

ON THE RECORD

BY **DAISY PRINCE** | AVENUE | FEBRUARY 2016

Record producer Chris Blackwell is a man who has always acted on his instincts. And never has that impulse served him so well as the moment he handed over £4,000 in cash to three itinerant Rastafarian musicians and made history. Of course, everyone knows that the three Rastafarians were Bob Marley & the Wailers and that with Blackwell's money the band would create *Catch a Fire*, an album of songs that brought reggae music to the world, sold millions of records and eventually helped Blackwell earn £200 million when he sold Island Records to PolyGram in 1989.

In the early 1970s in England, giving that kind of money away (about \$80,000 today) with

no written contract would have been considered a bold move. (Blackwell admits wryly, "People in my office were not thrilled.")

But he didn't care. "The best thing I ever did really was to give them the money. I felt the only way to get their trust—because they'd been #&%* over by everybody—was to trust them."

From the moment the Wailers walked into his office, Blackwell knew they were stars. "They were broke, busted broke, but they walked in like kings. Particularly Bob, because he was their spokesman," Blackwell says in his terra-cotta-hued apartment on the Upper West Side.

At 78, Blackwell is slender, fit and elegantly grizzled. He's wearing an African print shirt and black jeans, and has replaced his ubiquitous flip flops with a black pair of Tod's driving slippers. Softly spoken but with a residual cut glass English accent, he sits at his carved wood table and drinks strong coffee prepared by the CFO of Island Outpost, Meg Friedman. Bottles of Blackwell's Fine Jamaican Rum line the shelves behind him, and a large photograph of a beautiful Jamaican woman (who turns out to be Blackwell's late wife, Mary Vinson) hangs behind him. There is a blue-and-white-striped cookie jar with "Ganja" written on the front of it (later before I leave, I ask Blackwell to show me what's inside. It's disappointingly empty).

Blackwell carries on with his story about the day he met the Wailers. "They wanted to make singles for black American radio. I told them that black radio would not be interested in their music. 'Look,' I said, 'I'm interested in careers, I'm not interested in singles. I think you should be a black rock band.'" Bob said okay and told me how much it would cost to make a record, so I just gave him the money right there."

To understand why Blackwell made the decision he did, you have to look back at the people who shaped his life from an early age.

Blackwell was born into top echelons of Jamaica's elite. His mother's family, the Lindos, were directly descended from a Sephardic Jewish family who had been imprisoned during the Spanish Inquisition in the 1660s. They fled Spain and made their way to London, where their descendants would settle in Kingston. The Lindo family made their living from shipping, coffee

plantations, real estate, and as slave agents. They prospered well into the 20th century and eventually turned their interests toward sugar plantations and rum, having bought a distillery in 1916 called J. Wray & Nephew, which distributed Appleton rum.

The Lindos were a very prominent family in Kingston. Old photographs in a book on the family lineage, *The Lindo Legacy*, show pages of beautifully turned-out men, women and children dressed in white Victorian garments. It was a colonial childhood of upper-class comfort and privilege. Blackwell recalls that there were no less than 14 servants around at any one time, including gardeners, cooks and grooms. As an asthmatic only child, Blackwell was often too sick to leave the house, and the servants became his closest friends.

"From a very early age, I grew to love them and understand them and sympathize with them," he says. The person closest to Blackwell was his nanny, Nana Redwood, and she died when he was 18. When I mentioned that it must hurt his mother to know that her son considered himself closest to the nanny, he assures me that is not the case.

"No, my mother is a terrific person, a very strong person. She's more like a dad. And my dad was like my younger brother: he was great and fun and always misbehaving and mischievous, but not in a negative way."

Blackwell's parents separated when he was very young. His father, Joseph, a dashing soldier with a keen interest in opera, whose family made Crosse & Blackwell's jams and custards, went back to live in Ireland. Blanche Lindo (still alive at 103) was a vivacious, independent, spirited girl who captivated Jamaican and London society in equal measure. Her friendships with Errol Flynn, Noël Coward and Ian Fleming are well-documented. It was rumored that she and Fleming were more than friends, and supposedly he wrote the character of Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger* with her in mind.

With such an unusual childhood, it would have been unlikely that Blackwell would grow into a conventional person, so when conventional stays were put on him, he invariably broke free. He was sent to Harrow, one of the best boarding schools in England, but never graduated. He was caught selling booze and cigarettes to his fellow students and received the school's first public canning in 130 years. He claims he didn't hate school, but that the school hated him and that he just didn't agree with their policies. ("Well, I hated that stupid hat they made us wear," he says with a smile, referring to the boater hats that are part of the school uniform and which all students, including Winston Churchill, have had to wear.)

By the time Blackwell returned to Jamaica at 17, the family's fortune was dwindling. In 1945 when Blackwell was 8, his grandfather died and his sons took over the rum business.

"They screwed it up by not being savvy enough to run a busi-

ness. They quarreled together, so the Lindo family, which had been very important in Jamaica, was virtually invisible by the time I was a teenager.”

If there was a sense of loss in status, Blackwell says he honestly can't recall it. “We weren't a regular family. I don't remember family gatherings or anything.”

After his return to Jamaica, he tried a bunch of odd jobs, including selling air conditioning units (“I hate air conditioning,” he says) and was finally given a job as aide-de-camp to the governor general of Jamaica. He also worked on the first James Bond film, *Dr. No*, but while these experiences helped to form the future entrepreneur, it was the experience of being shipwrecked and rescued by Rastafarians at 20 that became a pivotal moment in his life.

