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December 2016

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"Theater should be dangerous."

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FIRST PERSON, FAR FLUNG

GoldenEye, Jamaica

Bayside with Chris Blackwell, the ‘single person most responsible for turning the world on to reggae music’

Story Naomi Jackson
Photography An Rong Xu

Late in May, I went to GoldenEye, the luxe resort hotel overlooking Oracabessa Bay, on Jamaica’s northern coast, to seek out its owner, Chris Blackwell. The legends are many: Since founding Island Records in 1959, he had created the first international ska hit, made Bob Marley and the Wailers an international phenomenon, helped Marley convalesce after the 1976 attempt on his life, cast Jimmy Cliff as the lead in *The Harder They Come*, and had become, according to his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, “the single person most responsible for turning the world on to reggae music.” Reviewing the first reggae album he produced—*Funky Kingston* by Toots and the Maytals—rock critic Lester Bangs came up with a line that now seems to speak to an entire career: “Perfection, the most exciting and diversified set of reggae tunes by a single artist yet released.”

Years after that success, I’d come to find the lion in winter: He’d sold Island Records for \$300 million in 1989 to focus on GoldenEye—once the villa of his





Chris Blackwell in the Sha'Been bar at GoldenEye, with paintings by local artist Albert Artwell in the background



mother's paramour, James Bond author Ian Fleming—which he'd bought in 1976 with the aim of creating a resort that's truly integrated with the island (unlike so many white-sand Caribbean resorts). I went there looking to see whether he'd infused the property with the same depth of feeling for Jamaican culture he'd brought to his records. And I went to hear the stories of a music that was so close to my roots.

Growing up in a blended West Indian family in Brooklyn, I sustained myself on beef patties and curry goat from Jamaican joints on Flatbush Avenue, along with the gospel, soul, calypso, and reggae that swirled throughout our household. I got my love of music from my family: One of my uncles was a radio DJ in Antigua, while my dad had formed a band called the Soul Servers in the '70s. And each Saturday morning, as my sister and I did chores around our apartment, my Jamaican stepmom kept up a soundtrack of "rockers"—'70s reggae with syncopated bass drums—that made it clear that while we lived in America, our ears were still trained on the Caribbean.

Above us all, the recently departed Bob Marley was our patron saint, proof that distinctly Caribbean music could speak to listeners across the world. One of my earliest childhood memories is riding with my sister in the backseat of a warm car at night in Barbados, singing along to "Three Little Birds"; the lyrics lulled me to sleep, the song a cover of comfort I lingered beneath. As I grew into myself, Marley and the Wailers' ballads were an ever-present soundtrack. It was "Redemption Song" and "Buffalo Soldier" that I returned to time and again as I grew increasingly politically aware of black history and culture. Marley was ours, a bard with a thrilling range who could speak to family, love, history, war.

Despite my affinity for the country's music, I hadn't been to Jamaica since I was 12, when my dad sent me there to bond with my Jamaican stepmom. I found it hot and muggy, and had to rely on her to translate the Jamaican patois that grew thicker and more unintelligible as we traveled


into the high mountains of Portland, where her family had its homestead and a shop. It was a place so small that everyone peered into the car as we made the slow, final climb, looking boldly at our faces to decipher where these foreigners were from. But then, when we reached the shop, we heard rockers emanating from the jukebox, and I felt at home again.

Twenty-four years after that trip, I sat down for breakfast at the Bizot Bar at GoldenEye. Talsie, GoldenEye's longtime cook, had prepared the Jamaican national dish of ackee (a tropical fruit) and saltfish; it was so good that it made me feel like I was cheating on my Jamaican stepmom, who'd made the same meal for our family countless times.

Across the table from me was Chris Blackwell. At 79, he looked worldly yet jovial, eminently relaxed in a white shirt with three buttons undone. Talsie called him Mr. B., a nickname that sounded more fitting for an uncle with a well-worn place at the rum shop than a

Above: Chris Blackwell (far right) with the Wailers' Junior Marvin, Bob Marley, and Inner Circle front man Jacob Miller, en route to Brazil in 1980
Right: the Fleming Villa





“Marley was ours, a bard with a thrilling range who could speak to family, love, history, war.”

GoldenEye's Bizot Bar, named for French music journalist and tastemaker Jean-François Bizot; opposite page: the bar's collage of reggae royalty





“I smiled at the serendipity of Blackwell and my family having met before, at the welcome table of music.”

renowned music mogul and real estate entrepreneur. In an English accent mel-
lowed by island living, he told me how
he first got his start in the business, in
the '50s, when he managed 63 jukeboxes
around the island. “Sometimes the jukebox
was the entire entertainment in a com-
munity,” he said. “When I went to a place
called Rocky Point—a fishing village in the
south of Jamaica—I don’t think they’d
seen anybody of my complexion. I was
like a ghost walking in there. When I took out a record and
put in a record, you’d get an
instant reaction and everybody
would either say “Tune, tune” or
“Take it out, take it out.””

