How fitting it is that the first major-label reggae album released in America is the first reggae album to be recognized by the Library of Congress in its National Recording Registry. The soundtrack album for the Jamaican film “The Harder They Come,” released in July of 1972, opened the door for Bob Marley & The Wailers and the many other reggae greats to be widely heard outside of Jamaica. But more than just a door-opener, it was an ear-opener, excellent in its own right, filled with some of the sweetest, most vibrant music that American record buyers had ever heard. That’s no surprise, as “The Harder They Come” selects from the best songs from some of the island’s best recording artists, cherry picking choice nuggets originally released from 1966 to 1972.

By the time Jimmy Cliff starred in “The Harder They Come,” he was already a recording star in Jamaica. His title track, from 1972, is a complete winner and the album’s spearhead. Cliff’s powerful, emotive voice is at its best as it rings out an anthem of righteousness triumphing over oppression. It’s the only song on the album that has no backing vocals of any kind—Cliff is just too big here for another voice to fit. He’s supported by the first-rate Jamaican musicians in the aptly-named backing band, The Dynamites, and the equally talented producer, Leslie Kong, a tandem that is well represented on the album. Irrepressible and accessible, it’s the best known song of the set, and, at least for a time, was the most famous reggae song on the planet. Cliff has two other songs on the album: “You Can Get It If You Really Want” (1972) and “Sitting in Limbo” (1971), establishing his versatility as he effortlessly crosses over to pop and gospel, respectively.

There are two songs from 1969 by vocal group The Maytals, led by Frederick “Toots” Hibbert, with Henry “Raleigh” Gordon and Nathaniel “Jerry” Mathias, and backed, again, by The Dynamites and producer Leslie Kong. Though Toots recorded in seven different decades in a career unmatched in reggae, only a few of his songs were as good as these two and there were none better.

These songs gave the non-Jamaican listener their first taste of the rich, rangy, rural Jamaican vocal harmonies that are pure delight. “Pressure Drop,” a joyous assurance that the wicked will
get their just deserts, is a wonderful song. “Sweet and Dandy” is even better. Featuring a sound that’s the most rural of any song on the album, it lovingly details the wedding of Etty and Johnson, a young, couple from the country. They are overwhelmed by their wedding, with Etty crying and Johnson fretting. Parents, aunts and uncles offer advice and urge them forward. Toots calls them “perfect partners.” Meanwhile, the guests aren’t waiting for the bride and groom to pull it together. “All dressed in white” for the occasion, they are dancing in the ballroom, drinking cola wine, and eating wedding cake. The film has a scene with a recreation of the song being recorded by producer Kong in a studio that’s so engaging and authentic, I promise you won’t mind the lip synching.

“Rivers of Babylon,” from 1971, is by vocal duo The Melodians (Brent Dove and James McNaughton), again backed by The Dynamites and Leslie Kong. It’s a big song, the only one on the album to top four minutes. And despite its unhurried approach, it’s loaded with more music than four minutes should be able hold. The instrumentation brings the relaxed refinement of the rock steady style from the mid-late 1960s. If that aspect of the song was looking back, the lyrics were looking ahead to the roots reggae that would explode a few years later. Such lyrics were concerned with Rastafarian religious beliefs and issues of social justice. Here, these sentiments are expressed by adapting from the Bible passages Psalm 19:14 and Psalm 137:1. Vocals contrast somber roots harmonies for the verses and soulful release for the chorus. And then the song introduces a surprise second chorus with introspective vocals. Spanning styles and time, rich in music, “Rivers of Babylon” is a song that stands alone, and is the best ever from The Melodians.

Next are a pair of “rude boy” songs. Rude boys were young, violent criminals that inspired many a fine reggae song, sometimes identifying with the rude boy, other times decrying their behavior. These songs began to appear in 1964 during the ska era (with a number of memorable examples from a young Bob Marley & The Wailers), hit a peak in the rock steady era, and continued into the new millennium, albeit with “gangsta” by then often supplanting the term rude boy. “The Harder They Come” film portrays the rise and fall of Jimmy Cliff’s rude boy character, Ivanhoe Martin.

“Johnny Too Bad,” from 1970, is by The Slickers. Derrick Crooks was a constant in this vocal group’s fluctuating lineup and Abraham Green provided lead vocal on this, The Slickers’ finest song. The lyrics give an account of a rude boy’s transgressions (“You’re just robbing and you’re stabbing and you’re looting and you’re shooting.”) Are The Slickers impressed by this swagger? Not when the song ends with the “ruddie” getting his biblical comeuppance. Meanwhile, producers Tommy Cowan and Byron Lee see to an immaculate rocksteady backing with excellent ensemble playing featuring a pair of organ solos with the down-to-earth excellence that characterizes reggae.

“007 (Shanty Town)” by Desmond Dekker, recorded with The Dynamites and Kong in 1966, is the earliest song on the album. Though he had Jamaican hits before it during the ska era, “007 (Shanty Town)” marks the beginning of a run of outstanding rock steady hits for Dekker. It even made the UK charts--a rarity for a reggae single prior to Bob Marley’s massive popularity in the next decade. He topped that feat two years later with “Israelites,” a song that not only was
number 1 in the UK, but it also cracked the reggae-resistant US charts. Dekker truly belonged on this geography-conquering album.

Decker observes how rude boys get out of jail on probation only to "loot... shoot" and "bomb up the town" in Kingston's notorious slum, Shanty Town. But in the end, with the growing presence of police and soldiers, the rude boys sees their demise. Dekker does so in his quintessentially Jamaican voice: high, a bit nasal, accented, emotive, and full of play. The backing music is a cool, clean rock-steady breeze, pleasingly uncluttered with just drums, bass, two rhythm guitars, and some backing vocals.

"Draw Your Brakes" by Scotty (David Scott), from 1971, is undoubtedly the strangest sounding song on the album to non-Jamaican ears. It's in the "DJ" style of reggae, where the vocalist is not a singer per se, but a DJ who rhythmically speak-sings to a backing that's not newly recorded, but is instead an existing recording that has been repurposed for the DJ's use. The stance is that the DJ's vocal skills may not be the conventional ones of a singer, but still demands to be heard--and that crashing another artist's hit single is a perfectly good platform. A man of the people, the DJ speaks patois, the heavily accented speech of the common folk, rich in slang words and alternate grammar.

In 1967, the rock steady vocal duo Keith & Tex had a hit with "Stop That Train," produced by Derrick Harriott. Four years later, the producer ushered Scotty into the studio to perform over a version of this record with some of the vocals dubbed out to create more room for Scotty to DJ. The result was one of Scotty's best songs, as he transforms the conservative original into something more exotic. In his youthful, high, nasal, whiny voice, Scotty opens with a spoken word introduction in heavy patois that's completely indecipherable to non-Jamaicans. The Keith and Tex record begins, but there's that voice again, giving a running commentary on what the singers are saying in his plaintive voice. He urges the singers on, empathizes with their sad tale, elaborates on their theme, gives instruction to the guitarist as he solos, and adds a variety of exclamations. "Draw Your Brakes" is the soundtrack's hint to the listener that there are more styles of reggae out there than the singer-oriented sounds of the other songs.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress*