

nonperformer

chris black- well

By Bill
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CHRIS BLACKWELL IS what record executives dream of being: an innovator, a barrier breaker and an international man of mystery. Mention Blackwell's name and the first association many people make is with Bob Marley. Fair enough: Blackwell's role in bringing Marley's music to the world assures him a place in pop history. Mention Island Records, the label Blackwell founded and personified for thirty-years-plus, and most people will think of U2. Fair enough: Island and Blackwell nurtured U2 from the beginning. But as enormous as Marley and U2 are, they are only the tip of the story.

Blackwell's mother's family had settled in Jamaica in the 1700s after the Inquisition chased them out of Portugal. In Jamaica they began selling rum, cattle and sugar. Those were good businesses then and remained so for the next two hundred years. Chris was born in London in 1937 to an Irish aristocrat, Middleton Joseph Blackwell. When Chris was six months old, he was brought to his mother's family's mansion in Jamaica to be raised. He was brought home.

At age ten, Chris left Jamaica to be educated in England, but he was already too free-spirited to slide into the British class system. He left Harrow in 1955 and returned to Jamaica, where he worked at odd jobs while falling more and more deeply in love with music. In 1959 he started Island Records, which at first mostly supplied Jamaican records, including early efforts by the fledgling Wailers, to Britain.

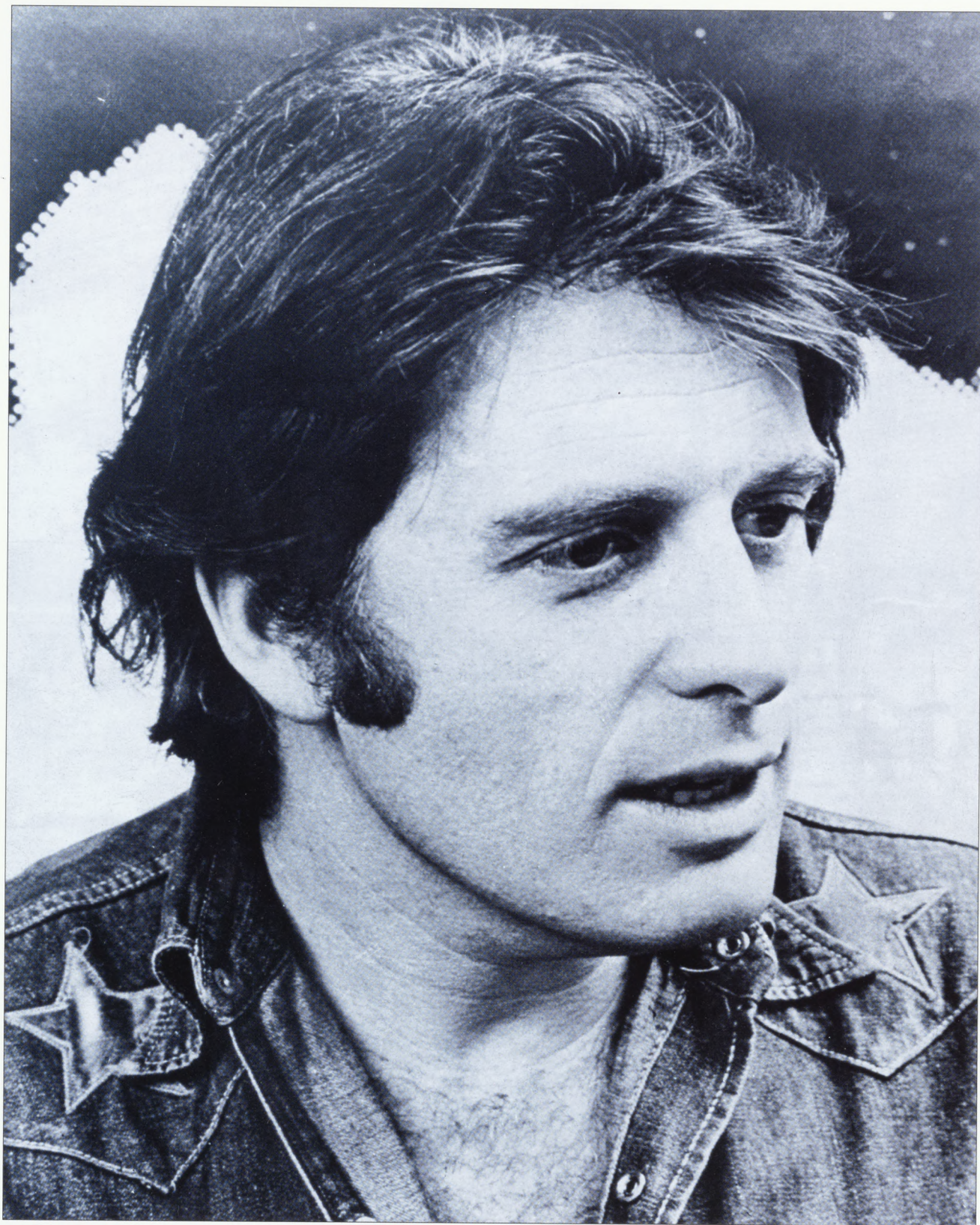
Always curious and still a very young man, Blackwell also took a job as a second assistant to the director of the first James Bond movie, *Dr. No*, filmed in Jamaica. Offered a permanent job in the production company, Blackwell asked a fortune-teller what to do. She told him his destiny lay with music. Blackwell passed on 007.