The answer, more often
than not, was “tune, tune.” By
the early '60s, Blackwell was
producing some of the first
records of Jamaicans singing
pop music: Cuban-Jamaican
godfather of ska Laurel

Aitken’s “Little Sheila” and teenaged
Millie Small’s cover of “My Boy Lollipop,”
one of the first songs recorded in the ska
style. “Millie’s record opened up every-
thing for me,” said Blackwell. “Because
once you have a big hit in anything you’re
doing, you go from one of millions to one
of hundreds. It happened at the same time
as the Beatles, the Stones, the Who, the
Kinks. And I was right there.”

For Blackwell, Bob Marley and the
Wailers were his Beatles. “When I met Bob and Peter
Tosh and Bunny Wailer in 1972, they were known to be
bad guys—which meant they
wanted to get paid what they
should be paid,” he recalled.
The musicians had been going
through a rough period, and
Blackwell decided that the
best way to establish a good
relationship with them was to
trust them. So he cut them a

\$6,000 check to record their next album.
“I felt it was a risk worth taking. Every-
one told me I was crazy. It was the best
decision I’ve ever made.”

This spring, Blackwell is helping to
bring that story to the stage at the Bir-
mingham Repertory Theatre in England
with *One Love: The Bob Marley Musical*,
which he’s coproducing with longtime
Island Records executive Suzette New-
man. Directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah,
the story traces the Rastafarian icon’s
two-year self-imposed exile in England
after he was shot in a 1976 assassination
attempt. (Marley spent the immediate
aftermath of the shooting convalescing
at Strawberry Hill, Blackwell’s villa in
Jamaica’s Blue Mountains.)

“He was devastated by that,” Blackwell
said. “He never expected to be the target
of a shooting in Jamaica. Depressed, he
went to London and found out that he
was really popular in England—all the
punks discovered his music because it

Clockwise from top left:
pictures and books at the
Gazebo at GoldenEye; a
signed copy of the Police’s
hit single “Every Breath
You Take,” which Sting
wrote at the resort; a hut
between the trees on the
resort’s grounds; GoldenEye’s Beach
Lagoon Villas; **opposite**
page: a resort guest dives
into the lagoon



was a kind of rebel music. He was revered and got his confidence back and wrote most of the songs on *Exodus* and *Kaya*, two of his most successful albums. He came back to lead a peace concert and got the leaders of the rival political parties to hold hands on stage. Only he could have done that.”

The show premiered last May at the Center Stage theater in Baltimore, in the wake of that city’s civil unrest. “It was extraordinary,” said Blackwell. “In a way, the riots helped bring attention to the play. We were just there for a month, and the theater was full the entire time. It was strange—the music Bob had written 40 years ago was still so relevant.”

You see Blackwell’s devotion to the artists he’s worked with—and to Jamaica itself—throughout Golden-Eye, especially at the open-air Bizot Bar, whose collage of album covers and portraits make it a kind of shrine: a

statuesque, flat-topped Grace Jones; a pensive Marley stroking his chin on the cover of *Rastaman Vibration*. Even the matchbooks bear the name of Marley and the Wailers’ first Island-produced record, *Catch a Fire*.

Perhaps most of all, though, you find Marley’s legacy in the harmony between the town of Oracabessa and the resort. On our first afternoon, we found locals and tourists sharing the same beach, which is far less common in the Caribbean than it should be. Nearby, I waded into a swimming hole just below the Fleming Villa to find a Rastafarian fishing the cerulean waters. I’d read a legend that a Rastafarian had saved Blackwell’s life when he nearly drowned, and that he’d cultivated a close, trusting relationship with the Rasta community ever since. I sensed there was some truth to it.

Later, after returning home, I assumed a familiar perch at the kitchen table of my parents’ house in Brooklyn. I watched as my stepmom cooked dinner, stirring meat in the dutchie pot she bought on our trip to Jamaica more than 20 years before. She listened as I played my interview with Blackwell, stopping to tell me about how she was once responsible for taking care of the jukebox in her father’s shop in Portland. I smiled at the serendipity of Blackwell and my family having met before, at the welcome table of music. She ribbed me about the mangled accent I put on as I spoke to Mr. Blackwell. There was my family, giving me a hard time as usual, and me, gathering stories to try to make sense of our lives. And there was Blackwell’s voice swirling in the heat of my family’s Brooklyn kitchen—just like so much of the music he had brought us before. **R**

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