The Man With the Golden Ear

The 75-year-old businessman Chris Blackwell has made a fortune betting on the charms of his beloved Jamaica. In 1959, Blackwell started Island Records, which brought reggae and Bob Marley to a worldwide audience. (He also signed U2, Cat Stevens, Grace Jones, Nick Drake and Roxy Music.) When Blackwell sold Island 30 years later, he turned his attention to hotels: both in Miami’s South Beach, which he helped put on the map when he transformed blighted Art Deco properties into luxury destinations; and, more enduringly, at home, where his current holdings include GoldenEye, the former home of the James Bond author Ian Fleming (a longtime lover of Blackwell’s mother, Blanche), which attracts the likes of Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell. His latest venture? Jamaican rum, naturally.

BY JULIA FELSENTHAL

17th Century

WHEN HIS FAMILY EMIGRATED TO JAMAICA

Amount of money it took to start Island Records in 1959
About £3,000

Amount of money PolyGram paid for Island Records in 1989
Close to $300 million

130 YEARS

HOW HE LIKES HIS RUM

Neat

Artists and bands that Blackwell passed on:
Dire Straits
Pink Floyd
Elton John

“MUSIC TO STRIP BY”
An early album released by Surprise, Blackwell’s label before Island Records
*included with purchase: a G-string

“NUMBER OF INSTRUMENTS HE PLAYS”
None

Personal motto:
You can’t do good deals with bad people, and you can’t do bad deals with good people.

On first hearing U2
(to NPR)
“I didn’t love the music that much, quite honestly, because it was a little rinky-dink to me because I love bass and drum. But I loved them. There was a passion.”

On Grace Jones
“A Hot Hurricane”

On Grace Jones

What’s for breakfast?
Poached egg and callaloo with lots of Scotch-bonnet pepper oil

Biggest pet peeve
Chocolates on pillows in hotels

JAMES BOND CHARACTER SUPPOSEDLY INSPIRED BY BLACKWELL’S MOTHER, BLANCHE
Pussy Galore in “Goldfinger”

The guano tanker in “Dr. No” was also called “the Blanche”

LONGEST BACKGAMMON GAME HE’S EVER PLAYED
3 days

One of the 10 most attractive men on the planet,
as once described by the London Daily Mail gossip columnist Nigel Dempster.

Copies of “Legend” by Bob Marley sold to date:
25 MILLION

When he was caught selling booze and tobacco to fellow students at Harrow School in England, he received the school’s first public caning in Zero
Number of air-conditioning units in his personal homes
(in Jamaica, London and New York)