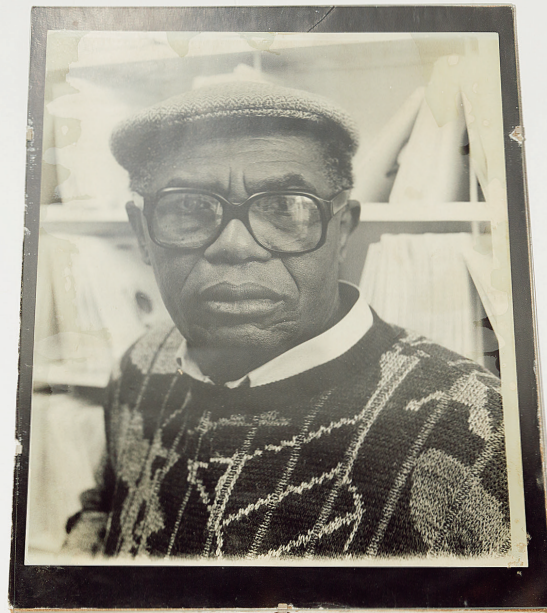


Talking

Daddy Peckings on the wall at the Peckings Studio 1 shop, Shepherd's Bush, West London



Peckings Studio 1

record shop was the hub through which reggae took hold in the UK. Julian Henriques, Mykaell Riley and Debbie Golt reflect on its history. By **Courtney Yusuf**. Photography by **Lewis Khan**

Shop

Reggae came to England in a suitcase, carried off a plane by George 'Peckings' Price. It proved to be a defining moment for the Windrush generation, as through the 1960s and 70s Peckings supplied stacks of colourful and sought-after 45s to a music-hungry Jamaican diaspora in the UK. These records were bursting with the beats and basslines of Jamaica's hottest label, Studio One, and with exclusive rights to distribution, Peckings Studio 1 Record Store in Shepherd's Bush, West London was the key place to be for seekers of the island sound. This is a music story not about a producer, nor a DJ, but a distributing dynasty that's kept its finger on the pulse for decades, shaping UK sound system culture and generations of British musicians along the way – much of it through a shop that remains on Askew Road to this day.

Price – aka Daddy Peckings – knew how to work with people. Before even setting foot in the UK in 1960, he had a reputation for the gift of the gab, as a dancer, and a member of the Coxson Downbeat sound system crew that was making it big on the island. Indeed, it was his 'chicken' dance moves that earned him his name. Peckings and Clement 'Sir Coxson' Dodd, founder of the sound system, had a relationship that went way back to their time as kids. "My dad was like a big brother to Mr Dodd," recalls Chris Peckings, Daddy's son. "They used to go to all the big bands together and when Mr Dodd would go and do farm work

in America, my dad would keep all the dances running all over Kingston." When Peckings the entrepreneur decided to try his chances in the UK, this relationship proved critical to the future of sound system culture.

What made the Peckings record store so unique was its exclusive right to distribute the records of Studio One. If you wanted to buy the latest Wailers, Marcia Griffiths or Dennis Brown, you had to get yourself down to Shepherd's Bush. Exclusivity was a tried and tested part of the Coxson formula. Dodd had started running sound systems in Jamaica in the mid 1950s, playing the latest R&B from America. When the R&B supply began to dry up as the US turned to rock 'n' roll, Coxson started producing ska, but refused to sell them and instead kept them as a secret weapon to give his sound systems the edge. Studio One was launched in 1962, and by 1966 it was on its way to becoming the Motown of Jamaica, churning out a stream of hits in the newer, slower, rocksteady style. When Peckings made the move to the UK, that exclusivity of distribution, and the excitement that it generated, put Peckings Studio 1 right on the map.

"As soon as people landed they said 'there's no music here mate'," recalls Mykaell Riley, founder member of UK greats Steel Pulse, and now head of the Black Music Research Unit at London's University of Westminster. "You come from a culture where the music was formed for community entertainment and played on equipment for an outside experience – you

were used to hearing things in a very different way, with bigger speakers and louder sound." Music sounded different coming out of tinny speakers built for classical sounds, and people missed the house parties and blues dances that they remembered from home – spaces that needed portable sound systems. For Julian Henriques of Goldsmiths University of London, this was where Peckings came in: "A sound system needed records – simple!"

Peckings started off in 1960 as the first person selling Jamaican music in England. Originally distributing records to friends from West Kingston and pioneering UK sound men like Duke Vin, he was the go-to guy for his producer friends back on the island like Lee 'Scratch' Perry, Winston Riley and Bunny Lee. Debbie Golt, of selector collective Sisters Of Reggae, remembers how the Peckings were "the first people that made records fully available here. It started off at their house and from those early times people would travel from everywhere to come and get the records."

Building a distribution network in those days demanded the development of a reputation alongside relationships that could reach right across the Atlantic. "This is at a point in history where the development of a network is physically moving yourself, from one location to another, and speaking to another human being," explains Riley. "You needed trust, respect, but above all, the ability to connect and communicate in a short space of time."

