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A PUG'S LIFE

Clandestine meetings on superyachts, a committee made up of billionaires, rock stars and aristocrats, and a habit of blackballing big names – Taki Theodoracopulos lifts the lid on the world's most exclusive private members club

Words: JOSEPH BULLMORE

You don't get to become the world's most exclusive private members club without doing a bit of, well, excluding. The Pugs Club membership may span the echelons of European and sub-continental royalty, the scions of vast merchant and aristocratic dynasties, several famous rock stars and more billionaires than you can shake a polo stick at, but its committee is prouder still of those who have been turned away.

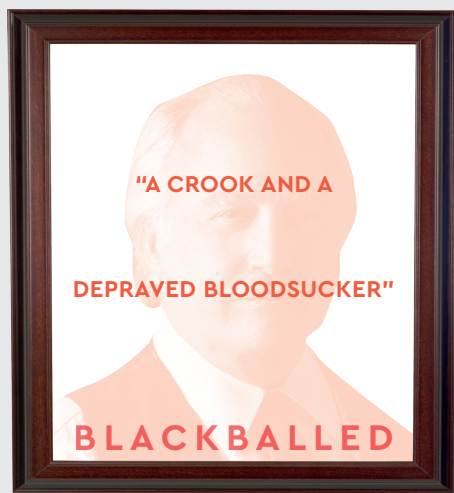
"This is our statement of disapproval," says Taki Theodoracopulos – the Greek shipping heir, *Spectator High Life* columnist and co-founder of the Pugs Club – lingering on that final word with the kind of Greco-American, mid-century drawl that has long since died out in the population-at-large. Disapproval is a light way of putting the club's infamous 'blackball' process, which involves, in a gleeful inversion of a commonplace AGM, the proposing and seconding of banned members followed by a club-wide vote. "A couple of years ago Charles Saatchi received 19 blackballs out of 19, which means his name can never come up again," Taki says. Saatchi got off lightly. When novelist Edward St. Aubyn – whose novels recount his childhood abuse at the hands of his father – received 22 blackballs (more than there are voting members), Taki stood up to pronounce that "St Aubyn had blackened his father's name by writing that his old man had buggered him silly. Patricide is a real no-no among Pugs members."

The litter of other 'blackballed' applicants includes Hugh Grant, George Soros, Jay-Z, Rupert Murdoch, Warren Buffett, Sir Elton John, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Geordie Greig, Bernie Ecclestone, Salman Rushdie and Sir Mick Jagger. "Most of these people never applied and have never even heard of us. A few, however, did ask to join," says Taki. "You can choose which yourself."

“Charles Saatchi received 19 blackballs, which means his name can never come up again”

This ceremony – and accompanying scything condemnation – is a central feature of the Pugs' one truly regular meeting, a decadent lunch-turned-dinner-turned-three-week-bacchanalia held each June at Scalini in Mayfair. (The Pugs prides itself on having no fixed clubhouse other than the various decks of their various boats, though several venerable London establishments – including White's, the Turf, Brooks's, Boodle's, Pratt's and the Beefsteak – have applied to the club in search of 'reciprocal privileges'.) "One year we asked – who is that hustler with one leg? – Heather Mills if she'd like to become our matron. We wrote this very pleasant letter to her, and then at the end we said: 'There are 330 steps in the club building – will that be a problem? Signed, the committee.'" Taki laughs triumphantly. "She wrote back telling us to get fucked. So that was a lot of fun."

And fun, at any cost, is the Pugs' raison d'être. After all, as Taki reminds me, "the whole thing is wonderfully unserious". The club first came into being on the deck of a yacht ("I forget whose") in 2006. "Someone saw this grand house on one of the islands and said 'it looks



BERNIE MADOFF



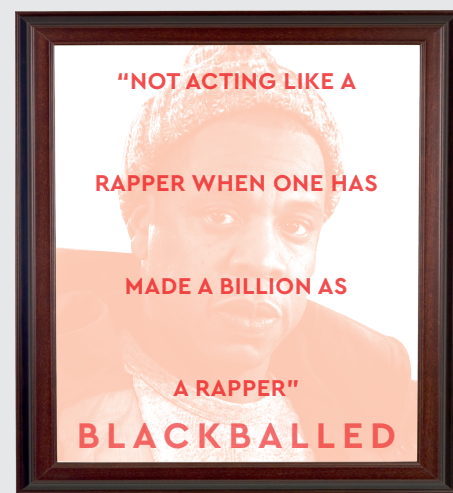
MARK GETTY



HENRY KISSINGER



EDWARD HUTLEY



JAY-Z



BOB GELDOLF



TAKI THEODORACOPULOS



PAUL MCCARTNEY



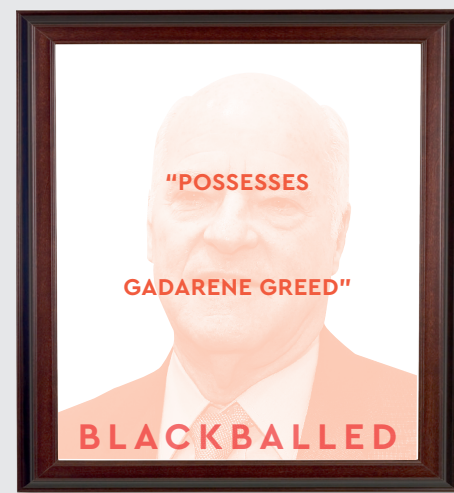
PRINCE NIKOLAOS OF GREECE



WOODY ALLEN



ROGER TAYLOR



HENRY KRAVIS

like a club’,” remembers Taki. “And I said: ‘Don’t be silly, these savages don’t know what a club is’. So we decided we should make a club befitting of that house. The night before we had been watching a television show about the Navy Commander Victor “Pug” Henry. So I just said we’ll call it Pugs Club. And that was the joke. That’s how it started.”

