

THE HARDER THEY COME

30 YEARS AFTER

BY ROGER STEFFENS

"Best Rock Movie of the Year" - Rolling Stone
6 DAYS ONLY! December 26-31

ROGER CORMAN
presents A NEW WORLD RELEASE

Jimmy Cliff In **THE HARDER
THEY COME**

PRODUCED & DIRECTED BY
PERRY HENZELL
 Written by Perry Henzell & Trevor D. Rhone
 In Color/A NEW WORLD RELEASE

Also starring
 CARL BRADSHAW • JANET BARTLEY • RAS DANIEL HART
 WINSTON STONA • BASIL KEANE • BOBBY CHARLTON

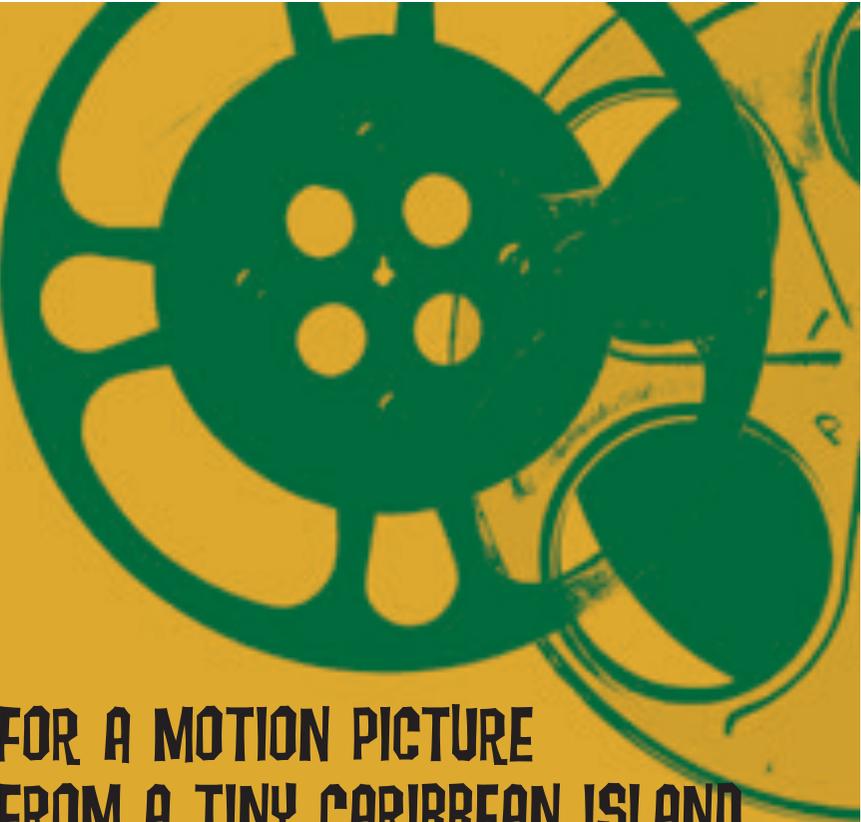
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Third World films that break through to a wider audience are rarer than union organizers in a free-trade zone. For a motion picture from a tiny Caribbean island to achieve enormous international attention, not to mention ignite a musical movement of irresistible force, is a mighty accomplishment indeed.

2002 marked the 30th anniversary of the release of *The Harder They Come*, director Perry Henzell's landmark film of ghetto life in the daunting depths of the Dungle, and the accompanying soundtrack which revealed reggae to the rest of the world. Based in part on the true story of Ivanhoe Martin, a late '40s cop-killing folk hero known as Rhygin (raging), the film weaves scenes shot inside Kingston's prolific studios with a riveting tale of ganja, Rasta consciousness and revenge. An anniversary edition of the film has just been released on DVD, with commentary by the eloquent Henzell and the movie's star, Jimmy Cliff.



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In dozens of countries from Africa and Europe to North America and the Caribbean, Henzell's film was responsible for many peoples' first exposure to reggae and its dreadlocked creators, a feat that helped bring a worldwide awareness of Bob Marley and other leading musical figures in the Movement of Jah People. The soundtrack became one of the biggest-selling albums in the history of Jamaican music, still in print and selling steadily three decades later.

