



1 Better Days Are Coming: from Somerton to Kingston

When Jimmy Cliff was born, the island of Jamaica was experiencing a period of particular uncertainty. The Second World War had been raging for five solid years and, although the battlefields of Europe were thousands of miles from Jamaica's Caribbean shores, the war was the overriding concern affecting daily life.

As Jamaica was still a Crown Colony, thousands of young Jamaican men left the island to fight the Nazis on behalf of the British 'Mother Country'; others were recruited into the Royal Canadian Air Force or seconded to American military bases in the region, while Jamaican women were also sent overseas in significant numbers as members of the Auxiliary Territorial Service, though most of them at least avoided the front lines. American GIs also became part of the fabric of Jamaican society, as three American military bases were established on the island. Several thousand evacuees from Gibraltar and Jewish refugees from elsewhere in Europe were housed in a purpose-built camp on the outskirts of Kingston, while an airport was constructed south-east of the capital to allow for the refuelling of Allied bombers searching for enemy

submarines. Censorship was imposed on the press, telephones, letters and telegrams; staple foods were rationed and a ban on imported meat resulted in the popularity of 'dip and fall back', a stew that replaced animal protein with mackerel or salted cod.

Even though Europe was an entirely unknown entity for most Jamaicans, the island's newspapers were filled with reports from European battlegrounds; movie theatres screened nothing but war films, propaganda and war bulletins; and those lucky enough to have access to a radio were treated to daily dispatches from the front on ZQI, then Jamaica's sole radio station. The threat of invasion by the Germans and their Axis partners felt very real, particularly as Japanese submarines were torpedoing Jamaican banana boats bound for Britain, and the daily lists of Jamaican casualties publicly posted in Kingston brought home the tragic results of war with terrifying clarity.

At the same time, the bitter labour disputes that erupted on the island during the late 1930s continued unabated, with trade union leaders Alexander Bustamante and Norman Washington Manley galvanising the public into dramatic action, lobbying the island's colonial rulers to consent to a living wage for the entire populace, the great majority of which had inherited a life little better than the slavery their ancestors endured during the centuries of British rule that had followed Spain's fleeting control of the colony. And although the two leaders were distant blood relatives united in certain ideals concerning wages and human rights, with Manley even taking charge of Bustamante's union during the latter's imprisonment, each had very different ideas about the kind of governance a free Jamaica should engage. Manley favoured a version of Fabian socialism while Bustamante believed in the free market; thus the seeds of the island's independence movement were already fraught

with a divisive conflict when Manley founded the People's National Party (PNP) in 1938, from which Bustamante broke away five years later to form the rival Jamaica Labour Party (JLP).

As negotiations with the colonial authorities continued, universal suffrage was granted to all adult citizens in 1944. At the end of the year, due largely to the charismatic Bustamante's vociferous call for better wages, the JLP won the island's first general elections by a huge margin, making Bustamante the leader of the country's first democratically elected Executive Council, though the elections had been marred by stone-throwing and stabbing incidents amongst party supporters, particularly in Kingston's ghetto areas.

Meanwhile, as British and Russian soldiers were closing in on Nazi aggressors in Poland and France, and Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah were negotiating the partition of India to enable the creation of Pakistan, Jamaica was gradually becoming more industrialised: the island's railway switched from steam engines to diesel fuel, and the first bauxite extracts were shipped abroad to investigate the potential for mining; roads were constructed along the north coast and agricultural concerns were expanding, particularly in the dairy sector. But as increasing numbers of the unskilled travelled to the USA to engage in seasonal farm work or to toil in munitions factories, life in the Jamaican countryside continued much as it had done for countless generations: by day, the people bore the brunt of back-breaking labour in sugarcane fields and on banana plantations; by night, men quarrelled over women and sought solace in rum, with music and dancing being among the only elements to bring some form of release. For most, life was inevitably hard, and there was little else to sustain them other than a fervent belief in God and the promise of a better life to come.