How the fun is enacted is less well defined. “I’m not sure what the Pugs Club is,” writes Taki’s daughter Mandolyna in *Gstaad Life*, a tiny lifestyle publication built to document the exploits of the resort town whose name, pronounced incorrectly, would surely secure you a dozen blackballs or more. “From what I gather, their little clique is some sort of gentleman’s club started by a group of friends to engage in gentlemanly activities.”

For ‘gentlemanly activities’ read an annual cross-country skiing race (“though a number of the members are unable to ski once they’ve had a drink,” Taki tells me) and a madcap re-

ABOVE:

Some of those who made the cut... and some who didn’t, with Taki’s reason as to why they were blackballed

“Listen, when I invited you to become a member of this club, I didn’t realise you were a member of the working classes as well!”

gatta around various Mediterranean islands that pits Roger Taylor’s *Tigerlily* against Mark and Tara Getty’s *Blue Bird*, the *Marie Cha* and the achingly beautiful *Bushido*, amongst others. “We have no traditions, other than drinking, of course. And we shoot quite a bit. But organising that always used to be Nick Scott’s job. Now he’s gone, I’m too lazy to do any of that stuff.”

This is the latest, and saddest, chapter in the Pugs’ history. Nick Scott, the Pugs Club’s President for Life and its ‘main mover’, died earlier this year. (Scott, it should be said, was a clubman sans pareil. It’s said that he proposed more members to Whites than anyone in the history of the club, even putting forward Osama Bin Laden.) In his *Spectator* column that week, a usually upbeat Taki writes how, with his dear friend gone, “London now seems distant to me, as does Pugs”. With the life and soul of a 1000 parties now departed, the highest orders of the club began to wonder whether

there was much point in going on. When I ask him about the future of the Pugs, Taki sighs and says: “We’re having a conversation about that on the 28th of June. I fly back to London next week. We will have to see.”

Needless to say, this year’s annual lunch was the most significant to date. But it was clear from the moment that the invitations went out that there were reasons yet to be cheerful. “When I invited people to the London lunch on the 28th, two of the members wrote to me to say ‘why did you call it then, I have a meeting or I’m out of the country for work’. So I wrote back to them and said: ‘Listen, when I invited you to become a member of this club, I didn’t realise you were a member of the working classes as well!’” It was a dispatch worthy of the great Scott himself. Aside from his meticulous knowledge of club rules and etiquette, Nick Scott introduced the annual tradition of the Pugs Christmas Card – a devilish piece of handiwork that superimposed current club

members’ faces on others’ bodies or onto “amusing vintage hunting photos from the subcontinent”, according to Mandolyna. “The last one had our heads superimposed onto the bodies of world leaders,” says Taki. “I won’t tell you who got who.” It is not hard to see, with Scott departed, how the very essence of the club might now be found wanting.

“We will all gather there on the 28th in our blue and white ties,” says Taki (“I insisted on that colour scheme – the colours of Greece.” he says. It was while wearing the Pugs regalia, incidentally, that Sir Christopher Lee was knighted by the Queen.) “I don’t think anyone actually wants to dissolve the club. But we will certainly discuss its future.”

Taki sent me an empty email a few days later. The subject line read simply: “Long Live the Pugs.” In the *Spectator* the following week, the *High Life* columnist wrote how the 20 remaining members had wrestled with the old proposition of ‘to be or not to be’ with a conviction

that would have drastically cut down the running time of the Danish play. After a brief debate in which everyone was awarded equal voting rights (“a dangerous principle, I agree,” notes Taki), the club opted unanimously to stay afloat. The only question remaining was who could possibly succeed Nick Scott as President. “Commodore Hoare and Count Bismarck suggested that I be head,” says Taki, “but I rejected that out of hand. I can’t even find a porn site, let alone run a club.”

At the time of writing, the position has yet to be filled. Robert ‘Bob’ Miller, the Duty Free billionaire, is said to be the front-runner. I ask Taki why he turned down the role. “I have been told that I’m the favourite to die next. Which may present a problem,” he laughs. “I’m 80 years old,” he explains. “But you should write that I’m 98. Perhaps then some young pretty girl will take pity on me. Perhaps then we might both get something out of this story.”

There is life in the old dogs yet. **G**



05.08.17

WILD FOR WILDERNESS

This year Veuve Clicquot brought a creative twist to Wilderness festival. The Champagne Bar treated guests to a world of hyperrealism, where champagne lovers could re-connect with nature through the creative lens of technology, music and performance. Among those in attendance were: Benedict Cumberbatch, Arizona Muse, Mark Strong, Tom Hollander, Whinnie Williams, Gizzi Erskine and Bonnie Rakhit.



Whinnie Williams



Bonnie Rakhit

Mark Strong, Jamie Byng and Benedict Cumberbatch



Freddie Harrel



Arizona Muse and Boniface Verney-Carron



Eléonore Decaux and Esi Neubert



Jake Warren and Lord Settrington



Greyhound racing



Isaac Ferry



Al Russell and Kai Corfield

Zoe Warren and Lauren Parks



05.08.17

GLORIOUS GOODWOOD

Lord Settrington and Jake Warren's Dancing at the Doghouse party at the Kennels at Goodwood closed the Qatar Goodwood festival with a bang once again. The evening's highlights included sponsored Greyhound racing, which, in line with the Magnolia Cup, hoped to have raised £150,000 for the charity Place2Be. Isaac Ferry took to his decks after top Ska band Chainska Brassika.