The story of the film's snowballing exposure on the international circuit is a fascinating one, a painstaking country-by-country campaign undertaken single-handedly by the indefatigable Henzell despite critical setbacks and distributor rip-offs. Born in Jamaica, Perry Henzell is also a novelist and keen political observer whose storybook life has crossed paths with several of the best-known political figures of the previous century. Some years ago, around the time of *The Harder They Come's* 20th anniversary, I spoke at length with Henzell during a visit to my archives in L.A. I began by asking if he had had any advance indication that his film would become one of the most famous ones of the 1970s, and not just in the Caribbean.

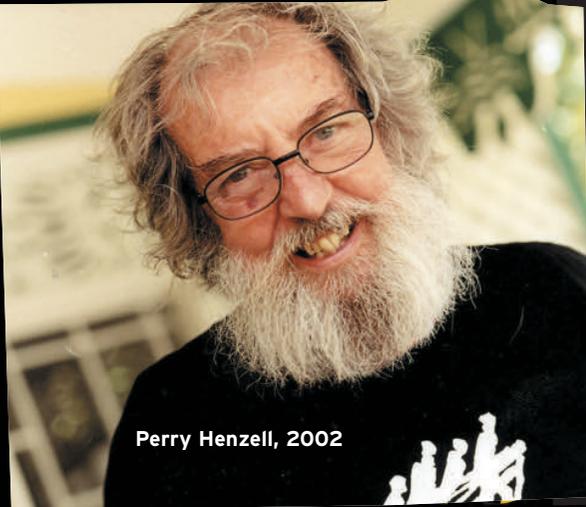
Scratching his wooly white beard, the avuncular director admitted, "No, I really didn't. I had no idea where it would go, but very early on I had to make a basic decision which was, would I water down the Jamaican realism in the film to try and reach a wider audience. For better or worse, I

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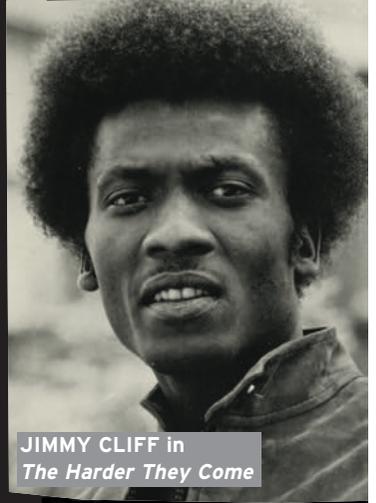
Director Perry Henzell on the set of *The Harder They Come*, 1972

PHOTOS © ART FUR GORSON/THE STOCKMINE



Perry Henzell, 2002

PHOTO, RIGHT, COURTESY OF ROGER STEFFENS/REGGAE ARCHIVES



JIMMY CLIFF in *The Harder They Come*

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30 YEARS AFTER

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decided no, I wouldn't, because I feel that the rhythms of speech in the film in those days, and still to a large degree, I think there's poetry on the street in Jamaican speech, and in film I am a fanatic for realism. I really believe that the spontaneous moment on the screen is what makes film, as opposed to theater or anything else. So I decided to make it as Jamaican as possible.

"I don't know if you know about the opening-night party in Kingston, Jamaica, but 40,000 people surrounded the theater and they just pressed in on the theater. It was a 1,500 seater, the Carib. And they all go 'round the theater. And the next day when I went there, it was flat on the ground. And the doors were broken down and it was like an assault on the theater. When the theater was full to overflowing, we rolled the film. When the crowd saw the opening titles they were kind of waiting and when they saw the bus turn nearly on its side, it's like this scream went up in the theater like they realized they were safe. We showed it twice that night. Then we started bicycling the prints; we opened in three theaters and we only had two prints so we'd show reel one in one theater and then take it across town and show it in another theater. And then what happened, it kind of took over the town in a funny way. I mean it became a mania in the city.

"And I thought to myself, well, let me get out of here, so I jumped on a plane and I went to Ireland where the next screening of the film was at Cork Film Festival. And the picture opened and you know, the credits went up and not a word. Not a sound, not a laugh, nothing, nothing. And I thought, my God, and I got up 15 minutes into the film and stumbled out of the theater and I remember walk-

ing the back streets of Cork and thinking well, that's it. Kingston, Jamaica, that's it. It'll never get beyond Kingston, Jamaica. It's hit this incredibly emotional chord and ignited this amazing emotional response in Kingston, but it'll never go beyond Jamaica.

