



International Humanitarian of the Year Blackwell is honored by the American Friends of Jamaica.



# FIDELITY

HOW MUSIC  
LEGEND CHRIS  
BLACKWELL  
GOT JAMAICA  
TO ROCK  
AND ROLL

**L**ike a politician's charisma or a rock star's magnetism, generosity of spirit is one of those qualities that eludes definition; rather, you know it when you feel it. On October 29, 2006, when Chris Blackwell accepted the International Humanitarian of the Year Award from the American Friends of Jamaica, everyone present certainly felt it. Best known as the founder of Island Records, Blackwell is also a music producer, talent scout, digital media pioneer (he's chairman of Palm Pictures), Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, and real estate visionary (he set off the wave of revitalization in South Beach), as well as the man behind the barefoot-chic Island Outpost resorts. Bob Marley got it right when he described his friend as a "translator"; what Marley couldn't have known: the ways in which Blackwell's accomplishments would eventually cross cultures, decades, and disciplines. These days it's Goldeneye—once home to Ian Fleming, who penned James Bond's adventures—that's got Blackwell shaking and stirring. The property, which will be on 40 acres on Jamaica's north coast, is being developed as the model for what he calls "residential tourism," wherein local communities (in this case Oracabessa) actively participate in the resort's planning, design, and operations. "The people of Jamaica are the country's biggest asset," he says. Having shared its creativity with the world, Blackwell now brings a world of creativity to the island through Goldeneye. Here, in telling the story of his life in the music business, Blackwell pays homage to the many talents without whom, he says, he'd never have received this award. —L.G.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER LIVINGSTON

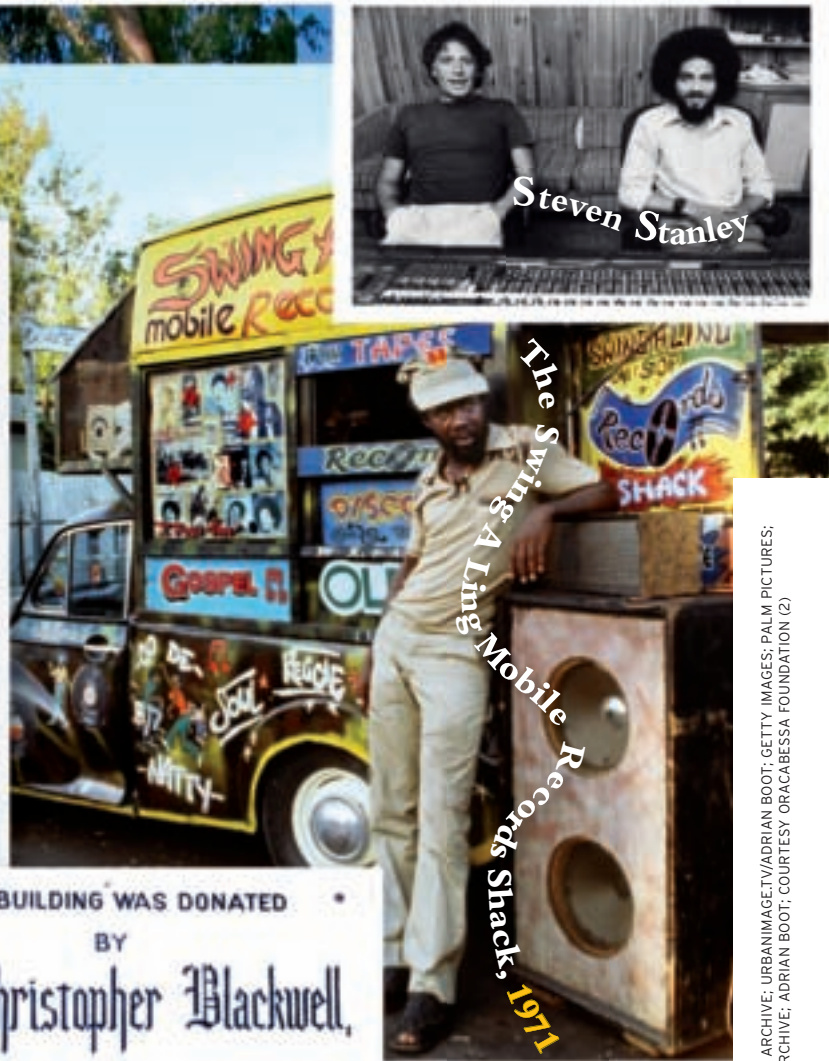


Director Perry Henzell

Musicians Toots Hibbert and Jimmy Cliff



Steven Stanley



The Swing A Ling Mobile Records Shack, 1971



The Oracabessa Foundation

THIS BUILDING WAS DONATED BY Mr. Christopher Blackwell, ISLAND COMMUNICATION LTD. TO THE ORACABESSA PRIMARY SCHOOL OCTOBER 29, 1996.



Junior Marvin, Bob Marley, Jacob Miller



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CB ARCHIVE; URBANIMAGETV/ADRIAN BOOT; ADRIAN BOOT; CB ARCHIVE; URBANIMAGETV/ADRIAN BOOT; GETTY IMAGES; PALM PICTURES; MURPHY/HERSHMAN/56 HOPE RD. MUSIC LTD.; JENNIFER LIVINGSTON; GETTY IMAGES; ND ARCHIVE; ADRIAN BOOT; COURTESY ORACABESSA FOUNDATION (2)

Director Dickie Jobson and actor Countryman



Ian Fleming's house, GOLDENEYE



SIR Ian Fleming



Ahmet Ertegun, founder of Atlantic Records

Chris Blackwell



started my business life in Jamaica in 1959, recording artists in an attempt to emulate American R&B singers like Fats Domino, Louis Jordan, Brook Benton, and just about anything I heard on Atlantic Records.

