

The Record

Jimmy Cliff
Mexical Blues Café
Teaneck
10:00PM
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\$30.00

Fantastic Plastic

By John Radanovich

In 2002 Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics and reggae legend Jimmy Cliff quietly booked time at Abbey Road studios in London. The pair planned to produce Cliff's first full record in four years, and Cliff wanted to give it a characteristically Cliffian title: "Fantastic Plastic People." When word of the recordings got out, Stewart's phone began to ring. In the end, so many music superstars got included that the original title didn't seem so appropriate. Ultimately, the quiet little recordings contained as many celebrities as a week's worth of Simpsons episodes.

From his tour bus somewhere in America, Cliff admitted that "I didn't really intend to have all the guests," and yet "the musical direction [still] came out the way I would have liked it to." The renamed "Black Magic" is soon to be released in the US on the independent Artemis label. Musical guests include Annie Lennox on a well-suited duet with Cliff. Sting, Kool and the Gang, and Wyclef Jean all lend a hand to a song each. Former Squeeze keyboardist Jules Holland plays on most cuts. Even French ex-pro tennis player Yannick Noah shows up. Yannick Noah?

Cliff explained: "we all know him as a sports figure, but he's a big music star now, especially in France." Cliff also feels a kinship with Noah because of his humanitarian work with children in Africa, and mentioned his own work with needy Jamaican kids.

The late Joe Strummer of the Clash also collaborated for a song, one of his final recordings. When he showed up at Abbey Road all he had was a few scribbled words. "I have these lyrics and I hear Jimmy Cliff singing," he had told Cliff. "Dave Stewart asked him how he thought they should go, and he said 'I don't know, I just hear Jimmy Cliff singing them.'"

Cliff's voice is as sweet and plaintive as ever, and "Black Magic" contains a handful of reggae styles. "Even though I have always been in reggae," he explained, "I have always gone in various directions musically. At a certain time I was more criticized for that, but now I'm allowed to be Jimmy Cliff."

Although his great "Wonderful World, Beautiful People" appeared in 1969, most fans came to know Jimmy Cliff when he starred as a musician turned rudeboy in the cult film "The Harder They Come" in 1973. His stirring "Many Rivers To Cross" did much to make the film's soundtrack one of reggae's biggest selling records ever. Cliff has been trying to produce a sequel for some time; he hopes that Wyclef Jean will play a starring role. The inevitable Hollywood hip hop remake is also said to be in the works.

Although Jimmy Cliff's voice and pedigree are well-known in the reggae world, his face is probably better known in the States from his more recent movie appearances like Club Paradise and Marked for Death. He regularly shows up on soundtracks the hit "I Can See Clearly Now," from Cool Runnings, and "Hakuna Matata" from The Lion King.

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Cliff discussed current political affairs and how his message has always been essentially positive. “With all that’s going on in the world today, someone had better accentuate the positive because there’s so much negativity. People want to wake up in the morning, put on a record and say ‘I can go to work today.’ I try to make that kind of music.”