"And then later on when I went to meet in the mayor's town hall, I realized people said they liked it but that's the way Irish audiences react. Every audience is a different animal—for example, one of the phenomenal things about a Jamaican audience is the Jamaican movie audience is the best movie audience in the world. Really, it's incredible. People constantly commenting about what's going on on the screen. So after Cork we took it to London and we opened in Brixton, but the Jamaican population in Brixton didn't like the picture. They felt it gave a down image of Jamaica. As Jamaicans living in England they felt it was putting them down.

"So what I did was print up, I think it was 5,000 flyers and I think it was on a Wednesday night we opened and the theater was virtually empty. There was no vibe for it at all. I got 5,000 flyers printed overnight and got a bunch of street hustlers and gave them all the flyers and the next day when all the tubes and buses were coming back with the workers, coming down into Brixton, I sent them up ahead and I walked behind them and they gave out all the flyers and I watched who took up and read the flyers and who threw them away. And enough people picked up on it, and on the back of the flyer was the story of what had happened in Kingston and none of the English press deigned to go to the press screening except for one guy. So I figured, well, OK, it's not gonna happen. And then enough people picked up the flyers; we did it Thursday and Friday and then Friday night there was a bit of a buzz at the theater, then on Saturday night it exploded. We got a house and it took off, and they liked it, but I figured no crossover.

"And so I went to get on the bus to fly to New York, 'cause that was where I had to sell it next and I remember feeling very depressed in a way that it wasn't gonna cross over. And I bought the Sunday paper, got on the bus to go to the airport, opened *The Observer* and there was a rave review in a white establishment newspaper. Boy, I flew all the way to New York with it," he recalls, laughing heartily at the memory. "I flew in my head, I flew off the plane, I really was happy.

"And then I couldn't get a deal in New York, or America, at all. And then the first Filmex Festival in Los Angeles saved my life. They said they'd play the film. And we played it at Grauman's



Chinese. It was packed and it was a fantastic audience. And they really loved it. Every studio sent somebody but everybody they sent were youngsters in the studio system who are now heads of all the studios, but in those days they were just youngsters. So the audience reaction was such that all these youngsters from the studios recommended it and I spent I guess five days—and film cans are quite heavy you know, if you carry them around they're quite heavy and lifting the damn film cans and putting them in the car. That's how I got to know where every studio in town is, because I went to every single studio and all of them said no. "And by the end of the week I was down to two offers. One was from Harold Robbins, which I thought was nice. For some strange reason he was going into the movie business. And another was from Roger Corman. So we made the deal with Corman, but there was another problem because they thought it was a *Son of Shaft*," said Henzell, referring to one of the first and most successful of the early '70s so-called blaxploitation movies.

While several critics at the time compared the handmade quality of the film and its deep delving into a localized musical subculture with the Brazilian classic *Black Orpheus*, Henzell recalled, "They tried to release it like *Son of Shaft* and so then it failed. It did very well indeed for two weeks in New York because every Jamaican within 50 miles wanted to see it and then it had no crossover at all into the American black market, so they were gonna shelve it. So I flew to L.A., stormed into Roger's office and said, 'You know, you're screwing up my picture.' And he said, "OK, what do you want to do?' And I said, 'I want to control the next opening.' And he said, 'Well, OK, wise guy, if you pay for it.' I said OK.

"And as luck would have it, thank God, the next opening was Boston. So I took it to Boston, to the Orson Welles Theater, rewrote the campaign completely overnight, stayed up all night with the stage manager, who later became head of Goldwyn, and rewrote the campaign and did endless interviews of all the

underground press, all the student press, student radio, student tv, everything. Really a lot. And the picture ran for seven years in that one theater. Then it started creeping back into New York, back into San Francisco, Austin, L.A. It started to become a midnight picture and it really had its life in America that way, but you see, at that point there was no reggae.

"Chris Blackwell told me later that he had tried to get interviews for Bob with Jann Wenner, the editor of *Rolling Stone*, and he said, 'No, he's not connected with *The Harder They Come*, and that's the only thing that's happening in reggae.' And of course, after the picture had been running for some time, Bob came to Boston and that caused an explosion and so the music started to sell, the soundtrack started to sell, and concerts started to happen and that in turn helped the film."

