

PRIVATE SECTOR HALL OF FAME

HONOURABLE CHRISTOPHER BLACKWELL, OJ

Some are fortunate enough to inherit a family business; some go to University to study business management and some acquire their wealth through ‘ginnalship’. But not Chris Blackwell. Blessed with an ease of recognising the importance of human character and possessing an innate entrepreneurial spirit, Chris Blackwell was able to use this natural talent, his good ear for music, and sharp eye for lucrative opportunities, to prove time and time again that greatness has no end.

Chris Blackwell was born in London to an Irish father and a Jamaican mother born in Costa Rica. He spent his childhood days in Jamaica, returning to London for education at the Harrow School, and then back to live in Jamaica. All this contributed to a hybridity some describe as “quirky”. From school days, Chris Blackwell conducted what we call ‘small business’ among his school mates. It was during this time and in a fallow period following his position as Aide-de-Camp to Sir Hugh Foot, that he ventured into a number of businesses that brought him in contact with the Jamaican music community. The rest, as they say, is history.

It was Chris Blackwell’s love of music that led him, with an initial investment of One Thousand Jamaican Dollars to form a record label in 1959. The label was called *Island* and Chris Blackwell was one of the first people to record the Jamaican music that later became known as “Ska”. In 1960 he aggressively began recording Jamaican popular music, and by 1962 this young record producer had two albums and 26 singles under his *Island* label belt. He incorporated *Island Records* in England, where he had returned to oversee the business. Chris Blackwell unashamedly but lovingly, sold Jamaican music from the back of his car. His first major hit was *My Boy Lollipop* by the Jamaican teenager Millie Small. It sold six million records worldwide and launched Island Records into the mainstream of popular music. Next, he signed the **Spencer Davis Group**, featuring another teenage singer, Steve Winwood. When that broke up he moved from ethnic music to rock music signing a spate of British groups to *Island Records*.

Returning to Jamaica in the seventies, Chris Blackwell entered the world of film with a small investment in Perry Henzell’s film *The Harder They Come, starring Jimmy Cliff*, whom he was managing at the time. In 1971 he heard Bob Marley sing and knew he could become great. Blackwell’s innate trust of his own instinct and that of Marley’s talents resulted in Blackwell plummeting Marley into the realm of a worldwide reggae superstar. Marley remained with *Island Records* until his death in 1981. The label’s signature was the knack to ferret out new talent and trends amidst upcoming reggae artists, the progressive pulse of rock, punk and New Wave, as well as leading African artists. Blackwell’s inherent business sense and the recognition of the importance of the artist, made him keep the label at a manageable size to maintain quality. Moving on to new things, in 1989 Blackwell sold his stake in *Island Records* to Polygram. He resigned from the company in 1997.

Almost immediately upon selling his stake, Chris Blackwell recognised the potential of a rundown area of Miami called South Beach. He thought the area perfect for hotel investment and for the establishment of his company, *Palm Pictures*, which would release experimental films and DVDs. But Jamaica was never forgotten. He loved the people and their storytelling quality, the music and the beauty of the island. He enjoyed giving the “small man” an opportunity to turn unrecognised treasures into successful businesses. Soon, wanting to share the beauty, the culture and the incredibly colourful personality of the Jamaican people, the concept of *Island Outpost* emerged, first at Strawberry Hill in Irish Town, then Goldeneye in Oracabessa, The Caves in Negril, Jake’s in Treasure Beach, St. Elizabeth, and more recently, Geejam in Port Antonio. *Island Outpost* was the project Chris Blackwell envisaged to bring the world to enjoy the beauty and culture of Jamaica while benefiting the small businesses of the local communities.

Bob Marley said, “All you got to do is give a little, take a little”. Blackwell has never forgotten that. Millie Small helped make him big and he is willing to give back more than a little to the Jamaica he so loves. His heart is as big as his pocket as seen in his philanthropic endeavours in The Mary Vinson Blackwell Foundation that supports the Unity community in the Cockpit Mountains of Trelawny; The Oracabessa Foundation for the development of the Oracabessa community; the development of the Strawberry Hill community, and now, his vision of Jamaica as an exotic tourist destination. In moments typical of Jamaican conviviality, the “sprints” of his creative genius will flow in small bars, in big hotels and on the tables in homes from bottles of BLACKGOLD, Blackwell’s new home-grown Jamaican rum.

In 1997 the University of the West Indies conferred on Blackwell the honorary *Doctor of Laws, honoris causa*, for his enlightened vision. In 2001 he was inducted into the *Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*, and in 2004 the Government of Jamaica awarded him the Order of Jamaica for philanthropy and outstanding contribution to the entertainment industry. This year *Vanity Fair* included him among the world’s entrepreneurial luminaries.

On this the 26th day of October 2009, The Private Sector Organisation of Jamaica salutes Chris Blackwell, the visionary, for his creative projects that promote the popular culture, physical beauty and economic development of Jamaica, land he loves, as a magical outpost of excellence in every aspect of human endeavour, and welcomes him as the 2009 inductee into the Hall of Fame.

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