

Don Mattera: poet of compassion¹

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By Lucille Davie

POET and journalist, gangster turned community activist, Don Mattera, voice of compassion, has personified his community for decades.

A few minutes in to my interview with Don Mattera, it became plain that he was going to decide what the questions were to be, and, if I was lucky, I might squeeze in one or two of my own.

Larger-than-life Mattera has for decades been one of the most prominent community activists in the working class areas of Bosmont, Westbury and Newclare. "My mission is to remove pain and suffering from people's lives," he says.

Variously Catholic schoolboy, gangster, political activist, poet and author, father, journalist, Muslim, and motivational speaker, Mattera sits behind a small cluttered desk in a large, sparsely decorated office. Behind him on the wall are several unframed photographs of some of his nine children.

He is a well-built man, his physique accentuated by his small desk, but relaxed and at ease with himself.

Mattera was born in Western Native Township (now Westbury) in 1935 and grew up in the city's black areas, notably the ghetto town of Sophiatown - and is decidedly a son of the city.

Minutes into the interview he picks up his autobiography, *Memory is the Weapon*, written in 1987, and starts quoting from it. The book tells the story of the early part of his life in Sophiatown, and it's a powerful, earthy account of life in the cosmopolitan suburb in the 1950s before it was dismantled in the name of apartheid.

Asked how he would describe himself, Mattera doesn't hesitate: "I am a genius." And judging by the number of literary and humanitarian awards, local and international, he has received for his writings and community work, other people think so too. The award he most treasures is the one he received in 1997, the World Health Organisation's Peace Award from the Centre of Violence and Injury Prevention.

Mattera, 67 and greying at the temples, talks often of compassion, saying he is a compassionate man - "the highest religion is compassion" - giving enormously of his energy and time to lesser-privileged youngsters. He says: "My mission is to help remove pain and suffering from people's lives, to remove an invisible chain. My work is a shadow of my actions."

Besides his autobiography, his writing includes an anthology of poems, *Azanian Love Song*; a collection of short stories, *The Storyteller*, and *The Five Magic Pebbles*; and plays that include *Streetkids*, *Apartheid in the Court of History*, and *One Time Brother*, which was banned in 1984.

He says he has completed another section of the autobiography but still needs to work further on it. He is "not in a hurry" to complete the work, but is confident one of his children will take it up if he doesn't finish it.

He was classified "coloured" under apartheid. Coloureds were the last to be removed from Sophiatown and were not taken 25 kilometres away to Meadowlands in Soweto, as their African neighbours were. Instead his family were among those moved to the nearby suburbs of Bosmont, Westbury and Newclare.

He recounts his childhood. As an eight-year-old he was sent off to "become a man" at St Theresa's, a Catholic convent in Durban. His grandmother believed that he "was chosen", and he was sent to a school where he would not receive a lesser "apartheid" education. His grandfather was an Italian immigrant and his grandmother was a Khoisan/Xhosa woman from the eastern Cape, and some time after their marriage they settled in Johannesburg, where Mattera's father - classified as an Italian - was born.

His heritage is important to him. He considers himself Italian - his full name is Donato Francisco - and can understand the language although he doesn't speak it. He speaks Afrikaans, English and Setswana. His grandfather adopted him as his son, and Mattera was largely brought up by his grandparents.

Mattera came home from boarding school in Durban to Sophiatown at the age of 14. He continued his schooling in another suburb of the city, Pageview, whose residents were forcefully removed in the 1960s and '70s. During his high school years he was a gangster, the leader of the *Vultures*, one of the most powerful gangs in Sophiatown.

He describes in his autobiography the viciousness of the streets and how the gangsters butchered each other, in the process destroying their own lives. "And as I look back sometimes, my heart goes out to my friends and enemies, for while we were destroying others, we destroyed ourselves."

He was stabbed and shot at, and lifting his sleeve now, shows one of nine nasty scars scattered around his body, several in his chest. "I had a sharpened pipe pushed through my chest - it went four and a half inches into my lung and missed my heart by two centimetres." He was charged with the murder of a rival gang member and spent time awaiting trial in jail. But he was acquitted, and at about the same time - he was 20 - became a father for the first time.

After leaving Sophiatown he became politically active, joining far left movements. He was banned for almost nine years, from 1973 to 1982, three of them under house arrest. Of this period he says: "My house was raided more than 600 times, I was detained more than 200 times, for one hour, for 10 hours, for three months. I was tortured on more occasions than I can remember - electrical wires were put into my penis and anus, two ribs on both sides of my chest were broken, my fingers were smashed."

Is he bitter? "I have a right to be bitter but I glorify God for giving me the resilience and power to withstand it. The experience made me stronger and I can use it to make others stronger."

He has worked as a journalist on The Sunday Times, The Weekly Mail (now the Mail and Guardian), and The Sowetan, and has trained over 260 journalists, he says. He has a doctorate in literature.

Nowadays Mattera is a Muslim, and deeply involved in the community in which he lives, Eldorado Park, just south of Soweto. He interacts with 1 000 young people each month, and counsels street children, gangsters and ex- prisoners. He says: "There is no leader who can claim to do this."

It's clear in conversation with him that he is a deeply spiritual man and through his community work has got to the point of "finally knowing God through humanity, by co-mingling and inter-mingling. God moves in people and nature".

He is involved in 143 community organisations, and is a patron on some 50 trusts, but what he is most proud of is establishing the

Harvey Cohen Day Centre for Mentally and Physically Handicapped Children in Eldorado Park.

He is also proud of the fact that he has made "young people understand that nobody owes them anything".

The word "transcendence" appears often while talking to Mattera, who says that "a person is truly a person when that person has found himself in others. We are one with God, one with all people".

There is another side to Mattera. "I like to laugh, I love teasing and telling jokes. I should have been a clown in a circus," he concludes. Mattera often works as a master of ceremonies, and usually squeezes in one or two recitations of his poems. His recitations are powerful, and once you have heard him recite a poem, reading the poem from a book is never the same.

As MC he tells sad-funny stories of the apartheid government's race classifications, of officials putting pencils in people's hair and judging a person's race by whether the pencil remains in the hair or not. He laughs and says: "Some of my friends dashed off and had their heads shaved clean." He says now: "If you don't laugh, you die."

Despite laughing and clowning, it's clear that the pain of apartheid and the struggle against it still lives with him - in the two-hour interview he laughs only once. He talks about "post-liberation stress" for which there is "no overnight cure", and "lots of disgruntled people". But what's important to Mattera is what one does with bitterness. "We need to transmit it positively and walk with heads held up high."

Towards the end of the interview, he says that people are "not dealing with an ordinary human being" when dealing with him. He recites his powerful poem Man to Man, which challenges God to meet him on even terms.

I ask for a picture, and he lifts his arms to either side in a generous gesture, and gives me a broad, happy smile.

At the end of the interview, I ask Mattera how he would like to be remembered. He replies: "I would like to be remembered as a man who loved his country and his people".

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