioning 'legacy', concerned the word might imply he is on his way out when he is more in tune with contemporary culture than anyone I have ever met. 'Pantrepant is in trust,' he says. 'My aim is to set it up so the place lasts.'

Blackwell does nothing in a hurry, which has helped give his Island Outpost group of hotels much of their integrity. Since 1988, when he first became involved in the industry, development has been slowly and carefully considered, such an approach being the very opposite of the quick-buck mass tourism that afflicts other parts of the island.

At a Blackwell property, nothing is streamlined, which means you can never talk about his hotels within some generic Caribbean category of five-star resort. Instead the Island Outpost vibe is all about authentic Jamaica, albeit for a high-end traveller – a sort of Afro-Caribbean cool, shot through with Etro and flip-flop glamour. At the restaurants, local farmers provide the vegetables and meat; fishermen provide the rest, with only the bare minimum of specialist goods imported. And in terms of service, perfection has never been the aim. 'It is about hiring local people with personality.' This can mean things get a bit slow around the dinner hour. At Strawberry Hill in the Blue Mountains above Kingston,

LEFT: *Pantrepant, Blackwell's home and farm in the green hills of Jamaica.*
ABOVE: *Bob Marley, the iconic Jamaican musician, was Island Records' most famous artist*



the lobster might take 50 minutes to arrive, but nobody complains. The food is so damn good it doesn't take long until 'real zippy folk', as Blackwell describes them, simply kick back and listen to the barman, while soaking up one of the finest views in the Caribbean. The same feeling pervades other properties that make up the current Island Outpost portfolio: the Caves in Negril, Jake's in Treasure Beach and Geejam in Port Antonio.

The new Goldeneye – several years in conception, the last two in construction – is no different in sentiment to what has come before. It is, however, the most ambitious resort Blackwell has created to date. There is the original three-bedroom Fleming Villa (sketched by the author on his desk blotter), its cliff-top garden and private curl of beach, along with two newly built one-bedroom guest cottages flanking the Fleming Villa's free-form pool. The 52-acre site has numerous new cottages and suites, some of which are for sale, all of which are made from wooden clapperboard in pale candy colours. Some of the houses with private owners (the



properties sell for around a million dollars a piece) are put back into the resort's room inventory. There are two pools, a bar, two restaurants, a watersports centre and a couple more sandy swatches. But this is just the start – the first phase of a big idea that will keep evolving as Blackwell, Goldeneye's owner since 1976, develops his master plan for the local town of Oracabessa. It is only when out on a jet-ski with Blackwell (his preferred method for keeping fit) that I learn he owns another two miles of coastline adjoining Goldeneye's site. He envisions a community reinvigorated, a corniche and a marina. When I ask when this will all be completed, he smiles. 'The record industry is a good way to learn patience,' he says. 'You have to wait forever for someone to tune their guitar.'

The fact is the momentum is already building as Blackwell makes yet another push in his career to put Jamaica on the map. First it was with music, now tourism. Next it will be in becoming an example of how we can all live more responsibly by engaging with the land that provides – and ensures – our survival. 'When nobody cares about something, you can feel it,' says Blackwell. He knows this island backwards; driving the backroads, local people shout: 'Hey, CB,' and he asks after their families. It is as if he feels more than mere affection but responsibility for a place that has not only made him rich but has given him so much pride and inspiration. 'In the 1600s, Port Royal was more important to the world than New York City,' he explains. 'Jamaica was the sorting house for all the gold coming out of South America. This island has deep history. The fact it is one of the best-known countries in the world has got a lot to do with Marley, but also a lot to do with the strength of Jamaican culture.'

This perspective puts in balance the rough image of the Kingston ghettos, which is only one reality of a place often maligned; as more of the world recognises this fact, you can trace much of the swing back to Blackwell. This is his legacy, but ask him, and it's as if he is only just beginning. ■■

LEFT: Ian Fleming at Goldeneye, where he wrote the James Bond books; the beach at Goldeneye today. ABOVE: Fleming's villa at Goldeneye, which Blackwell has owned since 1976