



BLack MaGic Man

by GRAHAM BROWN-MARTIN

Jimmy Cliff has a global vision in which reggae plays a leading role.

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A long time ambassador for the Jamaican sound that has weaved its way through global pop culture for more than 40 years. Now, wherever you travel it's pretty sure that you're not far from reggae sound in all its forms and influences.

Riding the waves of international stardom, Cliff has seen the dreams he had as a boy growing up in St. James come true. Already getting props from superstar Bob Dylan in

the 1960s, Cliff hit the big time when he took the lead role in Pery Henzell's film, "The Harder They Come". The record, on which Cliff sang his own compositions, became one of the world's biggest selling reggae albums twitching the ears of an international audience.

Star status earned Cliff the chance to travel extensively throughout Africa, South America, Europe and beyond. Absorbing local cultures and sounds while offering his own reggae flavours he became a student of global religions along the way. His willingness and interest for collaboration has led to a who's who compendium of rock and pop greats whilst influencing the shape of conscious reggae.

His prolific recording output has given us such radio friendly hits like, "You can get it if you really want it", "Many rivers to cross" and his cover of Johnny Nash's, "I can see clearly now", while at the same time giving us more weighty counter culture hits ala Vietnam. Cliff was presented with a MOBO award for his outstanding contribution to urban music for over 40 years.

With a passion for remaining current, Cliff has been engaged in creating a "director's cut" of an album that originally appeared late in 2002 to mixed reviews despite its all star cast.

I'm talking with Cliff while he is in his Paris home where he lives with his Moroccan wife of two years. He is relaxed, thoughtful and excited about his impending release called *Black Magic*.

Skywritings: Tell us about the new summer release of *Black Magic*?

Jimmy Cliff: The project began after Wayne Jobson introduced me to Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics. We met when Dave came to Jamaica, with good vibes we wrote our first song in about half an hour and then recorded it in the same amount of time in Ocho Rios.

Then our ideas developed into an album project that attracted collaborations with artists such as Sting, Annie Lennox and the late Joe Strummer of the Clash.

Sting and I performed our song, "People", at the Commonwealth Games. Joe came to me with words that he said I had inspired and it was sadly one of the last songs he recorded.

The album was first released just before Christmas 2002 and was submerged beneath the volume of releases at that time. So my decision was to withdraw the record until another time.

Since then I have returned to the source and have remixes by Lenky of the Diwali riddim, Sly, Steely and Clive and collaborations with Bounty Killa, Tony Rebel, Capleton, Spice, Eagle Eye. I also have a song with Wyclef Jean.

I'm really happy with the outcome of it!

Did you imagine this life? Well I'm now working on a DVD some of which will be released with this new album, the rest appearing next year and it's about my life. When I was a little boy in St. James growing up I used to dream and look at the map of the world and see all these towns and cities and rivers. I would tell myself I would visit this place and that place. My friends and family would say that I dream too much but you know I've been to most of them.

How do you believe that your love of travel has influenced your music and your life? Beyond of my life and home in Jamaica

travelling has added a lot to my music, to my lifestyle, to my way of thinking. I have travelled throughout Africa and picked up a lot of different sounds and rhythms that I incorporate quite subtly into my music, the same thing for South America, not just Brazil but Peru, Argentina, Chile and all those places. At the same time observing different cultures that have had a profound impact on my outlook.

What Jamaican artists are you listening to at the moment and are there any that you would like to work with? I'm really listening to the new crop of roots and dancehall artists and I have high regard for them as they are carrying the part that needs to be carried forward.

On the matter of working together my way of working is simple, if it happens it happens and I like these people. Buju and I have spoken, Sizzla and I have crossed paths and the vibes were good, Capleton and I did a track called "Humanitarian". So you know anything can happen if the vibes feel right.

You have worked with so many artists could you single any of them that have left the greatest mark on you? Someone who was very inspirational to me when I was coming into the music business was Derrick Morgan who left an indelible mark on me. He was somebody who was writing songs of his own and inspired me to write. But to single out a particular artist that I have worked with would be very difficult!

One of the artists that I regret not working with was Sir Coxone Dodd who died recently. Every time we met we had big respect for each other.

Do you think that reggae will follow the American hip hop road from consciousness to consumerism? A lot that has happened with Jamaican music but I still feel that we have the spiritual foundation of it with artists like Buju Banton, Capleton, Sizzla, Tony Rebel and so on. When I listen to rap music now, which was originally as revolutionary to me as Jamaican music, it seems that it has lost its spiritual or uplifting part.

The film *The Harder They Come* was a huge success yet the Jamaican film industry is still nascent, why do you think that is so? I think writers are not producing scripts that have a broader outlook. The character that I played could have been from New York, Mississippi, London or almost anywhere in the world. So I think it needs writers with a broader outlook, we must write about our Jamaican environment but on a universal level.

Pery Henzell and I are now in process of writing the sequel to the film and are securing funding and directors. We hope to start filming during 2005.

You converted from Rastafari to the Muslim faith, are you still a practicing Muslim? The way I see it as a Nubian man looking for his roots again there were many doors and classrooms to go through and Islam was just one of those classrooms for me, Rastafari was another, Christianity another, Judaism and so on. I feel that I have graduated from all of them.

Who do you admire and why? I admire the people that have made some impact on humanity for the better and they would be people such as Marcus Garvey and Mahatma Gandhi as well as our own Jamaican heroes such as Nanny and Louise Bennett.

Some have suggested that by spending so long out of Jamaica you have lost touch with your roots. What would be your reply?

I think that's a very narrow-minded view. My dream was to travel and so I have, but you know, when you travel you have a home to come back to and my home has always been Jamaica.