From then on it was a never-ending journey to the far corners of the globe. Shaking his full mane of gray-white hair, Henzell himself marvels at the tireless efforts that kept him living out of a suitcase for so long. "Forty-three countries! Subtitled everywhere really, into French, German, Spanish, whatever. I had to keep subtitling it more and more because it was difficult to know just where to stop. Forty-three countries, 43 stories. I think it took me about six years to earn the investment back, because what I would do was get on a plane, go to a place, get into a hotel, take a taxi, drive around town, find a theater, go and find the theater owner, make a deal. It was quite primitive. If I distributed in 40 countries, 30 of those countries, the guy knew that he was sleeping at home, I was sleeping in a hotel, and he would simply wait till I ran out of money before making a deal. And then we'd make a deal, get the print, make the posters and all, then go back and pick up the money. There was so much traveling that I kept running out of money, but really it was about six years before we broke even. By now, I'd say the investors have their money back at least six times over."

Years ago, I ran across a quote from Herodotus that was more than 2,000 years old: "The harder they come the harder they fall." Henzell had no awareness of this, and in fact, had considered a couple of other titles for the film. "It was Jimmy [Cliff] who came up with it, in fact. I remember discussing the title song with Jimmy. I think the key line was 'pie in the sky.' He asked me what's the theme of the song. I said, 'Well, this guy, he has this dream and he's come to town with his dream and he'd rather die than give up the dream. That's really what it is about. The message that reaches the country boy is so strong that when he comes to town and he finds the reality is different than the dream, he'd rather die than give up the dream. Jimmy wrote the song and recorded it maybe two-thirds of the way through the shooting. We had started out with *Rhygin* and then it was *Hard Road to Travel*."

The biggest unanswered question over all these years has been why there has never been another Perry Henzell film. "Two days after it opened on Broadway I went to lunch with Sam Cohen, the most powerful agent in America, at the Russian

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SKANKIN' IN ST. CROIX

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Although this initial event was marred by some problems, it was still a great idea. It was disappointing that a few of the scheduled artists didn't perform (most notably Sabbatical Ahdah and Apostle). In fact, the lineup didn't really do justice to the truly outstanding talent found on the V.I., with artists such as Junior Daniel and Yah Shiloh I not even on the bill.

For the most part, though, it was a fantastic time. When they eventually get everything ironed out, an annual "V.I. Reggae Fest" could be one of the brightest reggae showcases anywhere in the world.

At the present time, however, the roots reggae scene on St. Croix is still in its infancy. If you plan on going to the island, remember it's fairly quiet, charming and quaint. Right now it's more of a recording scene than a live one. But if things progress as they are now, and more bands and venues appear, keep your eyes and ears open. St. Croix may just become the roots reggae capital of the world.

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Midnite's home page: www.midniteband.com; Midnite's lyrics: www.ireggae.com/midnite_lyrics.htm.

The Virgin Islands record companies' Web sites are: www.igraderecords.com; www.glamorousrecords.com; www.mtneborecords.com; www.shoestop.com/skankproductions.

THE HARDER THEY COME

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Tea Room," Henzell recounted. And he said, "Well, you have your choice, you can either do big-budget pictures and go Hollywood with very little control, or you can make small pictures and try and keep some control." I said, Man, what do you mean control? I have my own studio!"

Laughing at his own chutzpah, Henzell countered with "I have my own studio and far from control, I want complete control, and far from big budget—I want to do a film, I want to make the smallest possible film with the most scope, to be experimental. Because I felt that my contribution to film was that business of combining the spontaneous moment with the written moment so that you couldn't tell the difference. Quite a lot of *The Harder They Come* existed on paper, but more and more as I kept filming, I started to improvise and I felt that I wanted to take it to the next stage in the next picture and build on that. Like *Battle for Algiers*. Ponticovo, maybe Ken Loach. I figured that maybe two or three directors in the world were really on my wavelength. I didn't really bow to anybody but Ponticovo.

"I set out to do that with my next film, *No Place Like Home*. It was a scheme. I had in my mind that there were three films really. A cycle of three films starting with *The Harder They Come*. The basic assumption was that there were two spirits in Jamaica. There was the spirit of the city and the spirit of the countryside so that *The Harder*

They Come examined the spirit of the city by a country boy coming to town and the second film was examining the spirit of the countryside through the eyes of a rich American woman who is married to a rich man in New York. But while he has a lot of money, he has no control over his life because he's a corporate being and she ends up with a sculptor in Negril who has no money but has complete control over his life. She's white and he's black. But it wasn't about black and white at all, it was about a woman's choice between—her instincts were a bit of a power groupie. So—which man has more power. That was the choice she had to make."

