

My memories of Daddy

As his son, my memories of and feelings for Daddy (aka Ponnampalam Jeyaraj) are too much to put all into words. I have attempted to describe the person that Daddy was to me, from my own experiences and stories and advice that Daddy told me.

Daddy was born on 11 June 1944 in Kedah, Malaysia. The family lived in a village in Sungai Petani in Kedah, Malaysia. Twenty-two years ago, Daddy took us to see his birthplace and he showed the house where he lived and the place where he would throw away the milk his mother gave him. It was quite different from Cheam, where he settled and I grew up. When he was seven, the family left Malaysia and moved to Sri Lanka and settled in Sandilippay in Jaffna, where Daddy grew up. He studied at Skanda Varodya College.

He studied engineering at what is now Moratuwa University in Colombo, before starting an engineering apprenticeship with Browns. He told us how a group of his colleagues did something at work which resulted in all the apprentices, whether innocent or guilty, being sent home. To stop his mother finding out, he would get dressed each day as if going to work and go and read in the British Council library. It was here that he found out about studying opportunities in the UK.

He was also interested in music and he talked about managing a band called Valiant Star, who played on Radio Ceylon. His music tastes were eclectic and it was through him that I came to like Baila but he also liked lots of Western musicians, such as Jim Reeves, Frank Sinatra, the Beatles and Louis Armstrong. I remember how he would sometimes start singing some “golden oldie” songs at random times and one of my most vivid memories is at parties at home where Daddy and Uncle Joseph and other friends would sing “Dingiri Dingale Minachi”. In his later years, he played his old records more.

Daddy migrated to the UK in 1967 to study Textile Engineering at what is now the University of Greater Manchester. He lived with other students in Bolton. England in 1967 was not as diverse as 2024 and you could not just go to the local Tamil shop. Daddy said how he and his fellow students had to be innovative when it came to replicating Sri Lankan food, like using Bachelors soup powder to thicken the gravy – something that was particularly important to him and remained so until the end. I believe I may have inherited his love of the same. He also shared his experiences of being a non-white person in England in the 1970s and 1980s, experiences that I have not had to go through, and I think this impacted what he expected of us.