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## Postcard from Jamaica

By Richard Clayton

Jimmy Cliff talks about the 40th anniversary of ‘The Harder They Come’ and the origins and enduring influence of reggae



Jimmy Cliff at a London hotel

Jamaica is set for a huge summer. Usain Bolt is the face, and legs, of the London Olympics. Whether or not he wins gold, his country will swathe itself in yellow and green and black: on August 6, it celebrates 50 years of independence. And there’s another significant anniversary this month in the island’s cultural history – 40 years since the premiere of *The Harder They Come*, the movie that introduced reggae and the “real Jamaica” to the world. The film’s star, Jimmy Cliff, also releases a new album soon, the splendidly soulful *Rebirth*, which reveals in some unfinished business the 64-year-old singer and songwriter has with that period.

*The Harder They Come* still jolts the viewer today. It’s as exuberant as any musical – and, indeed, was successfully adapted as a stage show in 2006 by London’s Theatre Royal Stratford East. Shot in almost vérité style, the film’s street scenes have a vivid documentary feel, while clever cuts to a western he watches indicate the state of mind of its anti-hero, aspiring singer-turned-gangster Ivanhoe Martin.

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Then there’s the soundtrack, one of the bestselling ever: a cross-section of Jamaican music before Bob Marley dominated its international image – from the lilting ska of Desmond Dekker via the rocksteady harmonies of Toots and the Maytals to Cliff’s socially conscious pop, on the cusp of being called reggae.

This is the era Cliff returns to on *Rebirth*. “It’s a chapter I wanted to complete in my life,” he says, looking dapper and spritely when we meet at a London hotel. “It’s important to remind people of the value of what was done in those days.” Driving melody and sympathy for the common man have always gone hand-in-hand in his material, whether it’s “You Can Get It If You Really Want It” or “Many Rivers to Cross” then, “World Upside Down” or “Children’s Bread” now.

The new track “Reggae Music” is an autobiography in song. It touches on both his early success as a teenage ska singer in Kingston and the eventual political awakening that led him to write “Vietnam”. It skips, however, from *The Harder They Come* to the present, skating over the fact that Cliff’s career path since the film – in spite of a Grammy for *Cliff Hanger* in 1985 and acclaim for his live performances – has not been as smooth as he hoped. Cliff smiles coyly when asked about the choices he made, but concedes that he regrets leaving Chris Blackwell’s Island Records in the wake of the movie.

Cliff was an established international pop star before *The Harder They Come* – “purely on his music, not as some ‘cultural’ artefact,” observes Lloyd Bradley, author of *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King*. The film’s producer/director, the late Perry Henzell, cast Cliff on the strength of two contrasting photographs on his 1969 *Jimmy Cliff* album. “In one, I look like a winner,” Cliff recalls. “In the other, like a loser or a rebel.” Thus the character of Ivanhoe Martin, a real-life villain and anti-establishment folk hero in the 1940s, became a musician in the movie.

Blackwell and Cliff would later clash over that rebel persona. Blackwell wanted to promote Cliff in such fashion; the singer considered it a backward step. The film had taken three years to make, and wouldn’t be released in the US until 1975; Cliff was moving on. In retrospect, however, he admits “that would probably have been the right thing to do”, not least because Blackwell had a better understanding of reggae than Cliff’s subsequent labels. Blackwell also intended to market reggae as “rebel music” to rock audiences. For that, he needed a band, yet Cliff saw himself as a solo pop act. Enter Bob Marley and the Wailers.

*The Harder They Come* was none the less a revelation. In Jamaica, the response was ecstatic, chiming with a new optimism following the election of the socialist Michael Manley as prime minister. “How amazing is it the first time you see yourself on the big screen, speaking the way you speak?” says Justine Henzell, Perry’s daughter and herself a film-maker, alluding to the patois that peppers the dialogue. “Nobody was being portrayed in a watered-down or whitewashed way. Perry made the decision early on to make it for Jamaicans rather than an overseas audience.”

That truthfulness resonated abroad. “It gave reggae a context and a reality,” says Bradley. “It said, ‘This is where reggae comes from, this is what *Many Rivers to Cross* means.’ For a lot of Jamaicans in the UK, it was like a postcard from home. And an awful lot were offended because it was too violent and didn’t show Jamaica in a good light [with the shanty towns and the corruption], but at the same time it did show Jamaica.”