It was into such a world that Jimmy arrived on Sunday, 30 July 1944. He was born James Ezekiel Chambers at Adelphi Land, an impoverished hilltop community above Somerton, an underdeveloped town in the parish of St James, located about twelve miles south-east of Montego Bay, the most populated port on Jamaica's north coast. Jimmy's father, Lilbert Chambers, was a tailor who also farmed the land; greatly respected in the area, he was often deferred to for judgement when disputes arose and he would even influence which candidate the locals cast their votes for, giving him the status of the district's 'lawyer', despite being a man of limited means. Jimmy's mother, Christine, was a domestic worker descended from the Maroons, fiercely independent runaway slaves who formed impenetrable communities in remote mountain areas, from where they launched attacks on plantations to free others, often resulting in the deaths of white planters and colonial militia. A treaty brokered in 1739 had granted the Maroons a certain degree of autonomy, and although the British



Somerton, St James: Jimmy Cliff's birthplace

defeated them during the Maroon War of 1795, Maroons have maintained their traditional way of life in a handful of communities that are somewhat separate from the rest of Jamaican society.

From the very start of Jimmy's days on earth, it seemed that fate was threatening to throw obstacles in his path. Indeed, a mere three weeks after his birth, the north coast was struck by a fearsome hurricane, with 120-mile-per-hour winds whipping in from Port Maria, and although they had slowed to 80 mph by the time the storm passed directly over Somerton and exited Montego Bay, the coconut crop had been entirely decimated. The neighbouring parish of St Mary suffered most, but there was widespread flooding in the Somerton area and considerable damage to many homes in the district.

Life did not get any easier after the storm. For the majority of their childhood, Lilbert alone raised Jimmy and his older brother Victor in a tiny two-room dwelling. With only the bare earth as flooring, the wattle-and-daub shack had few amenities, other than a basic bed and homemade cupboard above it, with the nearby river providing the opportunity to bathe.

Yet despite the hardships of growing up poor in a village that had neither running water nor electricity, aspects of Jimmy's childhood were idyllic: on the way to and from the local spring from which drinking water was drawn, the lush, tropical environment provided ample fruits for plucking, such as sweet, juicy mangoes and custard apples; there were guava, orange and grapefruit trees, as well as the prickly-skinned soursop, while tangy star apples and June plums were just as good to eat as to juice. There were also large breadfruit trees stretching over the hillside, providing an ample staple food, along with ackee, the fruit of which was used for a breakfast dish when ripened, and avocado, known

locally as alligator pear, while the mineral-rich earth provided plenty of yams, Irish potatoes, cassava and other root vegetables, as well as peas and peppers. The abundant fruit and nectar-rich tropical flowers naturally attracted colourful bird life, their songs perpetually punctuating the air. Adelphi Land had the benefit of height, so in addition to the fantastic view over Somerton, there were also cooler breezes and less stifling humidity than in some of the communities below.

In general, Jimmy's early days were marked by a kind of Eden-like innocence involving a simple, naturalistic way of life largely untainted by pollution or negative influence; as he recalls: 'I really enjoyed that period of my life because there were rivers to go to, and the beach.'

The local Pentecostal church that formed the central focal point of the community was a place where he could exercise his vocal cords freely, though the sermons were terribly boring. As he explains: 'I enjoyed the singing of the church, but when the preaching came on, I slept.'

In August 1951, not long after Jimmy's seventh birthday, Mother Nature made her presence felt in Jamaica in a very dramatic fashion, unleashing her fury on the hapless islanders in the form of Hurricane Charlie, which caused untold devastation all over the island. The storm was spotted in the Leeward Islands on 15 August, and was initially thought to be heading south of Jamaica, but instead it made a direct hit on the island's southern shore, battering it with 125-mile-per-hour winds from 9.30 pm on 17 August. The first forty-five minutes of impact were the most intense, but the winds continued wreaking havoc for another three hours, and torrential rain added to the misery when the wind finally died down. The damage was unprecedented, with the south-east coastal towns of

Morant Bay, Yallahs and Port Royal completely flattened. Much of eastern Kingston was rubble, ships in Kingston Harbour had been smashed and Palisadoes Airport largely destroyed, while the island's banana and coconut crops were severely depleted. In all, over 150 people lost their lives in a storm that caused millions of dollars' worth of damage, and although the north of the island was spared the worst of the destruction, Jimmy and his family were among the thousands made homeless by the might of Charlie, their simple dwelling completely destroyed.

