

**C**hris Blackwell is late. This is not a problem. For two reasons. One is the view. Ahead of me, Low Cay

Beach fans out, its arc of gold bejewelled by nine villas. To the left, the sea rolls in almost politely, as if loath to disturb such a calm picture. For this is GoldenEye, the oasis at Oracabessa on the north coast of Jamaica where Ian Fleming wrote the James Bond novels; where stars and travellers have cooled their heels since it was turned into a luxury resort. I pour another cup of coffee and listen to the reggae bumping out of the speakers in Bizot Bar, from where the cafetiere arrived, behind me. The time is irrelevant.

The second reason for my non-clock-watching is simple. I've been warned that Blackwell – music pioneer, record-label impresario, owner of GoldenEye – will be sleeping in. The afternoon before, I receive an email from one of his team. He will be, it says, dashing to the capital Kingston – a 60-mile, two-hour drive south – to watch the young, fast-rising Jamaican reggae artist Chronixx play a gig. "He's not on stage until 11, which will mean midnight, so we'll be back early hours," the missive reads cheerfully. "Rock 'n' Reggae!"

No one should be begrudged a lie-in after a loud night. Not a teenager, not a partygoing 20-something. And, definitely, not an octogenarian. Chris Blackwell is 80 years old.

When he appears, he looks neither tired, nor his age. His outfit (a long-sleeved denim shirt over a T-shirt; a cap pulled down low) betrays only a lifetime spent in the Caribbean – long enough, certainly, for this Westminster-born gentleman to have developed a belief that this warm day might be a little chilly. He talks like a far younger man – apologising for his pre-arranged tardiness, ordering a coffee, then enthusing about the 25-year-old he has just witnessed – with whom he has signed a publishing deal. "Chronixx is amazing," he grins. "It's always exciting to see someone emerge. He's big in Asia now. Reggae was never big in Asia, apart from Japan – now he's taking it there. It happens so quickly now."

Blackwell's exuberance is understandable. For 40 years, he was the spiritual guardian of Island Records, the label he founded in Jamaica in 1959, and owned until 1989, when he sold it to PolyGram (he would stay on as CEO until 1997, when he retired from the music industry). He was 22 when he launched his endeavour, and would base it not on business experience, but on a love of Jamaica, its people and music – engendered by spending his teenage years on the island (he moved across with his mother after his parents' divorce in 1949). This start-up would blossom into a creative force.

Although Island would reach its commercial



## Want to holiday at Ian Fleming's Jamaica home?

The man who signed Bob Marley is turning GoldenEye into a chic retreat, writes **Chris Leadbeater**

peak under his stewardship in the Eighties when U2 were added to the roster, it found its soul in the Seventies, signing and showcasing the major players of Jamaica's reggae scene – such as Toots and the Maytals, and Bob Marley and the Wailers. It is feasible to suggest that, without Blackwell, Marley would not have become the generational icon he still is, 37 years after his death. Blackwell even produced some of the Wailers' records.

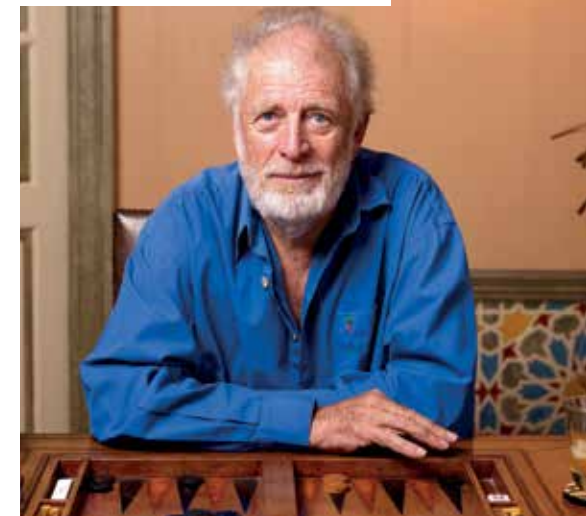
When Blackwell talks about this – he is not a man prone to reminiscence – it is as if he is discussing a dream. Music is his past; the deal with Chronixx a slight return to a true romance,

but no more than that. "Music has changed," he sighs. "It's not something you can do now unless you're in London, New York, Los Angeles or Paris. It's not a place for an 80-year-old." Instead, he devotes himself to GoldenEye, which he bought in 1976 and has run as his main project since 1997 – transforming it into one of the planet's most chic retreats. It has become a relaxed playground, 49 huts and cottages dotted across 52 acres of verdant Jamaican landscape. He has plans for further expansions in the next two years.