Henzell believes *The Harder They Come* remains relevant to Jamaicans today. “The passion and intensity that Ivan has in the film is still the spirit of Jamaica,” she says. Her documentary, entitled *One People*, taps into a growing national confidence, the mood behind calls for Jamaica to become a republic. To be screened during the independence celebrations, it aims to show “we don’t just sing and run fast”, highlighting Jamaican achievements in areas such as politics, medicine, and even chess. “OK, the past 50 years haven’t been perfect,” Henzell says. “We have made mistakes, but we have a lot to be proud of, and we are going to build on that now.”



A film poster for ‘The Harder They Come’ (1972)

Reggae, to use the term as a synonym for Jamaican music, has changed markedly since *The Harder They Come*. The roots movement, of which Marley was a part, was overtaken by the bass-heavy, electronic strains of dancehall. “People were, like, ‘Roots reggae, what’s it ever done for us? We’ve done roots and culture for 10 years and nothing’s changed [in society], so let’s have some fun,’” says Bradley of that more politicised form. Party music for adults it may be, but dancehall attracts much flak for its sexist and often homophobic lyrics.

While not condoning that lyrical content, Bradley maintains the “slackness”, the overt sexual bragging that originated with the Jamaican reggae and dancehall DJ Yellowman and others, was meant as a dirty joke. “It’s all a bit ‘nudge-nudge,’” Bradley says. “At a dancehall night, everybody’s thinking about one thing, pulling [the opposite sex], and that’s what much of this is about.”

Homophobia in dancehall is being challenged. It helps, Henzell says, that the Jamaica’s female prime minister, Portia Simpson-Miller, takes a clear lead within a very macho culture on anti-discrimination in general. The furore that engulfed Buj Banton in 1992, leading to the Stop Murder Music campaign, has been salutary. “If you’re going to make worldwide music, you have to comply with worldwide mores, whether you like it or not,” says Bradley. “That’s commercial intelligence as much as than anything else.”



Cliff performing at his home in Kingston, Jamaica.

A UK music-industry figure with notable personal links to Jamaica agrees. “There’s a long way to go, but these attitudes are less and less acceptable among the young,” says Natasha Manley, daughter of the late Michael Manley and Beverley Anderson, now a Jamaican broadcaster and political activist who, in 1972, had a small role in *The Harder They Come*.

Jamaica’s influence on pop culture has been out of all proportion to its size. Knowledge of the island’s music, “from the 1960s straight through”, is essential to win kudos among young British and American DJs and singers, Manley says. Jimmy Cliff is considered “in the top 10 icons” of those she works with, including M.I.A producer Diplo, who recorded his dancehall project, *Major Lazer*, in Kingston. “It’s the way he handles melody,” says Manley, explaining Cliff’s enduring appeal. “It’s coming back and being incorporated into current bass music.”

In reggae, too, Bradley and Henzell think the pendulum might be swinging back towards more melodic styles, citing Raging Fyah, Tarrus Riley and Busy Signal, among others. It’s fitting, then, that a sequel to *The Harder They Come* now looks likelier than ever. Unhappy that the protagonist is killed at the end, Cliff has longed to do a version in which Ivan has a son who “proves you can grow up in that [ghetto] environment and come out good”. Henzell, who owns the rights, will only say a “contemporary reimagining” is in “script development”. Will music play a role? “It has to,” she replies. “Has to.”

“Imagine the opportunities for the soundtrack!” Manley exclaims when I tell her. The next day, I suggest to Cliff that Diplo is a fan. “I would work with him,” he says, with the wary enthusiasm of a favourite uncle offered his first iPad. “I’m not one of those artists who wants to live in the past.”

*‘Rebirth’ is out on July 16 on UMC; ‘The Harder They Come’ concert is at Theatre Royal Stratford East, London on June 29 & 30; ‘Bass Culture: When Reggae was King’ is published by Penguin; for ‘One People’, see [www.onepeopledocumentary.com](http://www.onepeopledocumentary.com)*