After Charlie, while his father began rebuilding, Jimmy went to live for an extended period at the home of an aunt who farmed the land along with her husband, growing crops like bananas and sugarcane, as well as rearing cattle, dairy cows, chickens and goats. The couple had six sons and Jimmy's grandmother also lived there. 'I spent a lot of time with them,' he recalls, 'and I did quite a lot of things on the farm.'

In addition to the farm work, Jimmy had many noteworthy experiences during the five years in which he was a member of his aunt's household, including his first encounters with colour prejudice. His cousins were all much lighter skinned than Jimmy, whose complexion was very dark, and although he never faced maltreatment from any family member, it was while living with them that he first came to realise that skin colour could determine different treatment in the wider society, based on the attitudes of neighbours.

As the young Jimmy grappled with these experiences, seeing himself in a different light, his grandmother, who was also very dark, revealed herself as a fountain of knowledge where race matters were concerned. She told Jimmy that her own grandmother had been a slave, noting that the woman was as dark-skinned as Jimmy and

herself; she ultimately expressed to him that to be black was to be beautiful, and the wisdom she imparted through the special bond they fostered had dramatic effects as he grew older. She also became an ally where singing was concerned, as he would sometimes climb the large tree that stood near his aunt's home to sing out loud and long, and any complaints from the neighbours would be met by fierce scolding from his grandmother, who made sure to let all and sundry know how obvious it was that the young man was going to make something of himself, by virtue of his God-given talent.

Jimmy was a bright child who did well at Somerton All-Age School, but his mischievousness and constant questioning often brought the teacher's cane down on him. He was fond of teasing the other children and sometimes found it difficult to stop, while if another student attacked him physically, he would retaliate as necessary to avoid being victimised on account of his small stature. Mrs Robertha White became his favourite teacher, and he looked to her for the kind of guidance a mother would normally provide.

When he was cast in the starring role of a school play called *King Sugar*, everyone was impressed, particularly by his dramatic intonation of some adapted lines of William Cowper's poem 'The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk': 'I am monarch of all I survey, my right there's none to dispute. From the centre, all round to the sea, I'm Lord of the West Indies.' Some of the pretty girls that attended the school told Jimmy they thought it was the radio they were listening to when they heard him rehearsing for the play, giving him the first real inkling of the seductive power of his voice. But singing was always his main preoccupation; according to Jimmy, he had already made up his mind to be a singer by the age of six.

In his early life, he encountered folk music such as mento, a uniquely Jamaican form that fused African rhythms with

European melodies. Although its satirical and often ribald lyrics give it a similar feel to Trinidadian calypso, mento's distinctive instrumentation made use of what is known as a 'rumba box', which is a kind of oversized *mbira*, and often featured homemade wind instruments fashioned from bamboo, along with a banjo and various forms of percussion. In addition to mento, neighbours would sometimes provide raw rhythm with just hand drums and an acoustic guitar. There were also the work songs ringing out from field hands, as well as the ring-game songs that children sang, but as Jimmy grew older, a more important source of music was provided by the occasional dances that took place next door at an upstairs juke joint, the Money Rock Tavern, where a sound system called Pope Pius blared Latin American music.

In the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, heavily powered sets of amplified equipment, known as sound systems, were becoming the rage on the island after Jamaican seasonal farm workers encountered music-filled outdoor block parties hosted by their black American co-workers. In Kingston, the first sound systems to appear were typically attached to downtown business places, their musical displays initially a lure to attract customers, but bigger sets were gradually established to provide inexpensive entertainment at outdoor events – the antithesis to the costly live jazz concerts that were the exclusive preserve of visiting tourists and the light-skinned upper class. From the dawning of the 1950s, most Kingston sound systems played a steady majority of rhythm and blues, bolstered by mento and other Caribbean forms; in the countryside, rhythm and blues took a little longer to become popular, and small country sets often had a weaker output, typically being powered by car batteries or feeble portable generators.