

Jimmy Cliff

BY ROB BOWMAN



If Jimmy Cliff had done nothing but star in the 1972 film *The Harder They Come*, he would merit induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Masterfully playing the role of Ivan, a country boy trying to break into the thoroughly corrupt Jamaican music industry, Cliff embodied the hopes, aspirations, and sounds of roots reggae at its best. The four songs he contributed to the soundtrack – “You Can Get It if You Really Want,” “Sitting in Limbo,” “Many Rivers to Cross,” and the seminal title track – are, in their own ways, to reggae what “Johnny B. Goode,” “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” “Like a Rolling Stone,” and “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” are to rock & roll. More than thirty-five years after they were first recorded, they remain genre-defining recordings. Of equal importance is the fact that, for many North Americans, they opened the door to the rich and soulful sounds of Jamaican popular music several months prior to the release of the Wailers’ first major label LP, *Catch a Fire*.

Much of the story of *The Harder They Come* mirrors Jimmy Cliff’s own life. Born James Chambers in 1948, Cliff grew up the eighth of nine children in abject poverty in the parish of St. James, some twelve miles from Montego Bay. Blessed from childhood with a strong and mellifluous voice, by the time he was 6, Cliff was enthralled by congregations as the star singer in the local Pentecostal Church. A few years later he adopted the stage name Jimmy Cliff and was performing Elvis Presley covers at Boy Scout camp and singing contests.

Armed with ambition and a handful of original songs, in 1961 Cliff headed to Kingston, ostensibly to study radio and television engineering at technical school. While he had more than a passing interest in engineering, his real goal was to break into the music industry. “I was prepared to face whatever came,” he stated in 2003. “Even that young, I knew what I wanted to do. I had songs I had written, and I wanted them recorded. I had no consciousness about money. It was about getting my art exposed.”

Cliff’s first recordings, “Daisy Got Me Crazy” and “I’m Sorry,” were cut for sound-system operators Count Boysie the Monarch and Sir Cavaliers. Closely modeled on American R&B, neither disc was issued commercially. Instead, Boyses and Cavaliers pressed acetates of

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the recordings, which they kept for exclusive use at their sound-system dances. Shortly after he turned 14, Cliff convinced Leslie Kong, who with his two brothers owned Beverley’s – a combination restaurant, ice cream parlor, cosmetics shop, and record store in downtown Kingston – to enter the record business. Embracing the newly minted sounds of ska, Cliff’s first release on Beverley’s Records was “Hurricane Hattie.” The single stormed its way to the top of the Jamaican charts, kick-starting a string of hits written and sung by Cliff and produced by Kong, including “Miss Jamaica,” “One-Eyed Jacks,” and “King of Kings.” At the same time Cliff was cutting hits for Beverley’s, he was also auditioning other artists for the label, which led to his acquaintance with a young Bob Marley, whom he recommended that Kong record, resulting in Marley’s debut 45.

A certified star during the first wave of ska, Cliff was selected along with the Blues Busters, Millie Small, Monty Morris, and Prince Buster to represent Jamaica at the 1964 World’s Fair in New York City. Inspired by the performances of the Jamaican contingent at the World’s Fair, R&B producer Carl Davis and soul star Curtis Mayfield compiled an album they dubbed *The Real Jamaica Ska*, featuring two Cliff recordings, “Ska All Over the World” and “Trust No Man,” which was issued by Epic in September 1964. The World’s Fair also provided a venue for Cliff to meet Jamaican expatriate and nascent U.K. record label mogul Chris Blackwell. Eager to record Cliff, Blackwell suggested the singer pack his bags and move overseas to London.

In London, Cliff initially struggled, performing whenever he could and working as a session musician singing background vocals on numerous recordings, including the Spencer Davis Group’s December 1965 hit “Keep On Running.” By 1968 he had recorded his first album, *Hard Road to Travel*, which included the poppy R&B song “Waterfall,” produced by Spencer Davis Group member Muff Winwood.

As Cliff explained to Vivien Goldman in 1979, “I came over [to England] with my kind of music . . . [but] I found people were not really into reggae music, they were more into American R&B, so I started to blend the two.”

This was fine with Chris Blackwell, who had long been interested in crossover. Many of Cliff’s Island



Cliff sporting reggae colors in the late seventies

recordings cut between 1968 and 1972 exhibit a strong R&B influence, with tracks such as 1972's "Struggling Man" featuring horn parts straight out of Stax/Volt. On various other cuts, Cliff's vocals are alternately reminiscent of such soul titans as Otis Redding, Sam Cooke, and Percy Sledge; Sledge's transcendent, almost otherworldly deep soul is especially in evidence on "Many Rivers to Cross," Cliff's apocalyptic hymnlike paean to struggle and perseverance. When "Waterfall" won Brazil's International Song Festival in 1968, Cliff spent nine months in South America capitalizing on his newfound success.

