



"Dodd drop," as one of his oldest friends said, sadly and succinctly. The last of the pioneers is gone—and with him, the end of an era. Not since the passings of Peter Tosh and Bob Marley has the death of a reggae figure garnered such instant and passionate reaction, filling the Internet with outpourings of shock and respect from all over the planet. It is fitting, because a living monument has written the last chapter of his story, dying with his boots on. And what better way to go. Bread MacDonald of the Wailing Souls called with the news, moments after Mr. Dodd had passed on, his voice hoarse with emotion. "We were just with him at Studio One, 10 minutes ago. Him seh, 'See ya tomorrow, Jackson,' and he was all smiles, surrounded by people, the studio up and running like the old days, fulla people. I can't believe it."

I had the pleasure of numerous encounters with him, beginning in the mid-'80s, when Chris Wilson began work with Leroy Jodie Pierson and me on the Heartbeat reissue series of all the Wailers' Coxson catalog. We had frequent phone conversations regarding the various liner notes, and though I found his memory often at odds with others', he nevertheless made for colorful, if controversial, copy. The last time we spoke, it was about Studio One as Motown, a hit factory, with a staff of writers of the quality of Bob Andy at his prime, a ready supply of backup singers imbued with the feelings of a family affair where each one teach one, and a stream of top rankin' over-achievers, eager for a break. It was also compared to

Osbourne, Freddie McGregor, Jackie Opel, Delroy Wilson, Joe Higgs, Marcia Griffiths, Winston Jarrett, Slim Smith, Larry Marshall, or the Silvertones, the Heptones, the Maytals, the Gaylads, the Paragons and unnumbered hundreds more, the famous and the fleeting, all of them having major affiliations with Mr. Dodd.

Dodd was also famous for the confusion regarding the spelling of his name. "It's Coxson, when it's me, the man," he told me in his studio in Brooklyn a decade ago. "And when it's my label or sound, it's Coxson." Although Coxson had reached his peak some years earlier, with decades of major successes behind him, in the beginning of the '90s his Brooklyn lair, under an elevated train track like some 1930s socialist realist painting, was as funky as a mosquito's tweeter. From the shop, which sold a melange of beauty supplies, records, magazines and clothing, one passed through a narrow hallway, containing a tall and slender shelf on which, bereft of climate control, sat original master tapes of Bob Marley, the Skatalites and others, unprotected, right out in the open! For a fleeting moment I ran my fingertips over them; for an aficionado such as myself, it was like touching the tablets of the Ten Commandments. At the end of this cramped passage sat a small studio. Leaning against the back wall, Coxson was supervising Roland Alphonso this Saturday night as he cut instrumental versions of "Hypocrites," one after another, under black velvet paintings of Bob Marley and Stevie Wonder. The sense of metaphor was overwhelming. "Do a next one now, Jackson," insisted Mr. Dodd after each take, "I t'ink you could do one better." Like the reputed series of unreleased albums by the Skatalites, squirreled away all these years in Mr. Dodd's caverns, Roland's spirited takes on "Hypocrites" remain, to the best of my knowledge, sadly unreleased as well.

Our next fleshical linkup came in the most unlikely of circumstances, on one of his rare visits to Los Angeles, in the mid-'90s. He had been producing an album for local multi-culti master, Joey Altruda, and he arrived with Roland Alphonso as his sidekick. A word-of-mouth gathering to hail up Coxson was convened in the heart of the orthodox Jewish neighborhood on Beverly Boulevard at the Big and Tall coffeehouse, a neo-beatnik hangout with a loft from which a dj spun records. Coxson was seated nearby in a large chair, enjoying the attention of people not even half his age sharing their arcane knowledge of his vast catalog, and paying their obeisance. While Joey mixed Coxson dubs, Roland Al played his sax live. I

beginning of 1984. Alton Ellis and Bob Andy were our guests, and the subject quickly turned to Coxson. For most of the next hour, Alton let loose a bombastic attack on Mr. Dodd, as Bob Andy defended with an equally well-reasoned counterattack. "No, Alton," he said, "Look at it as an experience. You went to college and Coxson was the professor who taught us all. Everyone benefit." "No, mon," insisted Alton angrily. "Him rip me off, him owe me millions!" After the show, I went out to the parking lot and there stood the two Studio One veterans, doubled over with laughter and slapping each other's hands. What's up? I wondered. "See," said Alton, his eyes watery with mirth, "last night me and Bob have this very same discussion on the radio in San Francisco." He burst into laughter once again, locking eyes with Bob. "Except last night was Bob mosh down Coxson and was me a defend him."

In October 2001, Colin Leslie, the business director of Marley's Tuff Gong, took my wife Mary and me late one Sunday afternoon to Mr. Dodd's Brentford Road headquarters in Kingston, where he was basically alone, save for the omnipresent King Stitt and an assistant, a battle-scarred veteran of Chicago's music wars. Rumors of a slight stroke explained why his speech was somewhat slower, and his memory not what it had been. At first, he confused me with Steve Barrow, the English writer/producer.

"No," I assured him, "I have never ever worked for Trojan or written for them." Mr. Dodd seemed to have a heavy beef against all concerned at that British label. Once we cleared up the fact that Steffens wasn't Steve, things relaxed, and he took us for a tour of the building, posed for a picture with me at a mic in his big, high-ceilinged studio, offered us T-shirts, and asked if there was anything else I wanted. Well, one thing, I said, something I've been trying to find out. "When Bunny Wailer sang 'Dreamland,' do you know how the tune came about?" "Oh yes," he said firmly. "I gave him that song from America. A group on Vee-Jay recorded it named El Tempos, only it was called 'My Dream Island.'" Then he spoke of his plans to reanimate Brentford Road, attract new talent, and begin recording some of his legendary artists again with the classic, timeless riddims that his teams had created, tunes that had been versioned literally tens of thousands of times throughout the world.

If he got rich off it, he could never let it show. No matter—he was rich in music, earth's highest

REMEMBERING COXSON DODD

BY ROGER STEFFENS

a college, where the training was rigorous and precise, and gave everyone a chance to work up to the level of his or her own creativity. Mr. Dodd had a genius for recognizing talent. He assembled all-star studio bands, beginning with the bulk of the lineup that became the Skatalites, and moving through Roland Al's Soul Brothers, and the Soul Defenders, whose number included studio royalty like Jackie Mittoo and Leroy Sibbles and Don Drummond.

Imagine the world without Don Drummond. Or Peter Tosh. Or Albert Griffiths. Or Burning Spear. Or Sugar Minott. Or Alton Ellis, Toots Hibbert, Johnny

had brought along an album cover which pictured the two of them, and they happily obliged my request to recreate it in a new shot, 30 years on. An interested observer was Joe Higgs, once the object of Mr. Dodd's great physical wrath. Joe motioned me over, grabbed my arm tightly and whispered. "I know you, Roger Steffens. I'm going to talk to him, but I don't want you to take any pictures of me and him together, you understand? None!"

That animosity was not unknown among several of his biggest selling artists. I'll never forget a fiercely fought debate on the "Reggae Beat," broadcast at the

art, and his abundant contributions will live as long as there are any of us left here with ears to hear the celestial sounds of Jah made manifest.

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Photo: Dodd with Roger Steffens at Studio One, Kingston, 2001



PHOTO BY MARY STEFFENS

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT STEINHILBER