

Oral History with Name of Don Mattera

From the collection of the UCLA Library Center for Oral History Research

Please note that this transcript is being made available for research purposes only. Should you determine that you want to use it in any way that exceeds fair use, you must seek permission from the UCLA Library Department of Special Collections.

Interview with Don Mattera
SESSION 1 (4/15/2021)

HESTER ([00:02](#))

Good morning and good afternoon. I am Yolanda Hester and I am interviewing Dr. Don Mattera and his son Teddy Mattera on April 15th, 2021. I am in the Maryland in the U S and both Dr. Mattera and Teddy Mattera are in South Africa. So I want to start at the very beginning. Can you just tell me when and where you were born Dr. Mattera?

DON MATTERA ([00:33](#))

Well, 87.

TEDDY MATTERA

Yeah, it's 29.

DON MATTERA

But I'm okay. I'm not too well. We leave strokes behind. I had three strokes, heavy ones last time. It's okay.

TEDDY MATTERA

It's 29 December. When were you born?

DON MATTERA

29 December, 1935.

HESTER

1935. And where were you born?

DON MATTERA

Yeah. And in Sophiatown, Sophiatown and which is the place where, where I thought myself, well, I will leave one day and go to, to America, which I did. And it was good. I have good people here. People that can care and care is not enough. Love is the strength. And when he (Arthur Ashe) came, I remember going to take him to American consulate and the American library and Soweto. But what a beautiful, when he came in our house. It was something. It was beautiful. There is no, there is no way that you can remember. I suffered from the stroke last year in March.

DON MATTERA ([02:29](#))

And I don't want to be, I don't want it to be a baby. I have been a powerful man, a gangster, a teacher past too many mornings, 24 doctorates in the whole world. And then that's what it was. But he came to Sophiatown and he came to Soweto. Yeah, Soweto and Eldorado, all over where the so-called colored

people. We're not bloody colored people. We are Africans. We're God's creation. This country. This country has hurt people like me. And I want you to know, they speak about, they speak of the white race, the black African race, the colored race, and then the other race. What shit is that? We are people of God and I am the leader, one of the leader of the Khoi, their patron. And and he had wanted to know about these people, first people. And what a beautiful man.

DON MATTERA ([03:58](#))

I came with my late wife there. And she looked at him. She said, "Hey, he looks like us," the skin. And, my beautiful baby. Yeah. And I had married and things went that way. I am who I am. In Swedish. They say (det finns ingen smärta som att vara oönskad) [This is spoken in Swedish] There is no pain, quite like being unwanted. Beyond, and push you away. And he, he understood that, because it happened in America. It happened in lots of places. Yeah. But Hey, what a man? What a man, I'm telling you. And he gave me a shirt. He gave me a shirt.

HESTER

Wow.

DON MATTERA

Yeah. Yeah. Fantastic man, you know, and you know, you, African Americans, you have the, that, that, what do they call it when they speak, [inaudible] or something. Yeah. They've got this.

DON MATTERA ([05:34](#))

And he said, "Don, will you do something for me?" I say, "what?" And put me in your heart, put me in your people's heart. We took him like that. We took him in Soweto where it was another sign. Hey, well, I should, I should, as they call it, I'll African people. And I was like Shange. And I listened to him. I listened to other people, especially the children. There's something magic about me. I am still the patron of the National Organization of Children Workers. Yeah. And today we have them, they run, still come to us. I still sit with them because there's a man called Jesus, which is not his name. His real name is Yeshua. When he did work among the people and some come would hit the children, especially Peter. And then the one sold him to do Judas, and then he took them and he threw them down. He says, "If anyone of you harm one hair on the head of these, it were better for you not to be born." That was, Jesus said that. And then that is my way of being, my skin. You must see the little children here in this house, 10. And they talk and we love them. And Jesus says, leave the children to come back to me. And we have this organization, this organization, and I insist, I will insist for the child, for the child.

DON MATTERA ([08:00](#))

Yeah, as I also speak, I spoke, I went to so many countries, but ones of my fate. Islam. I'm Muslim. And they said, you all are facing that way. I say I'm facing the left way and this side. Great man gave me a shirt. I'll never forget too. I'd like to, I penned something for him and its very important. A poem for Arthur.

HESTER

Okay.

