



Christopher Blackwell

Chancellor, a question. What do the following have in common: "My Boy Lollipop," Jimmy Cliff, Bob Marley; **The Harder They Come**, **Mandela**, **Dancehall Queen**; Firefly, Golden Eye, Strawberry Hill? Answer: Chris Blackwell. The list signifies a lifetime of entrepreneurial achievement in the promotion of Jamaican popular music and culture, the conservation of Jamaican cultural heritage, and the marketing of Jamaica. Chris Blackwell has been described as "the entertainment industry genius with a nose for likely winners."

Blackwell was one of the pioneers in that remarkable development of Jamaican popular music that has had such seminal effect on the world's imagination. He was working as a water-ski instructor at the Half Moon Hotel, Montego Bay, in the late 1950s, when he produced his first record, featuring a jazz combo then playing at the hotel. The label? Island Records. By the time he sold Island Records to Polygram in the early 1990s, for a sum which modesty restrains us from mentioning here, the name Island Records had become synonymous with the names Chris Blackwell and Jamaica, even though Blackwell had moved heavily into trans-Atlantic rock music.

By 1960, Blackwell, with characteristic "street sense", had seen that there was a largely untapped market among the Jamaican community in England. He moved there and soon became a familiar figure in that community, selling the latest "back-home" releases from the back of his Mini-Cooper. Today there is nothing either mini or cooped-up about Chris Blackwell. Then came Millie Small and the big break. Blackwell had noticed that his well-to-do English friends were fascinated by the strangely compelling quality of the female voice on one of the records, a duet by Roy and Millie. With her mother's consent, he brought the fourteen-year old Millie Small up to London. Millie's "Boy Lollipop" "set the world on fire" in 1964 and catapulted Blackwell on to international centre stage of the recording industry. Soon Island was signing English rock groups and folk musicians. The Island was going global, long before globalisation became fashionable.

In the meantime, enter Jimmy Cliff. Cliff had already begun to acquire a reputation when, having come to Blackwell's notice, he moved to London in the mid-1960s. By this time, Duke Reid's Trojan Records, of which Blackwell was a director, was handling many of Blackwell's Jamaican offerings. It was through this connection that one of Trojan's early successes, in 1969, was Cliff's "Wonderful World, Beautiful People." An even more important product which drew on the Blackwell-Cliff connection was to be the film **The Harder They Come** (1972). The album of the soundtrack was one of Island's greatest hits.

Then came Bob Marley. One of Marley's biographers, Stephen Davis, has written: "In December 1971, Bob Marley played what he thought was the Wailers' last card. He walked into the Basing Street studios of Island Records and asked to see the boss, Chris Blackwell." Thus began one of the most epoch-making collaborations in the history of popular music. Beginning with **Catch A Fire**, the discography which marks that collaboration is a litany of greatness. In his introduction to **Tougher Than Tough: The Story of Jamaican Music**, a definitive 4-CD anthology produced by Blackwell's Mango Records, the US offshoot of Island Records, Steve Barrow contends that "Bob Marley's signing with Island was the beginning of world recognition for his own roots music, and the birth of a new, international form of reggae."

Chris Blackwell had his first exposure to movie-making in the late 1950s, when Ian Fleming, whose retreat, Golden Eye, Blackwell now owns, arranged for the young man to be a sort of Man Friday on the set of the first James Bond movie, **Dr No**. Blackwell could have followed through on this opening, but there is a story that "a fortune-teller advised [him] to stick with music." Since this is a Jamaican story, perhaps instead of fortune-teller we should read obeah-woman. The fine irony of this is that events were to show that the development of a Jamaican film industry may be consonant with the promotion of Jamaican music. It may be argued that the true subject and hero of **The Harder They Come** is Jamaican music. Conversely, Blackwell believes that, through films like the recent **Dancehall Queen**, that ride on the popularity of the music, one might exploit the visual excitement of Jamaica and Jamaican popular culture, which he considers to be underexposed.

Writing of Island Pictures' documentary film **Mandela**, which was nominated for an Oscar, our Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Rex Nettleford, has said that its making is evidence that Chris Blackwell "remains on the right side of history." And Blackwell, in his Preface to **Tougher Than Tough**, has written that "the main thing the Rastafarian element brought to Jamaica and to Jamaican music was a real recognition and honour of Africa." Chris Blackwell's affirmative engagement with Jamaican cultural identity, with Jamaican popular artistic creativity, with the conservation of Jamaican cultural heritage, and his enlightened

approach to Jamaican economic development are also evident in his tourism investments and the philanthropic community projects that go hand in hand with them. His resort properties, under the trade name Island Outpost, eschew standardised glitz for variety, individual character, fine yet simple taste. A cardinal principle is that of keeping on good terms with the natural and social environments. He glows with pride when he explains the features of the gazebo-type bedroom-villa overlooking the beach at Golden Eye: welcoming to nature and seeming to grow naturally, somewhat reminiscent of a traditional hut, among the trees. Then, because Blackwell knows that Jamaica is not just a beach, we lift up our eyes, and our stomachs, to the incomparable Strawberry Hill, of which it has been said, "Well, if it isn't heaven, it's only a local telephone call away!" Strawberry Hill, integrating motifs of traditional Jamaican architecture, and distinguished by traditional Jamaican materials and the fine work of local craftsmen, and pleasing the appetite with traditional culinary delights.

Chris Blackwell's community-outreach projects are examples of enlightened self-interest. They are, as he says, the necessary underpinning of the tourism development enterprise. The objective of the Oracabessa Foundation, his brainchild, is to transform Oracabessa into a thriving centre that integrates tourism into the local community. Under the aegis of the Foundation, a wing has been added to the local school, computers and bathrooms installed, and an agricultural project begun. There is the Eden Park sports facility, and the cultural subsidiary of the Foundation has embarked on an oral history project, which will in turn enhance heritage tourism. There are plans for a Reggae Hall of Fame. A new organ has been installed in the parish church in Port Maria. "The thinking," says our enlightened entrepreneur, "is that we need to be good citizens."

Island Records, Island Pictures, Island Outpost, and Island Trading, which exports a wide variety of Jamaican products: if no man is an island, Chris Blackwell is one man who is all islands, and for whom an Island is a world. He recalls that, in the early days, when he tried to improve the technical quality of the sounds he was producing, the better the records sounded, the worse they sold. The sound and the sales have long since come together in sweet harmony. I invite you, Chancellor, by the authority vested in you by the Council and Senate of the University of the West Indies, to "forward up yourself" to a sweet Island beat, as you salute on our behalf our Island man, by conferring on Christopher Blackwell the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.

Mona

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