Anyone who thinks this is sacrilege – that Blackwell has taken the sanctuary where Ian



Thanks to Chris Blackwell (BELOW), GoldenEye (LEFT and ABOVE), Ian Fleming's stunning retreat in lush Jamaica, has a new life



Fleming carved fiction's most famous spy and forged a hotspot for sun-and-sea breaks – is missing the point. Fleming set up GoldenEye for just this sort of escapism, and did so in close connection to Blackwell, whose mother Blanche was part of the Lindo family, which accrued large reserves of land in the sugar era – including around Oracabessa. She was Fleming's muse, a regular visitor to GoldenEye to swim in soft tides. When, in 1976 – 12 years after Fleming's death – it was on the market, she asked her son to buy it for her.

The tale of how Blackwell acquired GoldenEye is another reminder of his pivotal



Ian Fleming (ABOVE) penned several Bond books at GoldenEye, a place that Bob Marley (BELOW RIGHT) almost bought for himself



## At GoldenEye, there is happy noise in the delighted screams of children running to the surf. 'People make a place,' says Blackwell

place in Jamaican music history. "I didn't have the liquid capital when my mother wanted me to purchase it," he says. "So I suggested to Bob [Marley] that he buy it. And could he maybe let my mum swim there, as she often had? He agreed. But just before the sale went through, he came up for the first time. He'd never seen it, didn't like it, thought it was too posh for him. He asked if there was a way out of the deal. By that point, I had the cash..."

Fleming's vision lingers. His house is still there, and available as accommodation – concealed in a grove that safeguards the privacy of the celebrities and high-fliers who tend to be its guests. Everything is subtle, discreet. A veranda room just beyond the reception pays understated respect to the Bond legacy – a few copies of Fleming's books, photos of the author in conversation with Sean Connery, black-and-white images too of

Blanche splashing on the shore. Even the resort entrance is discretion itself, unmarked on the highway. You would drive past the gate if you didn't know what it was.

**B**lackwell's plans are no less restrained. He intends to build a performance space where bands can play – and a tranche of new chalets on unused land west of the current resort. But he has no ambitions for enormity. "Some people say a hotel of under 200 rooms is a waste of time," he says. "But some hotels are precious." This sentiment finds form on the other side of Bizot Bar, where Button Beach is the more affordable part of the resort, its 26 cottages aimed at families. There is happy noise here – and certainly no hint, in the delighted screams of children running to the surf, that GoldenEye only wishes to cater to a gilded elite.



"We want people of all ages here," Blackwell adds. "People make a place."

Holding a conversation with him as he wanders the property can be a faltering affair. He pauses to address minor details. When we play a game of table football (he wins 10-five, with a practised hand) he asks a staff member to look at one of the players, which seems to be loose. He is not in thrall to his achievements, instructing the servers at Bizot Bar to change a Marley album that has been spinning on repeat. "Obviously, we have to have Bob Marley," he laughs. "But you can't have Marley all the time." He halts regularly to chat – asking one group, staying for a 40th birthday, how their party went; inquiring after another guest, who has had a dizzy spell. The staff address him affectionately, as "Mr B".

He spends six months of the year at GoldenEye, in his own hut tucked on the lagoon that dissects the property. We stop here, at a seating area on the water. For a minute, he sounds his age, complaining of a cataract; answering a question on Marley with a wistful, "well, Bob would have been 73 this year". Momentarily, he looks the Englishman abroad,

carefully pouring tea from a pot, letting the liquid stream into the china cups. But then the Caribbean snaps back in. "Jamaica is special," he remarks. "It has so much variety. The best coffee in the world is Jamaican – fruit as well. You can live well here – so healthily."

His affection for the country shines in his thoughts on its economy. "We need to get away from all-inclusivity," he argues. "People come to Jamaica, go to their hotel, eat breakfast, lunch and dinner, never leave. We encourage our guests to see people and places. It's bad for our balance sheet – but it's important to get out, to understand that where you are is a community, not just a destination."

This attitude is borne out by a booklet in my room, listing nearby restaurants, and those who run them, on first-name terms – Deidre at Sugar Pot, Lisa at "seaside fish shack" Dor's.

He is worried, too, about the adjacent Ian Fleming Airport. What was a basic airstrip has been modernised, and will begin welcoming flights from the US east coast in 2019. This will be a boon to GoldenEye's guests, providing a more convenient option than the three-hour transfer from Montego Bay. But it will also alter the area. "This coastline is practically untouched," Blackwell says. "It's almost as it was when Columbus landed. It's about managing the change. I'm talking to people in the government. What we don't want is a raft of all-inclusives that excludes local Jamaicans."

