



Pat Chin

The Godmother of Reggae

by Chris Kwok

Focus Question

How did the legacy of colonialism lead to new cultural identities?

Jamaica's English name comes from "Xaymaca," the Taino Indian name for the island, meaning the "land of wood and water." Christopher Columbus was the first European to write of Jamaica in 1494. Shortly thereafter, the Spanish established Jamaica as a colony, and brought slavery and sugar production to the island. Sugar production was extremely lucrative and required dangerous and backbreaking labor. European nations vied for control of each other's Caribbean colonies, and the English defeated Spain in 1655 to take control of Jamaica.

Enslaved Africans were the primary source of labor during this period, as Europeans could not convince their own people to populate Jamaica. The successful revolution in Haiti, which defeated the French, frightened the English, as they feared the same would occur in Jamaica; so much so that an English administrator in Jamaica wrote back to the home office in 1803 suggesting the introduction of other people groups to the island, so as to create greater social stability and stave off enslaved people from rebelling.

Thus, the flow of Indians (South Asians) and Chinese (East Asians) would come to the Caribbean after the abolition of slavery via the system of indentured servitude. They came on the same ship that had carried formerly enslaved Africans, to work on the same plantations under much the same harsh conditions. Among this wave were the ancestors of Vincent and Pat Chin.

The Chinese and Indians intermingled, married, and had children with the whites, Native Taino Indians, and African Jamaicans. Unlike the U.S., where laws forbade marriage between people of different races, Jamaica had no such restriction. Pat Chin's father was Indian and her mother was Chinese. Vincent Chin's father

"It was an exciting time because, in 1962, we got our independence," she recalls. "It was a time for renewal—making new music—and Jamaica was really on the cusp of change."

Pat Chin

“I have always been proud to be a woman. So, as I take my 4’11” ‘tallawah’ self on stage and wave at the cheering crowd now on their feet, I accept the award [2015’s AAIM Lifetime Achievement] for all women – short and tall – working their way up a male-dominated field. It’s a journey I know all too well. But I want more company on that stage. This is why I encourage female artists to keep trying.”

Pat Chin

Randy’s Record Mart began by supplying the Kingston community with vinyl records and turntables. At the same time that the store was growing in popularity, the Jamaican music scene was also growing following the country’s independence from Great Britain in 1962. By the mid-1960s, Vincent and Pat Chin built Studio 17 above the record shop. The new studio was used by many of the island’s leading artists including Lee “Scratch” Perry, Dennis Brown, and Gregory Isaacs. According to journalist Reshma B, “Even if you hadn’t recorded at Studio 17, you could sell your records at Randy’s. Miss Pat would say: ‘Leave what you have, if we sell it, we sell it. If we don’t, you can take it back.’ That didn’t happen at other studios.”



Citation: “Randy’s storefront,” ca. late 1960s, Courtesy of Miss Pat.

was Chinese, and his mother was mixed race. Indeed, population growth in a far-flung colony was a net positive for colonial powers. For the formerly enslaved and indentured workers, this gave them a chance to have a family, bear children and leave a legacy behind.

Vincent’s job was to change records in jukeboxes across the island of Jamaica. Records taken out of the jukebox rotation from Vincent’s work would now be sold at their shop, “Randy’s Records,” which Vincent and Pat opened in 1959. As their business grew, they opened a recording studio upstairs. Studio 17, as it came to be known, was where seminal reggae albums would be recorded by emerging stars, most

In 1959, Pat and Vincent Chin opened Randy's Record Mart—popularly known as Randy's Records—in what was an ice cream shop in Kingston, Jamaica. Randy's Records became a foundational location in the Jamaican music efflorescence of the 1960s that would eventually give rise to ska, rocksteady, reggae, dub, and dancehall.



Citation: Pat Chin and Randy Chin at Randy's Records in Jamaica, ca. 1960, Courtesy of Miss Pat.

In 1977, Pat and Vincent relocated what was formerly Randy's Records in Jamaica to a small shop on Jamaica Avenue in Queens. They later moved the store down to its current location pictured below at 170-21 Jamaica Avenue.



Citation: Ira Berger, "The exterior of VP Records, a retail store for indie reggae label, on Jamaica Avenue in Jamaica, Queens New York," September 16, 2021, Alamy, Ira Berger / Alamy Stock Photo, 2GMYDCF.

notably Bob Marley & the Wailers. It became a gathering place for artists and helped create Jamaican music culture. Jamaica would become an independent country in 1962, and Jamaica's unique music culture would capture that critical moment in history. The record store and studio were well timed to capture the cultural and political revolutionary ethos of the era. That unique music culture was spurred on by the community that the store and recording studio nurtured. Over the next two decades, Randy's Records would become a gathering place and town hall for Jamaican musical artists to develop their craft, record it, and eventually become a worldwide phenomenon.

Political independence also brought societal and economic instability. Eventually, the Chins decided to emigrate to America. The Chins moved to Jamaica, Queens, in 1977 and opened "VP Records," named for Vincent and Pat Chin's first initials. They would continue to

"My work wasn't special. I honor those people who sell fruits and vegetables on the sidewalk. I was just selling a different commodity."

Pat Chin

nurture another generation of Caribbean artists including Sean Paul, Maxi Priest, Lady Saw, and Beenie Man.

VP Records is now the world's largest independent distributor of reggae and dancehall music. Vincent Chin passed away in 2003, but Pat Chin, along with her two sons and numerous other family members are still at work at VP Records. Their retail store is still open and going strong in Jamaica, Queens.

Embodied in the story of Pat Chin's life is the legacy of colonial empire, slavery, indentured labor, business savvy, and cross-racial love, respect, and cooperation. Pat saved old records that were to be tossed away as garbage and fashioned it into a record store, and then eventually a musical empire that would change world music. Now the next time you hear a reggae, ska, or dance hall beat, remember that the music you hear is a freedom song, a legacy of cultural and racial cooperation, crossing boundaries meant to constrain them.

Reggae singers Devonte, Tanto Metro, VP founder Patricia Chin, VP CEO Randy Chin, and the Consul General of Jamaica Basil Bryan attend the 25th anniversary party for VP Records at Sirius Satellite Radio on April 14, 2004 in New York City.



Citation: Bryan Bedder, "VP Records Celebrates Its 25th Anniversary," April 14, 2004, Bryan Bedder/Stringer, Getty Images, 3370017.

Passport to Social Studies Curriculum Connections

Grade 8

- **Unit 6:** America After World War II: The Changing Nature of the American People

Grade 11

- **Unit 6:** Social and Economic Change: Domestic Issues (1945–present)