In 1969 Cliff reconnected with his roots by returning to Jamaica to cut his next album. The resulting recordings reflected a new level of maturity in both Cliff's songwriting and singing. In quick succession he placed three singles on the British charts: "Wonderful World, Beautiful People" reaching Number Four in the fall of 1969, the moving "Vietnam" peaking at Number 46 a few months later, and Cliff's cover of Cat Stevens's "Wild World" storming its way to Number Eight in the

late summer of 1970. "Wonderful World, Beautiful People" also managed to penetrate *Billboard's* Top 25.

In the same period, Cliff wrote the inspirational "You Can Get It if You Really Want" and the raucous "Let Your Yeah Be Yeah." The former was turned into a Number Two hit on the U.K. charts in 1970 by Desmond Dekker, while the Pioneers took the latter into the British Top Five a year later.

Bob Dylan has often been cited as referring to "Vietnam" as "the best protest song ever written." Its lyric is one of the earliest examples of socially conscious material penned by Cliff, who told Roger Steffens in 1986: "The essence of my music is struggle. What gives it the icing is the hope of love." These twin themes have continued to run through his music right up to tracks such as "Terror (September 11th)" and "No Problems Only Solutions" on his most recent album, 2004's *Black Magic*.

Paul Simon was also impressed by both "Vietnam" and the *Wonderful World, Beautiful People* album. He booked the same studio, engineers, and session musicians to cut his

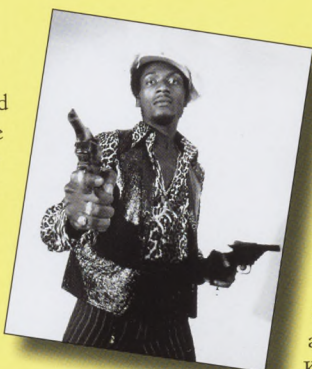
Jimmy Cliff: America's Gateway to Reggae

In 1974, a group of friends and I hopped into my old Ford Falcon and drove all the way from the Jersey Shore to Cambridge, Massachusetts, just to see a movie. It was a Jamaican film with English subtitles called *The Harder They Come*, and it wasn't playing anywhere else on the Eastern Seaboard except the Orson Welles Cinema, some 300 miles north of Asbury Park. The film was about a Jamaican singer-gangster, Ivan Martin, an antihero from the slums of Kingston.

A couple of weeks earlier at a new club in Asbury Park called the Stone Pony, the house band there, Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes, which included at the time Miami Steve Van Zandt (a.k.a. Little Steven), had closed a set with a version of the movie's title track. Miami Steve said it was reggae music, and the artist was someone named Jimmy Cliff.

That night I couldn't get the song out of my head. I was struck by its *chinka-chinka* rhythms, throbbing bass, and defiant, rebel lyrics. Southside sang it admirably, but I wondered what Cliff did with the song, and what else he had to say, musically. Someone in the Pony crowd mentioned the movie to me, and two days later we were on our way to Cambridge.

Neither the movie nor Cliff disappointed. In fact, we were blown away by both. I listened to the movie soundtrack incessantly. Over the next year I went back to Cambridge three



or four more times to see *The Harder They Come*, which was extended at the cinema for years. Each time, I took a new set of soon-to-be-Cliff fans with me.

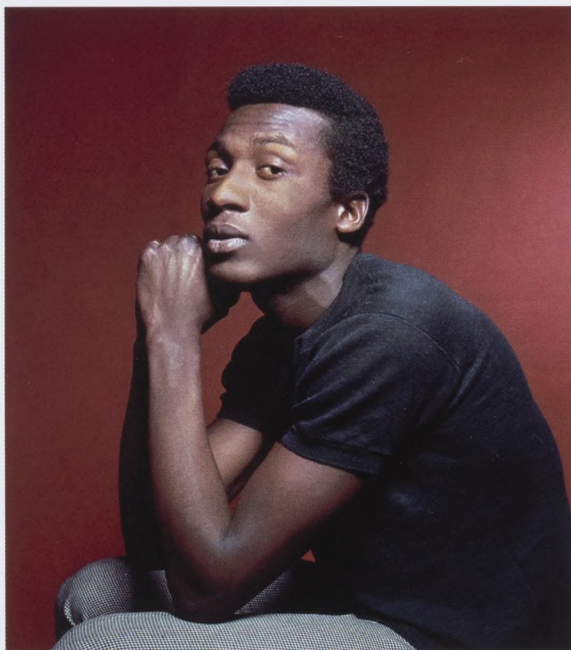
A few years later, I made my first trip to Jamaica as a freelance music journalist. My goal was to locate Jimmy Cliff and do a feature on him. I didn't find him – there was a national election, near civil war raging in Kingston during my stay – but I did discover firsthand the power and relentless force of reggae music and the conditions that gave rise to it in the Kingston ghetto. From 1978 through 1984, I traveled to Jamaica countless times, even moving there for stretches that brought me still closer to reggae culture. Cliff's music was my guide and inspiration. From him, I found my way to Peter Tosh, Toots Hibbert, Burning Spear, and, of course, Bob Marley.

But always I would come back to Cliff, whom I eventually did meet and interview a number of times. Always articulate and illuminating, Cliff represented the best reggae had to offer, and his music spoke to me in a way that went straight to my soul. Today, some thirty years later, reggae still resounds with me in a way that few other music forms do. For that, I thank Jimmy Cliff.