Compared to the short two years during which his first film was conceived and produced, *No Place Like Home* dragged on for a full decade: "I kind of structured the film so that if I ran out of money it wouldn't be a catastrophe. I could use the time difference, I could use the time lapse and work it into the story. But, by the time I raised the last half-million dollars to finish it, it had all taken so long that the optical house that was storing the negative for me in Manhattan went out of business and they shifted the negative to New Jersey and in the shift they lost like 20 percent of the negative and killed the financing, and that was that. I decided the only way I could keep my creativity alive, really, was to forget about the film business and write novels. So I just gave up everything."

The first fruit of these new efforts was a remarkable roman a clef about what had really gone on in the murderous atmosphere of Jamaica's mid-'70s, called, appropriately enough, *Power Game*. With thinly described lead characters and scandalously luscious gossip about everything from the reggae biz and herb trade, to international banking and the momentous power struggles for Jamaica's soul that reached from the very heights of American government to the back alleys of Tivoli Gardens, the book reveals the stories behind local events that drew worldwide attention during the time when, for a while at least, Kingston seemed like the center of the universe. The book took four years to complete, although Henzell feels that because of financial responsibilities he ended the book too soon. Another four years later, he had completed a mini-series version of the story, adding many new characters, several Americans among them. Then he rewrote the book, adding the new elements and more than a hundred pages. *Cane*, his new novel, has just been published, telling the story, as Henzell says, "of the cocaine of the 1600s—sugar."

But *The Harder They Come* is never far from his mind, and he has been in recent negotiations to make the film into a Broadway musical, perhaps preceded by a British tryout. And a sequel to his historic film may still be in the works, although the movie's lethal denouement seems to preclude any such undertaking. Years ago I ran into Jimmy Cliff at a MIDEM conference in Cannes, and asked him about the rumors that he was planning to appear in such a sequel, seeing as how his character had been shot 28 times in the last reel of *The Harder They Come*. A sly smile creased his ever-youthful features and he said slowly, "You see me shot . . . but did you see me killed?"

Henzell presents a plausible outline of a new script, involving many of the original characters from 30 years ago, and Jimmy getting revenge through a long-lost son with whom he connects upon his release from prison, a boy who has himself become involved in contemporary Jamaican musical runnings.

It is in this dancehall-permeated early 21st century milieu that Henzell may yet make another significant contribution to the world's understanding of Jamaican culture, as he simultaneously celebrates his triumphs of 30 years past.★

AFRICAN BEAT

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instrumental character. Particularly significant is guitarist Vula Missy, who has a light and delicate touch. While the music has the sweet and innocent feel of pre-independence Congo, there is a smooth modern production and an occasional kick to the group that makes the music feel contemporary and not just some old nostalgia experience. The album starts with a remake of an old hit "Victoria Apiki Drapeau" and includes his AIDS warning "Batela Nzoto" (a highlight of his live Bercy show with Papa Wemba on New Years Eve 2001). Title track "Amba" is a gem, there's a tribute to "Dead Prez" Kabila, a duo with thumb-piano veteran Antoine Moundanda and all in all some great feeling from a fine mixed bunch of old and young musicians. It is wonderful that Wendo has received this revitalization of his career. While he is unlikely to capitalize on it in quite the same way as his Cuban contemporaries (Compay Segundo, Ibrahim Ferrer et al.) it means that he might, at least, live out his final years in some kind of modest comfort.

Check out the www.africasounds.com Web site where Martin Sinnock's extended articles can be found. Contact Martin Sinnock at mhs@weatherallnorth.co.uk or write to P.O. Box 406, Croydon CR9 1XR, England.

THE OTHER CARIBBEAN

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rather bland lyrics. "Emergency" is another one of those apocalyptic visions at which the band excels (this time done to an old-school reggae beat) contrasted by the melodic testimony of faith, "Illuminata." Interestingly, the cut "Together" was produced by Haiti's ragga artist John "Papa Jube" Altino. There's a substantial lyrical verse in there that touches something inside: "...I walk away from hate, I walk away from pain, and the things that drive me insane."

As with 3 Canal's past releases, there are moments of spiritual illumination and catchy melodies which unfortunately aren't sustained for the album's length, often degenerating into pop banalities. Call this band's sound highly original within the constraints of modern soca, but it doesn't always deliver what it promises. 'Nuff said.

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