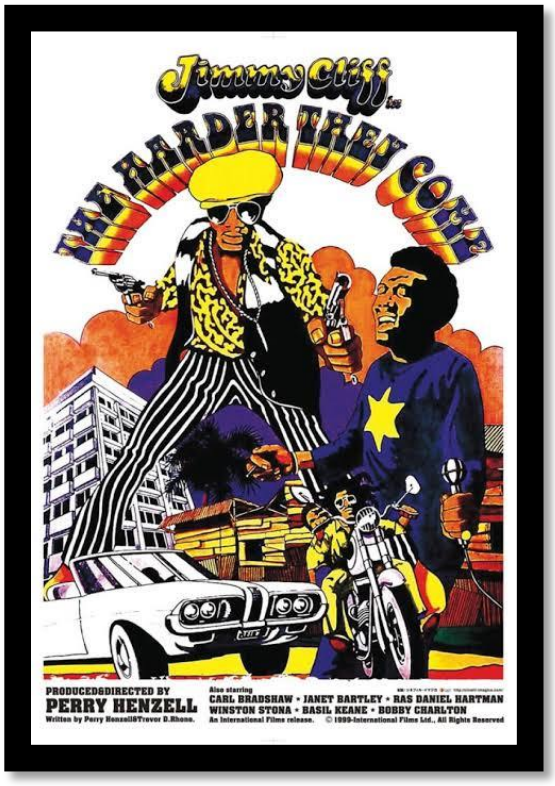
The Harder They Come: How a Jamaican Film Made History



In 1948, a young Jamaican gunman named Rhyging shot his way across Kingston. He evaded a nationwide manhunt and became the island's first true outlaw folk hero before police finally caught up with him. Two decades later, his legend inspired a film that did something no Jamaican film had ever done: it put the country on the map of world cinema.

That film was *The Harder They Come*, a 1972 crime film directed by Perry Henzell. It stars reggae icon Jimmy Cliff as Ivanhoe "Ivan" Martin, a young man from rural Jamaica who travels to Kingston in search of fame as a singer. But after being exploited by the music industry and becoming entangled with a corrupt record producer, the police, and drug dealers, Ivan gets pulled into a life of crime. After violent run-ins with police, he goes from criminal to legend in the public eye. A symbol of defiance against exploitation and injustice.

Ivan's journey mirrors that of Rhyging, the outlaw folk hero, though the musical side of the plot draws on Jimmy Cliff's own life. For his first recorded song, he was offered a single shilling, which he refused; but unlike Ivan, he found another producer instead of turning to crime. Enormously successful in Jamaica, the film also reached the international market and has been called one of the most important films to ever come out of the Caribbean. It was also the first English-language film in the US that needed English subtitles, because so much of the dialogue is in Jamaican Patois. Director Henzell encouraged his cast to use their everyday dialect. In fact, he would have them improvise much of the dialogue to capture the true essence of Kingston's urban streets.

And then there's the soundtrack. The album that introduced reggae to the world. Well-known tracks included the film’s title track "The Harder They Come," "You Can Get It If You Really Want," "Pressure Drop," and "Many Rivers to Cross." More than 50 years later, this film is still a milestone. It didn't just tell a Jamaican story, it introduced the world to reggae, showed off the richness of our culture, and proved that Jamaican stories deserve a global audience.