

JIMMY CLIFF

of R&B-powered bands, the Shakedown Sound and the New Generation, that played a mix of his own ska tunes with American soul and R&B. "We'd play Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, James Brown, Solomon Burke," Cliff says. "Some Motown people." Cliff and his young British backing musicians would drive up and down the M1 motorway playing the same club circuit as Jimi Hendrix and the Who (he opened for both), making lifelong fans of a whole generation of British rock gods, from Pete Townshend, who would eagerly watch from the wings, to Robert Plant, who introduced Cliff at a South by Southwest showcase this spring. "He was really impressive," remembers Blackwell. "He had moves that were very James Brown."

On the other side of the island, not too far from Montego Bay, is the village of Somerton, where Cliff was born James Chambers in 1948. (Inspired by Fats Domino, he took the stage name Jimmy Cliff because it better reflected the heights he planned to scale.) He was raised with his older brother Victor by their deeply religious father, and got his first taste of performing in the local Pentecostal church when he was six or seven. "I liked the music," Cliff recalls with a shrug. "But I didn't like the preaching."

As a small boy in a tiny corner of a far-flung British colony, Cliff developed a burning desire to see all the wonders of the world. He'd pore over maps and books, memorizing the names and locations of cities, mountains, rivers and landmarks like Big Ben. "I really wanted to see this famous clock," he remembers. "And I have this thing about water. Because I grew up on a river. So the River Nile was fascinating to me. I wanted to go to China or India or England or America. I just didn't know how I was going to do it."

The answer, it turned out, would be beamed directly to Somerton on an AM-radio wave. Alongside American stars including Little Richard and Domino, homegrown artists like the R&B singer Derrick Morgan were starting to get played on Jamaican radio. Cliff asked his woodworking teacher how he could go about writing a song, too. "He said you just write it," Cliff says. "You just write it!" He laughs at the memory. "So I just wrote a song." His timing couldn't have been better — as soon as he'd written a few more, the 14-year-old won a scholarship to a technical high school in Kingston. "I had about four songs in my pocket," he

says. "And I knew this was the place to get them recorded."

THERE'S AN ARGUMENT TO be made that if it weren't for Jimmy Cliff, there wouldn't have been a Bob Marley. It goes like this: Chris Blackwell had an idea for breaking the singer to rock fans around the world. He was going to package Cliff as a new Hendrix — a black musician with a supercool swagger — and thought *The Harder They Come* was just the thing to make that



ROOTS ROCK

Cliff and old friend Keith Richards in 1982: "Unbeatable songs," says Richards, "and the voice of an angel, you know?"

happen. "[The director] Perry Henzell had seen the cover of one of Jimmy's records" — 1969's *Jimmy Cliff* (featuring the hit tunes "Wonderful World, Beautiful People" and "Vietnam") — "and he rang me and said that is the guy I want to play the lead guy in the film," says Blackwell, sitting barefoot on a deck at his extremely rock-star

IN THE MID-1960S, CLIFF MOVED TO LONDON AND PLAYED THE SAME CLUB CIRCUIT AS JIMI HENDRIX AND THE WHO. "HIS MOVES WERE VERY JAMES BROWN," SAYS CHRIS BLACKWELL.

resort, GoldenEye, built on Ian Fleming's old beachfront property. "I said to Jimmy, 'This is a great opportunity.'"

Before the movie came along, Cliff had been considering a \$50,000 offer to leave Island. Blackwell persuaded him to stick around, promising he'd be able to give him a bigger deal once the movie came out. But the production stretched on longer than either of them expected, and Cliff was running out of money fast. Feeling betrayed by Blackwell, Cliff took the \$50,000, signing with EMI. "It was a lot of money at the time," admits Blackwell. "But I'd been putting a lot of energy into him. I was bitter."

By chance, Marley strolled into Blackwell's office a week later and Blackwell signed him. As *The Harder They Come* stoked interest in reggae worldwide, Marley cut the rock-flavored LP *Catch a Fire* with Blackwell, who sent the Wailers barnstorming through clubs across the U.S. and Europe. "I transferred the whole plan I had for Jimmy over to Bob," Blackwell says, "and was motivated to make it work."

Cliff shrugs off the suggestion that Marley stole his fire. He had his own journey to take, his own rivers to cross, his own albums to record and his own stadiums to shake. Plus, as the singer points out, by the time he left Island, Blackwell seemed more interested in his new rock bands, like Traffic, than the lilting soul-flavored ballads Cliff was writing. "He saw the rebel side of me, which is what he wanted to promote," Cliff says. "The songs I was writing didn't really match the image he wanted. So we were both bitter, I think." (For a taste of just how bad the relationship got, give a listen to Cliff's 1974 Blackwell diss, "No. 1 Rip-Off Man," which is as harsh a toke as you'd think.)

Of course, the immensely talented Marley could have broken through even without the Cliff-Blackwell split. But there's one other key piece of information, from way before any of this. Cliff discovered Marley, when they were both teenagers in 1962. At the time, Marley was working with Cliff's friend Desmond Dekker in a welding shop. Cliff and Dekker both had singles out on Leslie Kong's Beverley's Records, and Marley wanted to get his songs recorded too. "We were maybe a few years apart," Cliff says. "He came into Beverley's, and I was in there playing a new song on the piano. He just walked in and said, 'That sounds good.' I thought, 'This must be somebody really sensitive, to just walk in the room and pick up on the vibe of what I was doing.'"

Cliff asked Marley to sing his songs, and was impressed enough that he set up a session with Kong to record three of them: what would become his first two singles, "One Cup of Coffee" and "Judge Not," and the never-released "Terror." "For me, those three songs kind of sum him up as the person and artist he was," Cliff says of his old

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