In 1964 he produced Millie Small's "My Boy Lollipop," which sold six million copies around the world. Chris Blackwell was on his way. That same year, he recorded the Spencer Davis Group with Stevie Winwood. "Keep On Running," "Gimme Some Lovin'" and "I'm a Man" gave Blackwell big hits, an influx of cash and the start of a long, fruitful relationship with Winwood.

Over the next few years, Island Records signed Free; Jethro Tull; Fairport Convention; King Crimson; Emerson, Lake and Palmer; Traffic; Cat Stevens; Richard and Linda Thompson; Spooky Tooth; Nick Drake; Robert Palmer; and Roxy Music. It was the hippest independent label in the world.

In the early Seventies, Blackwell played a key role in launching the reggae explosion when he financed the film *The Harder They Come* - and released its seminal soundtrack. Blackwell put out records by Jimmy Cliff, Toots and the Maytals, Burning Spear, Third World, Sly & Robbie and Black Uhuru. Bob Marley, down and out in London, approached him, and they made a deal. Marley went back to Jamaica and made a rough version of *Catch a Fire*, which he and Blackwell then remade, overdubbed and re-created in a London studio. It was the start of Blackwell's most important collaboration. The records Island made with Bob Marley reached across the planet. It was the greatest - and truest - world music.

By the 1980s, when U2 hit, Chris Blackwell was already pretty close to a living legend. He was at home all over the globe, but his spiritual center was Goldeneye, the Jamaican estate where Ian Fleming wrote the James Bond novels. In the Bahamas, Blackwell opened Compass Point studios and a string of exotic hotels. He continued to sign, record and promote new talent, including the Cranberries and Melissa Etheridge, whom he heard singing in a California sea-



side bar. Island also provided a home to Tom Waits, who made some of the most acclaimed albums of the Eighties and Nineties during his tenure with the label. Under the Mango banner, Blackwell released breakthrough international music by King Sunny Ade, Baaba Maal and Angélique Kidjo. He also kept a hand in movie production, with *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *The Trip to Bountiful* and *Mona Lisa* among his credits.

Blackwell sold his stake in Island to PolyGram in 1989. He stayed on to run his com-

pany, but, uninterested in being part of anyone else's system, he resigned in 1997. Then, merging his Palm Pictures with Rykodisc, he created a new mini-major, RykoPalm.

In a business full of people who risk nothing more than their opinions, Blackwell stands out as a visionary who gambled everything to follow the music he loved for a simple reason: He believed others would surely love it as much as he did, if only they had a chance to hear it. Out of such faith, Chris Blackwell built empires. ●