It is easy to grasp why he is so protective. We go two miles uphill, to one of his favourite



Behind the gate at GoldenEye, literary history is an integral part of its present

places. On the peak, Firefly was once the Caribbean residence of Noel Coward – another of Blanche Lindo's pals. The playwright so loved it that he's still here, buried in the lawn. The vista he admires from eternity is incredible, a sweep of sky and ocean.

Blackwell has a lease on the property, and is keen to use it to host events for GoldenEye guests – but is precluded by the state of the road up, which is barely more than a series of ruts. For now, Firefly is in limbo, Coward's books still on his desk, his LPs stacked by his record player.

A similar stasis cloaks Port Maria, a village to the east. Blackwell indicates the Anglican church

in whose graves several of his ancestors lie, then directs the car to Fort Haldane, a relic of the colonial era, built in 1759, now lost in the tree line. He is seeking a Rastafarian friend, who lives in the semi-tumbled (yet habitable) structure. He is out – so Blackwell shows me instead the rusted 19th-century British cannons that still monitor the bay. I ask him, as we watch the light fade across the Blue Mountains in the distance, if he relishes the hotel business as much as he did the music industry. He smiles. "When you work on a track and it becomes a hit, that's fireworks," he says. "It's the same seeing people come here, and enjoying themselves. It's the same feeling – a fine feeling."

## Your holiday playlist: Island Records' greatest hits

Chris Blackwell ran Island from 1959 to 1989. In that time, these classics were released...

### Jackie Edwards: *Keep On Running* (1965)

Island began as a label for Jamaica's then-unpublicised music scene. *Keep on Running* would be made famous by the Spencer Davis Group's (another Island act) 1965 cover, but is at its purest in its original reggae form – released in the same year, by the song's writer.

### Free: *All Right Now* (1970)

Blackwell briefly relocated to Britain in 1962 to try to boost Island's profile. This would later result in the signing of rock acts such as Free, whose hit single from *Fire And Water* boasts one of the most unmistakable guitar riffs in existence.

### Jimmy Cliff: *The Harder They Come* (1972)

Island also dabbled in film distribution, including the Jamaican crime thriller *The Harder They*

*Come*. The movie made a star of its lead Jimmy Cliff, while the soundtrack album, and its title track (sung by Cliff), helped bring reggae to a global audience.

### Toots and the Maytals: *Funky Kingston* (1972)

Legend has it that the word "reggae" was coined by Frederick "Toots" Hibbert and his merry men on their 1968 single *Do the Reggay*. *Funky Kingston*, with its title track – a salute to the capital – was their first Island album.

### Bob Marley and the Wailers: *Stir It Up* (1973)

Marley would become the bedrock of the Island Records roster. *Catch a Fire*, the first Wailers album released on the label, was produced by Blackwell. It introduced the band to overseas fans. Sixth track *Stir It Up* remains a Marley touchstone.

### Roxy Music: *In Every Dream Home A Heartache* (1973)

This dark number from the second Roxy Music album *For Your Pleasure* (the last with the original line-up) spins on Bryan Ferry's gift for an unsettling lyric and Brian Eno's ethereal keyboards.

### Bob Marley and the Wailers: *Could You Be Loved* (1980)

By the time the Wailers' 1980 LP *Uprising* – again produced by Blackwell – arrived, Marley was a superstar. Its catchiest track, propelled by a rhythmic guitar line, made the UK top five – the album went top 10. Marley was dead within a year.

### Grace Jones: *Pull Up To The Bumper* (1981)

Jones would rise to catwalk and Bond film stardom in the mid-Eighties, but her roots were (and are) firmly Jamaican. With its funky

bass riff and overtly sexual lyrics, *Pull Up To The Bumper* – from her 1981 album *Nightclubbing* – was a worldwide smash.

### U2: *Pride (In The Name Of Love)* (1984)

The Irish megastars would sell more records with 1987's *The Joshua Tree*, but this chest-beating tribute to Martin Luther King – from their underrated 1984 album *The Unforgettable Fire* – is still arguably their greatest track.

### Robert Palmer: *Addicted To Love* (1986)

For all Island's origins in Jamaican music, it did not stay aloof from pop's growing slickness as the '80s progressed. This single was a classic of the era.

*Rooms at GoldenEye start at about £320 a night. visitjamaica.com*