Chris 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 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 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 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 role in the history of music. Thanks to Chris Blackwell (BELOW), GoldenEye (LEFT and ABOVE), Ian Fleming’s stunning retreat in lush Jamaica, has a new life.

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.

Thanks to Chris Blackwell (BELOW), GoldenEye (LEFT and ABOVE), Ian Fleming’s stunning retreat in lush Jamaica, has a new life.
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 was in a waste of time, he says. "But some hotels 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 - Daleke at Sugar Pot, Loo at "shuffle fish shack" Dorian'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 lot of all-inclusives that excludes local Jamaicans."

It is easy to grasp why he is so protective. "We give two miles up hill, to one of his favourite places on the Peak. Firefly was once the Caribbean residence of Niel Cadow - another of Blanche Lindo's pals. The playwriting 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, Cadow's books still on his desk, his LPs stacked by his record player. A similar stairs leads up to his villa, 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 19th-century British cannons that still monitor the bay. He asks, 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 rocking," he says. "It's the same seeing people come here, and enjoying themselves. It's the same feeling - a fine feeling."

Fleming's vision lingers. His house is still concealed in a grove that safeguards the privacy of the celebrities and high-fliers who wander the property can be a faltering affair. He halts regularly to chat - asking one about their stay. "We want people of all ages here," Blackwell adds. "People make a place."