By 1968, the arrival of Jamaica's latest sonic export – reggae – stepped things up further. Coxson was a producer extraordinaire. Although not always present in the studio, he knew how to pick the cream of the island's talent. After rounding up representatives of the island's jazz scene, "Mr Dodd assembled probably the best musicians Jamaica had ever seen at one time in The Skatalites and The Soul Vendors," recalls Chris, "and he had mad arrangers like Jackie Mittoo and great engineers like Sylvan Morris". By the early 1970s the Peckings family was developing a serious reputation. "You might not have known London," recalls Riley with a smile, "but you knew where to get your Studio One records which meant coming down to the Bush and collecting your Peckings!"

With the sound system scene exploding, Daddy's duties as sonic gatekeeper were being tested like never before. For Coxson in Jamaica, limited pressings of top quality sounds helped to keep people hungry. But a limited supply demanded a canny distributor. What do you do when four different sound crews came knocking for the same track? Daddy knew how to give which record to whom without causing offence. The ability to connect and communicate kept harmony among the systems.

In 1972, it was his wife's turn to shake things up. "She was always encouraging my dad and all of us to do something," remembers Chris. "Even when it was the big dances in Jamaica, my mum would run the bar and get the drinks in." Having followed her mother's footsteps into Jamaican politics, Miss Gerty, as she was universally known, had her own extensive network in the UK. Finding a site at 142 Askew Road, she decided it was time for the first high street shop to open (and for her to get her living room back).

The new shop quickly drew vinyl-hungry bass heads from all over. At its peak in the early 1970s, the Peckings shop was packed from midday to night, shifting thousands of records a year (by now it had switched from suitcase delivery to shipping in crates). When the shop was full, "you'd play a song and hands would go up", remembers Chris. While a number of records in any given batch were saved for special clients, Daddy made sure that he kept enough available for the regulars. Frequent visitor Julian Henriques recalls "the record shop was where you had to be on a Saturday morning to know what was new!" Squeezed into the Peckings store, with a tension that would put Sergio Leone to shame, punters waited to identify the blank records being played. If you wanted it, "it was the quickest draw that would get the tunes! Simple!" says Chris. Daddy was also given both the authority and the masters to press new versions of Coxson's rhythms, so crews flocked to the store to negotiate getting their own vocals, often bigging up their own system, on top of the latest Studio One tracks.

But it wasn't just the music that kept people coming back. "It was how welcoming the Peckings were," remembers Riley. "Accessibility is what they were all about. You could just go there, stand up and listen." For Golt, it was Daddy's character that generated the vibrant atmosphere: "He was like an octopus behind the counter... He'd be chatting with you, keeping track of things, remembering people, keeping records aside, saying, 'Yeah OK, I'll get one for you'."

While the store was open to everyone, as a black-owned business it also retained a special significance

as a space for the community. As Henriques puts it, "The three most important institutions were churches, barbershops and hairdressers, and record shops." Riley argues that this made it a crucial hub for networking in the music business. "You travelled because you wanted to meet the people in the sound system community. The shop became that place."

As the 1970s progressed, new labels and producers like Channel One and Joe Gibbs started to challenge Studio One's domination of the reggae market. Major labels like Island were also cashing in and the competition was fierce. But choppy waters didn't faze Daddy, who had no interest in looking beyond Coxson. "They're very similar in many ways – Coxson and my dad," Chris recounts, "It's not about the money. It's about principle. The way my dad would lecture me was just how Coxson would lecture me, and when I talked to Coxson's kids they would say exactly the same!"

By 1982, with the arrival of South London's Saxon Sound, Studio One records starting catching the attention of a new generation licking over classic rhythms and getting hooked on new versions. But in 1985, Wayne Smith's "Under Mi Sleng Teng" put Jamaican music on a different path, its digital beats marking the birth of dancehall and a subtle shift away from nyabinghi and towards kumina rhythms. In 1984,

facing a surging tide of dancehall music, Coxson and Peckings agreed that it was time to open up the distribution of the Studio One collection.

Next year marks 45 years of the Peckings Studio 1 store. The unique access to Coxson's label may have gone but for Riley, "What's exclusive now is the consistency. You know that you're gonna be welcomed, that the information is genuine and has a real depth." Daddy Peckings died in 1994. The store is now in the hands of two of Daddy's sons, Duke and Chris, whose combined music knowledge speaks to several different generations. In 2004, the duo established their own Peckings label, matching new voices like Gappy Ranks and Alicia Scott over classic tried and tested Studio One rhythms. In 2000, to make room for a music studio, the shop moved down the road to number 81. Pass through the new store's blue and white exterior and you find a temple to reggae's past, present and future, with portraits of Bob Marley, Dennis Brown and Daddy himself looking down from the walls. The presence of a member of the Peckings family on the turntable reflects the present of the dynasty, and the walls hold the future in stacks upon stacks of white 45s. As long as these sounds exist, there'll always be a future for reggae. □

Chris Peckings behind the counter at Peckings Studio 1