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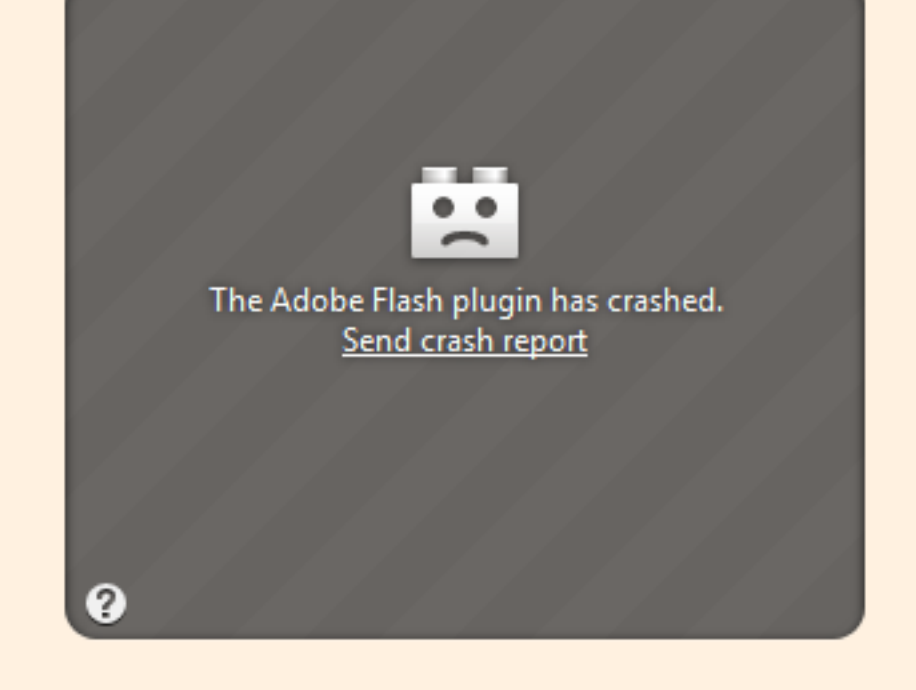
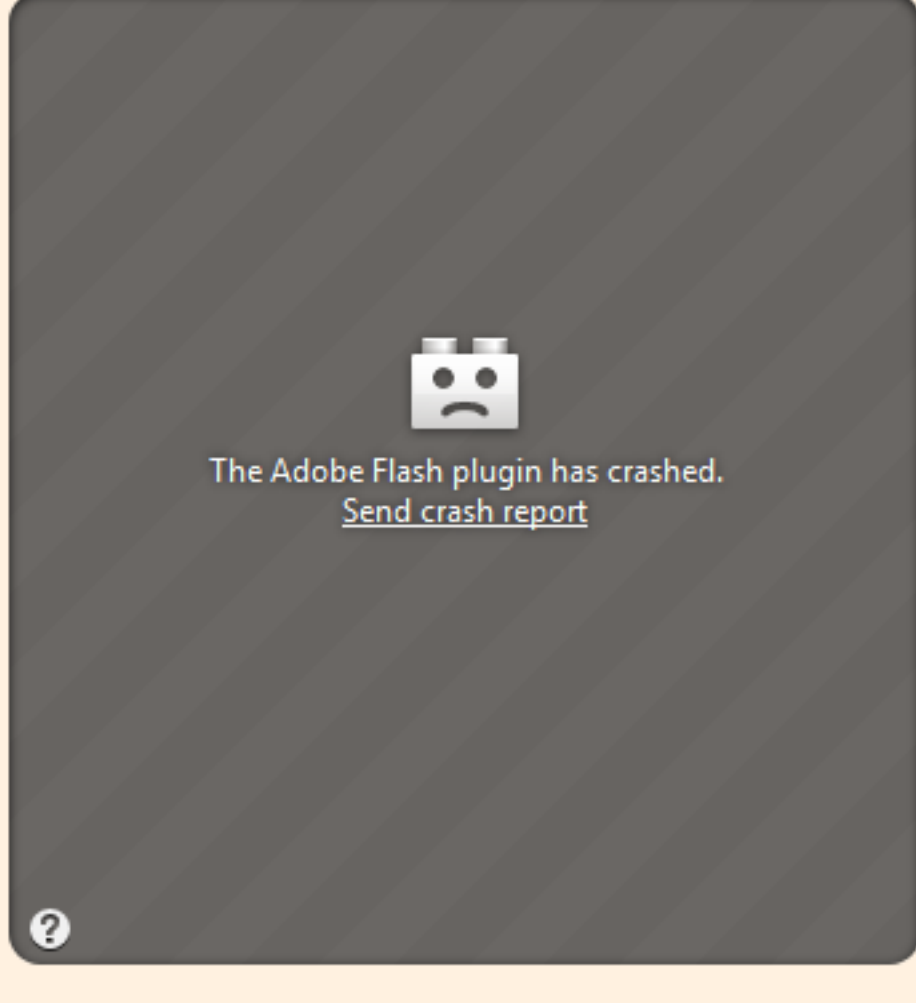
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