



Jimmy Cliff, OAD

*O, for a muse of fire that would ascend
the brightest heaven of invention,
O for a reggae, reggae muse
to sing a sweet citation!*

But, alas, Chancellor, we have only prose; prose that cannot hope to catch the dulcet tenor of Cliff. I present Jimmy Cliff, actor, singer, composer, songwriter, ambassador by acclaim. **The Guinness Who's Who of Reggae** describes him as "one of the great popularisers of reggae music, [who] blazed a trail into rock that Bob Marley later followed." He is a songbird who was singing even in the nest. Even then he knew that there would be "many rivers to cross," but he also knew, even then, that "you can get it if you really want." As a child, at Somerton in the Parish of St James, when he climbed up into the big tree to serenade the neighbourhood, and the neighbours shouted to him to stop the noise, his grandmother would say to them, "Leave the boy alone; he's going to come to something one day." At school his form teacher would punish him for disturbing the class with his singing: "Boy, you think you're on Broadway?" But when it struck her that he could really sing, she became one of his chief supporters.

When he was fourteen, his father sent him to Kingston, to study at the Kingston Technical High School, with a view to his becoming a radio and television technician. However, he brought with him four of his own compositions, and the ambition of making his name as a singer. It was "a hard road to travel." He spent weary days tramping the city streets, going from recording studio to recording studio, waiting in vain for an audition, "sitting in limbo". When they did hear him, some said that his voice wouldn't suit, it was too thin, the same voice whose crystalline clarity was to electrify the world's ear as it rose piercingly

in sweet melodic line against a heavy, heavy beat. He never had the pleasure of holding the first record he eventually cut, because the producer made it only for playing at dances on his own sound system. In another of the earliest instances, when he complained at not having been paid, the producer dismissed him with a shilling for bus fare, exclaiming at the idea that a mere schoolboy could think of asking for payment. Meantime, like most other youngsters of similar ambition, he entered the famous Vere Johns Opportunity Hour competitions held at city cinemas. The odds were against a country boy. The winner was determined on the basis of audience applause invited for each contestant in turn after all had performed. The contenders from the city brought along their own cheering sections. In spite of this, on his third attempt, Jimmy won.

Cliff scored his first hit, the topical "Hurricane Hattie," when he was fifteen. Later, in 1968, his participation in the International Song Festival in Brazil saw the beginning of his continuing huge popularity not only in that country but in South America as a whole. By then he had for some time been based in London, having come to the notice of the up-and-coming recording industry tycoon Chris Blackwell. Of one album that the collaboration produced, including such classics as "Many Rivers to Cross," "Wonderful World," and "Vietnam," Cliff says that it was a landmark album that "gave reggae respectability." He assesses his contribution to reggae in these words: "The gold was in its gross state, and I refined it."

Another landmark, and a sort of culmination of the Cliff-Blackwell partnership, was the movie **The Harder They Come**, an instant classic. In this, Cliff's already-evident authoritative stage presence was to be given room for more subtle and varied shadings, and his talent as an actor given a stage. At school in Somerton, it was in acting that he most imagined his future; there wasn't a school play in which he didn't have a substantial role.

Cliff's genius as a songwriter has been acknowledged by other renowned practitioners like Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Paul Simon. Dylan considered the poignant "Vietnam" "not only the best record about the war, but the best protest song he had heard." And it inspired Paul Simon to begin incorporating reggae into his compositions. The world's response to Cliff's music is not only to the infectious energy of this dapper dynamo, or to his driving rhythms and catchy tunes, or to his skill at fusing diverse musical traditions, but also to the imaginatively simple turn of words which go to the heart of the human condition, whether in the celebration of love and hope or in the articulation of pain and anguish.

By his musical authority, his winsome personality, the sense of cheerfulness and welcome that attends him, and in spite of the fact that he has never fancied himself as any ambassador, Jimmy Cliff has become a bearer and bringer of goodwill between his country, his people, and the world. And nowhere has the world received him so rapturously as in Africa. From Nigeria to Zambia, from Senegal to

South Africa, he has never known such adulation. Even in francophone Africa, they knew his songs word for word even before he ever set foot on the golden shores. The esteem and affection in which he is held on that continent are a sign that, although so much was lost in the Middle Passage, so much remained. A sign, too, of how much the children of the diaspora can give back to the motherland.

Although he ended his formal education prematurely, in order to follow his dream, Jimmy Cliff has always been a seeker after knowledge, a man of a philosophical cast of mind. It is significant that he came to see, more and more as he grew up, that his father was a wise man. His father, a tailor by occupation, was also, by general acknowledgement, the village lawyer, respected by all classes. His son, in his own quite different way, has also become a teacher and a guide, for a wider community. How Jimmy Cliff became Jimmy Cliff is instructive. At birth, he was named James Chambers, but that wouldn't do for a stage name. For one thing, at school his mates had shown him only too well, and at *his* expense, the punning possibilities of "chambers." When his father was angry with him, he called him James; but when he was pleased with him, he called him Jimmy. Then Jimmy, wanting to keep his initials, thought of the fact that he was born on top of a hill. "Furthermore," he says, "I have always pitched my goals high." Hence Jimmy Cliff.

He comes to us this evening fresh from a tour of France, Spain and Switzerland. Were it not for your invitation, Chancellor, he would right now be on stage in Brazil, but, to our honour, he considered this stage more important. Show him, Chancellor, that his judgement is not misplaced, and that he has fans here aplenty, as you acknowledge his high achievement, by conferring on Jimmy Cliff, member of the Order of Distinction, the songman from Somerton, the degree of Doctor of Letters of the University of the West Indies, *honoris causa*.

Mona

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