– Robert Santelli



INSET: Cliff as outlaw Ivan Martin in 'The Harder They Come,' 1972
ABOVE: Solidarity on a worldwide scale: Cliff in the eighties



Cliff in the late sixties



With Bob Weir at the press conference for the Jamaican World Music Festival, 1982



With Mick Jagger in 1981

1972 hit "Mother and Child Reunion," further sensitizing North American ears to the seductive rhythms of Jamaican popular music.

When director Perry Henzell tapped Cliff to star in *The Harder They Come* in 1971, the veteran singer had long been a bona fide star in Jamaica and had also established a name for himself in Europe, Africa, and South America but had absolutely no acting experience.

Although slow moving by Hollywood standards, *The Harder They Come* is arguably the most influential music film ever made. It is certainly the most important film of any kind ever to come out of Jamaica. Released ten years after Jamaica achieved its independence, the movie was not an instant hit. Instead, it was distributed in piecemeal fashion, with director Perry Henzell using his own money and traveling from city to city, convincing art cinemas one by one to screen his vivid and intense portrayal of Jamaican life and the country's underhanded music industry. One of the finest examples on celluloid of social commentary involving music, the film masterfully dramatizes the reality of contemporary Jamaican life – economic, social, spiritual, and political – and the vital role that music plays within, and as a reflection of, the community. While success was gradual, the movie slowly became a cult hit, garnering extended runs wherever there was a sizable Jamaican expatriate population. In the Boston area, it was screened every weekend for seven straight years. For many North Americans, including this author, *The Harder They Come* was their entrée into the impossibly rich world of roots reggae.

If Henzell's film did not exactly make Cliff a household name, it did introduce him to a much wider audience and paved the way for his music to have a significant impact on subsequent generations of rock, R&B, and reggae musicians. Evidence of the influence of Cliff's recordings from *The Harder They Come* is the number of covers they have generated. The title track has been waxed by a wide range of artists, including Keith Richards, Madness, Cher, Joe Strummer, Rancid, Willie Nelson, and the Jerry Garcia Band; "Many Rivers to Cross" has similarly garnered covers by Joe Cocker, Harry Nilsson, UB40, Oleta Adams, Annie Lennox, Linda Ronstadt, Gov't Mule, and Lenny Kravitz; and "Sitting in Limbo" has been cut by Garcia and David Grisman, as well as Willie Nelson, Fiona Apple, Three Dog Night, the Neville Brothers, and Phish's Trey Anastasio. "Trapped," written by Cliff in late 1971, became a staple of Bruce Springsteen's 1981 concerts, with the Boss donating a searing live version of the song to 1985's *We Are the World* project.

After the success of *The Harder They Come*, Cliff signed to Warner Bros. Though he was seemingly poised for superstardom, his career inexplicably stalled. "I changed," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1981. "I went into a heavy spiritual and cultural thing, which I felt was more important. I still made records, but my interest wasn't 100 percent into music."

Regaining traction in the early 1980s, Cliff signed with CBS and placed a number of singles in the lower reaches of *Billboard's* R&B charts, including 1982's "Special" and 1983's "Reggae Night" (a big hit in Europe and Africa) and "We All Are One." Cliff's 1983 album, *The Power and the Glory*, featuring Kool & the Gang's horn section, was nominated for a Grammy in the Best Reggae Recording category. In 1985, his *Cliff Hanger* album won the Grammy in the same category. The

following year Cliff once again appeared on the silver screen, starring in *Club Paradise*, and four years later he had a small role in *Marked for Death*. His 1993 cover of Johnny Nash's "I Can See Clearly Now," from the film *Cool Runnings*, returned him to the Top Thirty on the U.K. charts. The single did even better in the States, where it reached Number Eighteen pop. In 1995, Cliff and South African composer Lebo M recorded a duet version of Elton John and Tim Rice's "Hakuna Matata" for *Rhythm of the Pride Lands*, released by Disney as a sequel album to *The Lion King* soundtrack. Cliff's version of "Hakuna Matata" went on to become a huge hit throughout much of Europe and Africa.

In 2002, Cliff recorded *Fantastic Plastic People*. Produced by the Eurythmics' Dave Stewart, the CD features guests including Annie Lennox, Sting, Joe Strummer, and, of course, Stewart. Two years later, Cliff elected to completely rework and add to the tracks, replacing the original pop flavor of the album with a much heavier reggae and electronica sound, as well as guests Wyclef Jean and Kool & the Gang. The results were issued in 2004 as *Black Magic*, his last recording to date.

Jimmy Cliff's monumental contributions to Jamaican music and culture were recognized by the University of the West Indies with an Honorary Doctorate in 1997 and by the Jamaican government in October 2003 when he was awarded the country's prestigious *Order of Merit*. Tonight, Dr. Jimmy Cliff's contributions to both Jamaican music and the world of rock & roll are being internationally recognized by his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. 🎸



A prophet of rhythm: Cliff in 1991



Spreading the message at an AIDS awareness concert in Cape Town, South Africa, 2003