

“The Harder They Come”—Jimmy Cliff (1972)

Added to the National Registry: 2020

Essay by David Katz (guest post)*



Jimmy Cliff (center)

“The Harder They Come” is a landmark of Caribbean cinema. The first full-length feature film shot in Jamaica by a Jamaican director with a fully Jamaican cast, it centers on a plot based on the lives of ordinary Jamaicans, making it unlike anything to come before. Through Jimmy Cliff’s sympathetic portrayal of Ivan, a determined character whose pride will not allow him to be beaten down but whose desperation leads to an inevitably swift and gory demise, filmmaker Perry Henzell illuminates the widespread social injustice commonplace in the developing world.

Breaking box-office records in Jamaica on release in 1972, the film initially struggled to find its audience overseas, despite critical acclaim at the Locarno film festival in Switzerland; even in Brixton, with its large Jamaican immigrant community, the film received a mixed response, though it would gradually be embraced as a cult classic, with a cinema in Boston, Massachusetts, later screening the film on repeat for decades.

Though it took time to establish itself abroad, “The Harder They Come” brought the sights and sounds of Jamaica to overseas audiences for the very first time; in particular, it made plain the jarring reality of the Kingston slums and gave some indication of the Rastafari way of life, sparking an interest for many in the island’s music and culture, especially in the USA, where the soundtrack was a revelation.

The album begins with “You Can Get It If You Really Want,” one of Cliff’s most optimistic numbers, but Henzell has pointed out that the film proves the opposite of what the song implies: Ivan believes the city holds the key to his dreams, but the squalor of the slums is oppressive and carceral. Then comes “Draw Your Brakes” by David “Scotty” Scott, one of the few to successfully make the transition from singer to deejay; his witty toast, ably assisted by Derrick Harriott’s sterling production, has made the song an enduring favorite.

The Melodians’ “Rivers of Babylon” is an evergreen expression of Rastafari faith, while “Many Rivers To Cross” is one of the most moving numbers of Cliff’s career, inspired by early disappointments he experienced trying to make it as a soul singer in Britain, at the behest of Island Records founder, Chris Blackwell, who was heavily involved in the

soundtrack's back catalogue selections. The Maytals' "Sweet And Dandy" is a wonderful depiction of a Jamaican wedding fete, while the title track, which was the only song written specially for the film, alludes to the terrible price Ivan will have to pay for his independence.

The Slickers' "Johnny Too Bad," written and led by Delroy Wilson's younger brother Trevor, a downtown tough known as "Batman" who died a violent, early death, brings us straight to the heart of the Kingston "rude boy" phenomenon, whose exploits are further explored in Desmond Dekker's perennial "Shanty Town," while the Maytals' intense "Pressure Drop" attempts to warn of the severe consequences awaiting wrongdoers.

The exquisite "Sitting In Limbo" is one of the strong numbers Cliff crafted at Muscle Shoals studio in Alabama for his "Another Cycle" album, which somehow fits entirely with the imagery of the film, and the reprises of "You Can Get It If You Really Want" and "The Harder They Come" that follow it parallel the film's dramatic closing scenes, in which Ivan learns the true significance of Jose's proclamation that "Star bwoi can't die til the last reel," as uttered while the two were watching a violent Western in a Kingston cinema at the start of the film.

One of the great ironies of "The Harder They Come" is that the film was originally planned as the first episode of a trilogy. Perry Henzell began working on the second, "No Place Like Home," during the 1970s, but was unable to secure enough financial backing to finish it; the unfinished film thus languished in a warehouse for decades, until Henzell managed to retrieve it and film a sort of ending, though the work only enjoyed a very limited run. The final piece was supposed to be based on the novel "Power Game," an intriguing portrait of political manipulation written by Henzell and first published in 1982, though that film never came into being. Meanwhile, rumors of a "Harder They Come" sequel continued to circulate from time to time, variously involving Henzell, Cliff, or both.

Whether Ivan's story can ever be picked up again on the screen, the lasting legacy of "The Harder They Come" has made it the most revered Jamaican feature film in history, and as the music on its pristine soundtrack clearly illuminates, "The Harder They Come" is simply in a class by itself.

David Katz is author of "People Funny Boy: The Genius of Lee Scratch Perry" and "Solid Foundation: An Oral History of Reggae." Visit him at www.davidkatz.tk

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.