The salient details of what happened that day at Helshire Beach are as follows: Blackwell was stranded on a bit of this island with no roads. Lost and dying of thirst, he happened upon a Rastafarian fisherman, who gave him water. Exhausted, Blackwell fell asleep on the floor of the man's hut only to wake hours later at night with six other Rastafarians peering at him.

“It was scary for a few minutes,” Blackwell admitted. It would be hard to overestimate the level of fear the Rastafarians inspired in the Jamaican establishment at that time. “They were outcasts,” Blackwell says flatly. “They lived outside the system completely—no one would employ them.”

Blackwell soon realized he had nothing to be afraid of. “They were actually reading from the Bible.” The Rastafarians took young Blackwell unharmed back to Port Royal.

This was not the only positive experience Blackwell had with the Rastafarians—one of his other jobs was selling scooters and the only person who always paid his bill on time was a Rastafarian. Blackwell had more reasons than most to trust that community, but he still took a major risk backing Bob Marley, who was thought of as difficult to work with—largely because he insisted on being paid royalties for his music.

The gamble on Marley paid off in a big way. Reggae music spread like a storm all over the world and Island Records, in the words of Blackwell's friend and former MTV CEO Tom Freston, became the “the epitome of the great artist-oriented independent record label, a disappearing species.” He signed great artists like U2, Steve Winwood, Cat Stevens, Grace Jones and many others. Bob Marley and Blackwell remained close until Marley's unexpected death from skin cancer in 1981. Eventually, Blackwell wanted to move on from the music industry and sold Island Records to PolyGram in 1989. According to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, to which Blackwell was inducted in 2001, he is “the single person most responsible for turning the world on to reggae music.”

Ready for a new challenge, in the mid-90s, he set up Island Outpost, a hotels and resorts company. One of his first ventures, the Marlin Hotel, helped put South Beach in Miami back on the map. His many holdings in Jamaica include Strawberry Hill, Compass Point, The Caves, Jake's and GoldenEye, which enjoys the cachet of being the spot where Ian Fleming wrote many of the James Bond novels and Sting composed “Every Breath You

Take.” Visited by everyone from Kate Moss to the Clintons, Blackwell has certainly had a hand in securing Jamaica's reputation as a luxury destination.

GoldenEye has undergone some extensive expansion, opening April 1, with 26 new cottages, each with its own private veranda, designed by local Jamaican architect Ann Hodges. Blackwell's properties all have a barefoot chic vibe to them, and this one will be no different, with custom-designed Jamaican furniture, white linens and African fabrics. It was a project he wanted to start back in 2008 but was prevented from doing so by the world recession, something that now comes as a bit of a relief. “I would have been dead and gone if I'd built it and then we'd crashed in the middle of it.”

Island Outpost is committed to helping the local community; native craftsmen and talent are often employed, with wonderful haute bohemian results. Blackwell says he gets his great eye for design from his father, who had an artistic bent, but does not think of himself as hotelier in same way he thinks of himself as a record producer. His friends disagree. Tom admires Blackwell's versatility: “He has been able to move successfully from one different career to another. And career is probably the wrong word. He follows his instincts and does what he loves and he has done that his entire life. Cool calm and very collected. And connected.”

Even though Chris no longer remains as directly involved with the music industry as he once was, his association with Marley remains a constant in his life. Freston remembers a time when the two of them traveled together to the Cape Verde Islands and he was able to talk his way past the immigration guy when he did not have a visa. “Whenever Bob Marley comes into a conversation, any door opens. Chris is treated like royalty. Another time, in the middle of the Sahara desert, he found a nomad who had a Bob Marley ring tone on his cell phone. He went bananas at that one.”

Another fan is his friend, author and Blackwell's Fine Jamaican Rum cofounder Richard Kirshenbaum, who says, “Chris is like an onion: you have to peel back the layers. His history is so unusual and he has such an innate style. He's got such great élan, and there is nothing pretentious about him.”

The idea of making rum, in keeping with Blackwell's low-key business style, came out of a casual meeting at GoldenEye with his friend Richard Kirshenbaum in 2009. Kirshenbaum, a renowned advertising executive who had worked on the Hennessy and Dom Pérignon brands, and has a brilliant eye for products, suggested the rum concept to Blackwell.

Blackwell agreed on two conditions: One, the rum needed to be dark, and two, it needed to be made by J. Wray & Nephew.

The packaging was designed by Kirshenbaum, but the rum's blend is very much Blackwell's own. “It's a great product: when you taste it you feel like you are on vacation.”

It had to be spectacular or Blackwell wouldn't agree to put his name on it. With his family history, he couldn't afford to put out rum which was subpar.

Only in the market for three years, the product has already gone global. Kirshenbaum calls it, “The little engine that could.

We've sold over 10,000 cases.'"

Our interview nearly finished, Blackwell grabs a bottle of rum to take to his next meeting, which just happens to be with another old friend, Doug Morris, the CEO of Sony Music Entertainment. "Doug will enjoy it," he says with schoolboy enthusiasm.

Before he runs out the door, I ask him what he'd like to see his power and influence achieve. Unsurprisingly, he would like to see his native Jamaica prosper in the long term.

As one of the most prominent citizens of Jamaica, Blackwell is well aware of and understandably concerned about the violence that has plagued the island. Politically, he believes the island has reached a turning point. "When that happens people will view Jamaica differently, which is what the place really needs. I really think that Jamaica will go through a boom period. Jamaica is a place to be relaxed. It is an incredible island with incredible soil. It has mountains, it has everything."

If Blackwell's instinct about Jamaica is as keen as his instinct for musical talent, then there is no doubt that Jamaica and GoldenEye will be the premier hotspots for years to come.