

Down In Jamaica – 40 Years Of VP Records

Making of the box set

By Carter Van Pelt

If you've ever been digging for records in a sizable US city, chances are you're familiar with [VP Records](#). Whether it's the 12-inch singles in their concentric diamond pattern sleeves or the ubiquitous [Strictly The Best](#), [Riddim Driven](#), and [Reggae Gold](#) compilation albums, the company has handled some serious reggae and dancehall tonnage in its 40-plus years. Few if any reggae or dancehall DJs of the past four decades would walk without vinyl or CDs from VP.

After a brief stint in [Brooklyn](#) in 1977-78, VP (named for the company's Chinese-Jamaican founders Vincent and Patricia Chin) settled in Jamaica, Queens and extended a 20-year Jamaican legacy that had begun as [Randy's Records](#) in Kingston in 1958. The company moved into its flagship retail store at 170-21 Jamaica Avenue in 1980, a location previously occupied by Raymar Sales, the oldest 'one stop' in the country, dating to the 1930s.

Last year, I was hired as VP's Director of Catalog Development and tasked with compiling a 40th anniversary box set. Even as an active [Discogs user](#) since roughly 2013, I didn't realize how helpful the platform would be as I tried to vet a 40-year legacy that now encompasses 25,000 recordings. I wanted to consider anything and everything that could have helped define the company during a 40-year period.

While my starting point was *Strictly The Best*, a compilation series that dated to 1990 and reaches 60 volumes with the next edition, I was interested in looking at the company in terms of the singles it manufactured at or near the time of initial release, versus tracks licensed for a compilation. Reggae and dancehall have always been driven by singles rather than albums. The hit single or "big chune" is what drives the dance, and VP has had its hand in some of the biggest ever in the reggae and dancehall worlds.

Prior to *Strictly The Best*, which initially appeared not on VP Records (the label) but on a sub-brand called [Gold Disc](#), VP itself was nebulous. Many reggae and dancehall records originating in the US in the 1977 to 1990 period may not have a VP Records brand label but many have the company's store or warehouse address and contact information printed on the label. Look closer still, and you can identify VP's role as a manufacturer by a series of letters and numbers etched in the vinyl runout, the realm of the vinyl archeologist.

From the point of view of collectability, a great many of these records were big sellers on first release and were kept in print for many years. As a result, they still aren't very scarce in 2019, but hit reggae and dancehall records are part of the shared heritage and cultural fabric of Caribbean communities, songs that play at parties, dances, family gatherings, weddings, funerals, on street corners and out of cars decades after first release.

The VP Records label only appeared for a few years in the late 70s before going on hiatus until the early 90s. The company frequently manufactured titles on the same labels the producers had used in Jamaica, such as Jammy\$, Steely & Cleve, or Music Works, but '[VPRD](#)' (for singles) or '[VPRL](#)' (for LPs) could be found in the runout on these and other VP records consistently after 1980. Previously, it was just 'VP' or

'Randy's,' especially when the stampers were made in Jamaica, a less known aspect of the Randy's enterprise at 17 North Parade in Kingston.

Once it was decided that the *Down In Jamaica* box set would be mixed format (vinyl and CDs), I wanted to appeal to collectors by bringing back some titles that hadn't seen reissue, or were otherwise scarce, while showing the more common company sublabels – [Roots](#), [Roots From The Yard](#), [Lightning](#), [Jah Guidance](#), and [Love](#). This collection doesn't reproduce the [Reggae Sound](#) or Gold Disc labels, but several tracks from the CD sets were originally on those imprints.

Rare records and obscure labels aside, the real impact of VP is its relevance over a 40-year period with respect to new music, a company at the center of the reggae and dancehall worlds. Across the four CDs, *Down In Jamaica* should give a sense of how many impactful songs the company brought to the public and how many of the genre's key names intersected with the label at pivotal moments in their careers.

In order to define the territory, I wrote a brief article in the book for the box set, entitled "What Makes A VP Record?" This was my attempt to explain my approach and why a given title made the cut or not. I provided matrix info in the notes for every release, right up to the streaming era, to help justify each track's inclusion.

I avoided tracks that were acquired via license years after release in favor of tracks issued by VP as the first US release or within a brief window after first independent release. Again, the point was to show the company's relevance at every stage of the music over 40 years.

I didn't get to include every track I wanted due to rights that could not be secured. I hope that even with a few omissions, this collection helps shed new light on a key part of the full narrative of Jamaican music, as well as a Chinese-Jamaican to New York immigrant success story.

Finally, I have to acknowledge the extent to which working on playlists for Gary Stewart at Apple Music in 2017 helped inform the curatorial approach here. This wasn't about my favorite songs in the catalog or what I think is 'the best.' Gary was about holding the historical significance of tracks on a compilation far above personal taste. There are more than a few tracks here that are not at all part of my personal playlists or sets. In very few cases personal taste was the final arbiter if a key track was unavailable for licensing or if an artist didn't have a standout hit track through VP, but their significance as an artist in the genre warranted inclusion. Shaggy is the perfect example. He had his career defining hits for other labels, but his "Church Heathen" is some of the best and most humorous songwriting and cultural commentary you can find in contemporary dancehall.

