

LORD BASIL

There's only one place where stars like Mick Jagger, Kate Moss, and Elizabeth Hurley are merely the supporting cast—a bar on a very intimate Caribbean island. **By George Rush**

The Grenadine island of Mustique is only about three miles long, but the total worth of its 86 homeowners would dwarf the treasuries of many countries. There's Edgar Bronfman. There's Tommy Hilfiger. There's Mick Jagger. But among this crowd no one walks with more assurance than Basil Charles, proprietor of Basil's Bar.

It isn't much more than a thatched saloon on stilts, but everyone comes to Basil's: David Bowie, Robin Williams, Johnny Depp, Kate Moss, Posh Spice, Morgan Freeman, Quincy Jones, Hugh Grant, and Elizabeth Hurley. Jagger, one of Basil's oldest

friends, says, "He's just great fun to be with." Says photographer Peter Beard, "Basil is Mustique."

Almost 30 years ago the illegitimate son of a fisherman came from the neighboring island of St. Vincent to work as a bartender. In the woozy hours toward dawn, he'd walk the bar's ceiling beams—taking \$100 bets from white guys who thought he'd fall. He's still winning those bets. Somehow Basil managed to learn from Mustique's colonizers without becoming their boy. Instead he became the only black to own a villa, the only one to penetrate the ruling Mustique Company's private meetings, and, most certainly, the only one to romance a beautiful viscountess and become a surrogate father to a member of Parliament. Today, whether he's in a courtside box at Wimbledon or grouse hunting with French nobles,

he can't help standing out. Every time his friend the Earl of Lichfield takes a group portrait he tells Basil, "You're underexposed."

"He is the most remarkable person I've met in the Caribbean," says Colin Tennant, a.k.a. Lord Glenconner, the quixotic Scot who bought Mustique in 1958 when it was a mosquito-infested plantation ruin.

Tennant built the first villas. He also claims to have "invented" Basil. It was Tennant who asked Basil to take charge of the beach bar. Beyond that, Tennant introduced him to nobility and celebrity—early visitors like Paul Newman, Truman Capote,

"It's your life that changes, not the island," says Basil Charles, right, listening to the sound of the sea.



PATRICK LICHFIELD/CAMERA PRESS; LEFT, DAVE G. HOUSER





On a prime night, a flotilla of 80 boats would pull up to the bar. And often you could catch Mick Jagger's pouty-lipped strut on Basil's dance floor. Below: Mad dogs and English rock stars all come to Basil's to get out of the Mustique sun.

Richard Avedon, and Bryan Ferry. He took Basil abroad to Africa, to Southeast Asia, and to his ancestral estate in Scotland, where he mischievously seated him next to the worst snobs. More than a few female visitors to Mustique were happy to join in Tennant's outreach program.

"I was a bit of a rogue," laughs Basil. There were even whispers about how far his service to Princess Margaret extended. Basil swears that he only danced with the queen's sister. His relationship with Viscountess Virginia Royston was another matter. Royston, a cousin of Tennant's wife Lady Anne, was a 35-year-old widow and a beauty on the order of Vanessa Redgrave. She first visited Mustique in 1975. Just over a year after meeting Basil, Virginia told her then-seven-year-old daughter, Lady Jemima Yorke, and her five-year-old son Joe, the Earl of Hardwicke, that they were moving to Mustique. Soon the titled kids were sharing a house with Basil and his two children, Reynold, five, and Elizabeth, four, whose mother had been Mustique's telephone operator. The blended family lived happily together, with Basil and Virginia running the bar and a boutique they called Contrast.

But Mustique proved hazardous to Virginia's health. "I tried everything to get her to stop drinking," says Basil. After nine years together, they broke up. After another four years, Virginia died of liver failure. Basil's house, where Virginia's children visit several times a year, is still filled with her pictures. But on Mustique the party always went on. Jagger came to Mustique to get away from performing—but sometimes he couldn't help himself. One night he held everybody spellbound when he joined Basil's house guitarist, Seconi, in a song. You could often catch Jagger's pouty-lipped strut on Basil's dance floor. Grooving with him would be villagers who'd saved up for Basil's Wednesday night all-you-can-eat barbecue and jump-up. More and more star couples made their pilgrimage to Basil's: Michael and Shakira Caine. Michael and Diandra Douglas. Raquel Welch and Andre Weinfeld.

Richard Gere and Sylvia Martins. On a prime night, a flotilla of 80 boats would pull up to the bar.

By then, Tennant's days on Mustique were numbered. His Lordship's authority had begun to slip in 1975, when he informed his well-off subjects they'd have to help share the cost of the island's electricity, and in 1977 the cash-strapped Tennant had sold most of Mustique's nearly 1,400 acres to a consortium of investors headed by Venezuela-based chemicals tycoon Hans Neumann. Tennant had given Basil a 25 percent interest in the bar, and, bankrolled by friends, Basil later bought Tennant's remaining interest for \$75,000.

But gradually Basil began hearing complaints from homeowners, complaints about the service and menu and, more disturbingly, complaints that Basil let everyone in, including the rich folks' servants and the townspeople. Underneath the griping, one Mustique Company shareholder reflects, lurked the question, "Why are we letting Basil cream off all this money?"

The directors of the Mustique Company began to ask whether Basil had proper title to Basil's Bar. They demanded that he renegotiate his lease, and Basil, furious, turned the dispute into a national issue in St. Vincent, which controls Mustique.

The directors eventually reached a deal

with Basil. But, having bought himself a share of the Mustique Company, he has remained a vocal presence at its meetings. Basil was an early lobbyist for bunkhouses for construction workers. He now has a trust that gives scholarships to students in St. Vincent. Around Christmas, when he dresses up as Santa Claus, Basil joins Jagger in hosting a lunch for Mustique's little yellow schoolhouse.

Some years ago at a Homeowners Association meeting, Basil recalls, he pressed for a second teacher. "I said, 'You can't develop an island if you don't develop the people.' Mick got up and said, 'Basil, you've been talking about this for years. I'll pay for the teacher.' Everybody was dumbfounded. They said, 'No, no, this is a community, Mick. You don't have to do that.' Mick said, 'Every year you say that and nothing gets done. I'll give \$30,000.' Suddenly everybody started pledging."

Much as the island has improved, some have come to speak of Mustique as having a curse. The doomsayers blame its decadent air for breaking up a host of marriages, the latest being that of Jerry and Mick—who had a fling with Hans Neumann's 27-year-old granddaughter, Vanessa. Worse than the divorces was the 1998 murder of 56-year-old French socialite Susie Mostberger. Her still-unsolved stabbing bred suspicion between the homeowners and their servants, though Basil feels sure "the killer was not someone from the island."

Tennant bitterly declares that "Mustique is in decline.... It's turned into a country club from the Eisenhower era." Fond as he is of Tennant, Basil says, "I couldn't disagree with him more. Mustique is hotter than ever." Princess Margaret, who suffered a stroke on Mustique in 1998, may come only once a year. But the island has beckoned to a new set of celebrities, including Tom Hanks, Spike Lee, Courtney Love, Lou Reed, and Oasis's Noel and Liam Gallagher.

"I enjoyed the old days, when I would sleep on the beach at night," says Basil. "The younger people are still doing that. It's your life that changes, not the island." ■

