



# The harder they come



**Director:** Perry Henzell  
**Country:** Jamaica  
**Date:** 1972

A review by Michael Dare for *The Criterion Collection*:

The Beatles had already done “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da,” Paul Simon had already sung “Mother and Child Reunion,” The Rolling Stones and Jefferson Airplane had both recorded in Kingston, but it was *The Harder They Come* that really put reggae on the map. Its new and insinuating beat indelibly stamped itself into the consciousness of all filmgoers in 1973, and there isn’t a single song that doesn’t still ring true, not one without a classic hook that doesn’t stay with you long after the film ends.



But if you remember *The Harder They Come* for its soundtrack rather than for the movie itself, you’re in for a big surprise. This picturesque cult classic has aged remarkably well—the politics are still vital, Perry Henzell’s direction crisp and professional, and the story exciting and fresh.

Jimmy Cliff plays Ivan, a character loosely based upon Rhygin, a genuine Jamaican outlaw folk hero of the 1950s. Ivan is a renegade songwriter from the boondocks of Jamaica who comes to the big city looking for dreams and only finds reality. He’s ripped off, beaten up, falls in love with the ward of a minister who hates his guts, peddles ganja on the street, and finally sells a song to the only game in town for a measly \$20. Within half an hour, he’s doing battle against the music industry, old-time religion, corrupt police, more corrupt dope dealers, and life in the slums—simultaneously making it to the Most Wanted lists and the pop charts. It’s an anti-tourism film—violent and energetic, yet somehow managing to discreetly combine political realism with show-biz fantasy shootouts.

*The Harder They Come* came from left field as far as the film community was concerned. Everyone thought of foreign films as French, Italian, or Swedish, so an oddity labeled “Jamaica’s very first feature-length film” caught everyone by surprise when it premiered in the United States at FILMEX (The Los Angeles International Film Exposition) in 1972. Kevin Thomas of the Los Angeles Times immediately picked it as one of the best of the festival, calling it “delightful, poignant . . . timeless and universal . . . nothing short of amazing.” He virtually dared some American film distributor not to pick it up.

Luckily, New World did, and it became one of the hits of the year, making Jimmy Cliff an international star. Cliff, born James Chambers, was a ska recording artist from the early 1960s. He eventually won a Grammy for Best Reggae Recording of 1986, but it’s hard to beat what he wrote in 1972. The soundtrack to *The Harder They Come* is something like the Sgt. Pepper’s of reggae—one of the hippest and most memorable collections of Jamaican music ever recorded.

Reggae was more than a style of music, it was a political, social, and artistic movement throughout Jamaica. The police shut down production on *The Harder They Come* many times due



to the radical political content. When the film opened in Kingston, the islanders were overwhelmingly in favor of Ivan's wholesale slaughter of the local police department. They had just voted out the reigning conservative government, and a good thing too. According to Jimmy Cliff, "If the Jamaica Labour Party had been returned, there would have been a revolution."

The Harder They Come perfectly reflected the political climate of the times, when similar forms of anti-government movements were sweeping America and the world. Audiences were ready to identify with a film about a hero who would "rather be a free man in my grave/Than living as a puppet or a slave."

Especially if you could dance to it.

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