

JIMMY CLIFF • REBIRTH

“I got one more shot at the goal/Straight from my soul/I’m in control,” sings reggae legend Jimmy Cliff on “One More,” the lead track from *REBIRTH*, the new Universal Music Enterprises album from the Grammy-winning musician, actor, singer, songwriter, producer and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, produced by punk icon Tim Armstrong, of Rancid and Operation Ivy fame.

The release, his first studio album in seven years, is the next step in their collaboration on last year’s *Sacred Fire* EP, an effort *Rolling Stone* called Cliff’s “best music in decades... [his] tenor still soars.” With the groundbreaking 1972 film *The Harder They Come* celebrating its 40th anniversary, Cliff—who starred in the movie and contributed the title cut, “You Can Get It If You Really Want,” “Many Rivers to Cross” and “Sitting in Limbo” to the soundtrack—is still going strong in a career that has spanned almost 50 years and includes his native Jamaica’s highest honor, the Order of Merit. In *REBIRTH*’s autobiographical “Reggae Music,” Cliff recounts going to see famed Jamaican producer Leslie Kong in 1962 to convince him to work with him, releasing Cliff’s first hit, “Hurricane Hattie,” when he was just 14.

“Jimmy is one of my musical heroes and I’ve been responding to his music my entire life,” said Armstrong, who had never met Cliff before, but was once recommended to him by mutual friend Joe Strummer of The Clash. Gathering Armstrong’s studio band, the Engine Room (bassist/percussionist J Bonner, drum/percussionist Scott Abels, organ/percussionist Dan Boer and piano/lead guitarist Kevin Bivona), the first song they tackled was a cover of Rancid’s “Ruby Soho,” a ska-tinged number from the band’s 1995 album *...And Out Came the Wolves* about a musician having to tell his lover he’s headed for the road.

“I had no idea it was one of Tim’s songs, but I liked it and could identify with the sentiments,” said Cliff. “I never really had the opportunity to hear his music, but it was a great thing how we hit it off in the studio.”

They also worked on a cover of The Clash’s “The Guns of Brixton,” a song about the growing tension in Brixton at the time. Ironically, Strummer’s last session ever was with Cliff on “Over the Border, a song from Jimmy’s 2004 album, *Black Magic*. It was at that time Joe talked up Armstrong as someone who might make a good collaborator for him.

“It was inspiring working with Tim because even the sound of the album feels like we went back to the ’60s and ’70s,” said Cliff. “I had forgotten about a lot of the sounds and the instruments we used then, and we brought that all back.”

“Now the tides have turned/And the rewards we have earned/Bringing us good feeling/Set our hearts a-reeling.” “Our Ship Is Sailing”

While *REBIRTH* is named after what Cliff perceives as his own artistic revival, the reggae pioneer has never really been away, working with a who’s-who of other rock

legends over the years, including the Rolling Stones, Elvis Costello and Annie Lennox, his songs covered by the likes of Willie Nelson, Bruce Springsteen, Cher, New Order and Fiona Apple. His patented sweet tenor is the most recognizable vocal in reggae along with his only fellow Jamaican Rock and Roll Hall of Fame member Bob Marley. Last year, he made a triumphant appearance at the Bonnaroo festival that put him back on the pop music map.

“The album is about my rebirth as an artist and as a man, but also about the rebirth of the world,” says the man whose 1970 “Vietnam,” has been dubbed by Bob Dylan “the greatest protest song ever written,” and served as a centerpiece in Paul Simon’s acclaimed 2011 tour, the performer citing it as his original inspiration to record “Mother and Child Reunion” with Cliff’s band in Jamaica.

Never a stranger to politics, Jimmy continues as a voice of power and conscience, especially on songs like the opener, “World Upside Down,” a song written by the late reggae pioneer Joe Higgs back in the ‘70s with lyrics updated by Cliff. “I made it for the world today,” he added.

Other socially conscious songs on *REBIRTH* include “Children’s Bread,” with its harsh refrain, “They took the children’s bread and give it to the dogs... The time has come for us to right the wrongs.” Much of the material was inspired by his tour of African countries like Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Ghana.

“Africa is like an injection for me,” he explained. “Being there gave me that high feeling—the songs just poured out.”

“Let’s keep on moving...There ain’t no stopping until we say so” “Our Ship Is Sailing”

But it is the more personal songs, like “One More,” “Reggae Music” and “Our Ship is Sailing” which get to the heart of Jimmy Cliff’s music, and his own artistic renewal as he heads out on a summer tour that began in Brooklyn in June with a concert streamed on NPR Music. Among his future plans are more acting roles, including a possible sequel to *The Harder They Come*, as well as continuing to write songs inspired by the classic soundtrack.

“I have not become the artist I believe I am,” he told *Rolling Stone* last year. “I’m not done at all. I want to become a stadium act.”

REBIRTH is the next step in that direction.