But the recordings didn't come out quite right. The accent was on the wrong beat, so to speak; the musicians of Jamaica just played it different. What emerged, though, was ska...and the start of Jamaican popular music.

The radio stations never played any of it. In fact, when I asked the owner of a big department store who regularly sponsored radio programs if he would sponsor this new music, he laughed and said, "Absolutely not." According to him, the people who liked the music would only shoplift from his store since they had no money to buy the merchandise.

The people really catering to the Jamaicans on the street were the sound-system guys, who imported from the States the type of music we were trying to emulate. In those days it was called race music—soon to be called R&B—and the sound systems were huge speakers usually designed and put together in Jamaica. They would play on street corners, where an entrance fee was charged. The main sound-system guys were Sir Coxsone Dodd, Duke Reid, King Edward, and later Prince Buster. I knew all of them because I would go to New York, buy 45s and 78s at about 50 cents each, cross out the labels, then sell them in Jamaica for 100 pounds or so (the deejay with the best records would get the biggest crowd). Soon after I had my first Jamaican hits, these guys started making their own records. Coxsone, especially, made the very best—he is the father of this music.

In 1962 Jamaica gained its independence from England. At that time my recordings weren't selling anything like those other productions, but I was selling a lot in the UK to the huge Jamaican community there. I went to see Coxsone, Duke Reid, and also Leslie Kong, a Chinese Jamaican who didn't run a sound system but had an incredible instinct for finding and producing talent (Kong actually discovered Jimmy Cliff, and Jimmy Cliff brought him a very young Bob Marley). I asked if they would let me put out their records in the UK—and then I went to England. That's how I started Island Records, driving around in my Mini Cooper to all the Jamaican areas in London, selling ska music.

Those guys were the pioneer producers. They were the first people to put the backing track of a song on the record's B-side. They went on to invent and reinvent the music. Soon the sound-system deejays started talking—in Jamaica, it's known as toasting—over these backing tracks. These toasting records found their way to Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, where Kool Herc and later Afrika Bambaataa exposed them to the American black community. And from that evolved what has become the most popular music all over the world, in every language: rap.

Also, it was a Jamaican producer who first created dub—the sound produced by electronically altering music with repeat echoes while taking instruments out of the mix. This resulted in a new excitement, a dynamic that had never existed before. And these brilliant inventions were produced on the most primitive tape machines, with special effects recorded from the bustling streets of Kingston.

Continued



Channel One recording studio, Kingston, Jamaica

While this was happening, ska evolved into rocksteady and later into reggae. I worked with many of the artists: Laurel Aitken, Jimmy Cliff, Toots Hibbert, Derrick Morgan, Jackie Edwards, and Owen Gray, among them.

One of the records I got from Coxson was by a little girl named Millie Small. She had a unique voice and I decided to ask her to come to England. She was only 15, but in a flash she was there. I produced a record with her, "My Boy Lollipop," which was arranged by perhaps the greatest musician to come out of Jamaica: world-class guitarist Ernest Ranglin. That song became a hit worldwide.

It was Millie who gave me my break.

In late 1964 I went with Millie to Birmingham, where she was appearing on a TV show. Afterward, I went to a couple of clubs—I had heard there were some good bands there. That evening turned out to be one of the most exciting of my life. I saw this group called the Spencer Davis Group, whose lead singer was still not even 16. His name was Steve Winwood. He sounded like Ray Charles on helium. His music was like the music I used to hear at the sound-system sessions in Jamaica, but he was a kid.

Jackie Edwards was an artist I had worked with earlier in Jamaica, and I'd also brought him over to England. He wrote the first hit for Steve Winwood, "Keep On Running." Jimmy Cliff, who had by then joined me in England, was in the studio when we were recording. He was clapping and dancing and generally giving the session a special vibe.

By the end of 1966 Island Records was a force to be reckoned with. Thanks to Steve's musical genius, all the emerging rock acts wanted to be with Island, the company that Steve Winwood recorded for. This was when modern music really changed. The Stones, the Beatles, the Who, the Kinks: It was a musical revolution. And I got completely caught up in it. Island signed Free, King Crimson, Cat Stevens, Nick Drake, and Emerson, Lake & Palmer, among others. And Steve Winwood formed Traffic.

During this time, 1965, music in Jamaica became more inventive and rocksteady evolved into reggae. I was pretty much focused on rock then, but Island continued releasing records from Jamaica. I remember hearing some of the early works of Bob Marley and the Wailers but never met them until 1972. Bob turned up in my London office with Peter Tosh and Bunny Livingston. They were completely broke and stranded—and, in spite of that, totally charismatic and self-confident.

We made a deal in about half an hour. Soon after, Island signed Third World, Burning Spear, Steel Pulse, Black Uhuru, Aswad, and the great Sly & Robbie.

Now, 40 years after the beginning of reggae and 25 years since Bob Marley's passing, you can hear his music in any corner of the world. You can find posters and T-shirts of him in Nepal, New Zealand, Nantucket, Nairobi, New York. And as with rap, reggae bands exist in every country in every language.

As you can see, the magic of Jamaica and its people has been pivotal at so many occasions in my life. Much of what I've accomplished is thanks to Jamaicans—the Jamaicans from the country, the streets, and the ghettos. Not one of them had a complete education or a college degree. They are the reason I'm being honored for my work. There are no truer, funnier, more talented, or more loyal friends. I love these people and I love this country. ■

## BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**CENTURION CARDMEMBER ACCESS** Blackwell is happy to discuss his vision for residential tourism, the Goldeneye development, his Oracabessa Foundation, and other ideas related to enhancing the creative and financial viability of Jamaica. Interested Centurion members are encouraged to get in touch.

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