What Makes A VP Record?
(from *Down In Jamaica: 40 Years Of VP Records*, VP4224)

Selecting tracks to represent 40 years of VP Records began with task of understanding the changing roles the company has played in music distribution since it transitioned from Kingston, Jamaica to Jamaica, Queens in the late 1970s. The evolution of the company's identity traces to its origins as Randy's Record Mart in the late 1950s. Randy's started as a secondhand record shop in an ice cream parlor at 36 East Street in Kingston, then became a small label and producer of original recordings at its iconic 17 North Parade location. Most importantly, the success of the record shop grew into a "one stop" or distributor, advertised with the tagline, "You name it, we have it." Record distribution was a natural extension of the merchant class role in which many Chinese-Jamaican families like the Chins (and their music-industry peers) found themselves. They were able to thrive as they were already involved in moving products around the island and operating retail establishments.

In the process of Randy's rapid growth, the company expanded into aspects of financing and manufacturing recordings for various independent producers. The company rented its studio and mastered recordings, a key step in the production process, although it never owned a pressing plant.

The through-line of VP's identity is that of a manufacturer-distributor. VP is known today as the record label behind artists like Beres Hammond, Beenie Man, and Sean Paul, but this didn't come into focus until the mid/late 1990s. The flagship retail location at 170-21 Jamaica Avenue in Jamaica, Queens has been a constant since 1980.

The VP logo appeared on vinyl records as early as 1977 alongside other labels within the Randy's Records family. Those initially included VP, but also Big Hit!, Roots From The Yard, Love, and Roots, then Lightning, Jah Guidance, and Reggae Sound, and producer affiliated labels such as Volcano, Spiderman, Jammy\$, Music Works, Steely & Clevie, Digital-B, Germain, and others. Each of these bore the address of new locations in New York, before settling at 170-21 Jamaica Avenue. The VP label reappeared consistently in the early 90s after the Gold Disc label came and went. This may have fragmented the company's identity, but it was all happening under the umbrella of VP Records.

Researching the history of VP would have been almost impossible before the availability of crowd-sourced meta-data associated with vinyl records, CDs, and cassettes. Through tens of thousands of record collectors around the world, data on VP (and the entire universe of recorded music) has been aggregated at Discogs.com. From the point of view of manufacturing and distribution, much of the company's history is tied to the records it mastered and pressed, which from 1980 onward almost always bore a VPRL or VPRD etched into the 'run-out' of each record side, the space where the record needle moves from the last track to the center landing groove. This matrix etching convention helps tease out much of the company's work over 40 years. From 1977 to 1980, some records had a 'VP' etching in the run-out groove, while others bore the VP rubber stamp and/or address printed on the label.

A Discogs search for 'VPRL' and 'VPRD' also turns up information on independent producers and labels and albums not necessarily associated with VP, such as Rod Taylor's LP, [If Jah Should Come Now](#) or Horace Andy's [Natty Dread A Weh She Want](#). The VP brand itself was seldom seen on labels during the 1980s, but the store addresses (170-03 then 170-21 Jamaica Avenue) were included consistently regardless of the imprint or sublabel being used for a given release.

The tracks selected for vinyl reissue on this box set were chosen for the quality and collectability of the original pressings, while aiming to show a variety of sublabels. Few people realize the company's early history with Lee Scratch Perry, so the inclusion of the Congos' iconic "[Fisher Man](#)" on 7-inch is a testament to that track's enormous popularity and staying power, and VP's role in bringing it to the market. The 7-inch mix is unique to the VP pressing. The [Freddie McKay 12-inch single](#) on Roots From The Yard is one of the most collectible records the company ever issued, primarily because of

its limited original pressing and lack of repress up to this release. Similarly, the [Echo Minott sides](#) produced by Linval Thompson are reissued here for the first time. The [Tenor Saw 12-inch mix](#) is unique to VP's archives and remastered from the original tape. The Romain Virgo 7-inch, presented here on an original VP label, has never seen a physical release until now. The song's popularity has continued to grow since its digital release in 2015.

The CD collection is presented in roughly chronological order and aims to show the relevance of VP during each phase of Jamaican music's progression over 40 years, not a dive into obscure tracks. The CDs reflect hit songs, in some cases the most popular songs by the top artists in their prime in any given period. These are songs that VP either licensed or produced for first worldwide release or first US release, not hits from acquired catalogs. (Examples of the latter would be Sister Nancy's "[Bam Bam](#)" or Wayne Smith's "Under Mi Sleng Teng," both in the current VP catalog, but acquired years after independent release.)

The producer whose work is most represented on this set is [Henry Junjo Lawes](#). Lawes had a regular working relationship with VP, which began in 1979 with the Roots From The Yard titles "[A Yah Me Deh](#)," "[Mary Long Tongue](#)," and "[Collie Weed](#)." Within a few years, VP would release most of Lawes' then current recordings on 12-inch singles on the Jah Guidance, Volcano, and Reggae Sound labels. Lawes was the dominant producer in the pre-digital era (before 1985) and helped define what is now referred to as "early dancehall." The Lawes' productions included on this collection reflect a time when reggae was still ruling, but the emcees foreshadowed the changes to come.

Original release details are provided on the next two pages. The information listed in brackets following each title is the previously mentioned vinyl runout etching/matrix number, or VP catalog number.

--Carter Van Pelt, May 2019