DON MATTERA

(Mattera is reading his poem he wrote to Ashe during Ashe's 1973 trip to South Africa, titled "A Poem for Arthur") "I listened deeply. When you spoke about the step by step evolution of a gradual harvest tended by the rains of tolerance and patience. Your youthful face, a mask, hiding a pining, anguished spirit. And I loved you brother- not for you're quiet philosophy, but for the rage in your soul, trained to be rebuked and summoned," as for me, the young boy that was put on a train at age of six and big board on Don Mattera's dress, this says, "My name is Don Mattera.

DON MATTERA ([09:46](#))

I am going to seven St. Teresa's Road, St Teresa's home in Durban, be kind to me on my chest. And I, I put that in so that you should know who I really am. And it says here, "hiding a pining, anguish spirit that. [inaudible]. And I loved you brother, not for your quiet philosophy, but for the rage in your soul. Trained to be rebuked and summoned. As for me, when I asked them for bread, they gave me the wheat field and I thought they love me. When I asked for water, they gave me the well, and I thought they cared. But when I asked them for my freedom, they took back the wheat field and the well, tighten the chains and told me, I asked too much. Now, now I no longer wait for the wheat, the water, but fight for liberation, for freedom." And this is who I am, Donato Francesco Mattera from the Italianos and my short name is Don Mattera. I told him that he know that Dons are the big guns, and the big people. There is no pain, the poem says, to be just too hurt so much in your own home, in your own name.

DON MATTERA ([11:47](#))

And there's no every pair for the children still. I say, it is the same, this house here has 10 children. Dark in the street of Eldorado park and Soweto, when they see [inaudible] Hey clash, because I started the football and he knew about that. He started, we started the boxing. He knew about that. And he was a humankind person. Aye, some people die because it's their time. And for me, it's pain, there is no pain quite. I'm telling you, to be very . . it's happening still here in this country. The so called colored people, they say to me, "you came with your black conceptions. You came to us to, to do the right thing, the colored. I said, you are not colored, you are people and Africans. And he says, it's a painful thing. I'll never forget. And my, my late wife said they don't ask him if he's got a brother for my other sister.

DON MATTERA ([13:30](#))

Yeah. You know how we are here.

HESTER

Yeah.

DON MATTERA ([13:33](#))

And in Islam we say, [can not decipher]. I can't bless you from there, to touch you, but I can say to you go to the Bible, there was the three youngest prophets, David, Jesus and Mohammad, little boys. And they had to run away because they would have been killed. And there's no thing that touches me. If you love a child, come, come leave the children alone, for unto them is Heaven. And he (Ashe) lived for it. And he loved for it in Soweto, and [inaudible] of the Americans.

TEDDY MATTERA

I think the Americans had a library somewhere in the city. Yeah. They sponsored one in Soweto also here, which was where Don took him (Ashe) to.

DON MATTERA

Yeah.

HESTER ([15:12](#))

Yeah. So Don took Ashe to the to the library, to the sponsored library.

TEDDY MATTERA ([15:18](#))

Yes. And into Eldorado park to see the the sports facilities, another sports club. There were no real facilities, but the sports clubs that he had started, Ashe supported it.

DON MATTERA

I think I read, I should read the poem fully

TEDDY MATTERA

You want to read the full poem. You read it. You want to read it again?

DON MATTERA

Yeah. I should. Yeah. I want to feel the pain, the love and the joy. "A Poem For for Arthur." Arthur Ashe-I listened deeply when you spoke about the step by step evolution of a gradual harvest tended by the rains of tolerance and patience, your youthful face a mask, hiding a pining angry spirit. And I loved you brother not for your quiet philosophy, but for the rage in your soul, trained to be rebuked or summoned. As for me, when I asked them for bread, they gave me the wheat field. When I thought they loved me. When I asked for water, they gave me the well, and I thought they cared. When I asked them for my freedom.

DON MATTERA ([16:45](#))

They took back the wheat field and the well, tighten the chains and told me black men, I asked too much. Now I no longer wait for the wheat and the water but fight. And I was[unclear] I fight for my freedom, but now I want to, I was attacked. I was seven [unclear] in my body by a man called [unclear] and the other one, the Red Roost, a Russian. And he said, "We will fix you up, you bastard." And for eight months hanged, spinning, blood out through my ears, blood out of my eyes, my mouth and everywhere. And that comes, it hurts. There are so many, and the Swedish people took me in as their brother, their father, and . . .there is no pain, quite like being unloved, unwanted among your people. Yeah. But he understood that. Yeah. He understand that.

HESTER ([18:16](#))

Yeah. You know, Ashe, once he came back from, well, actually before he visited South South Africa in 1973, and even when he came back, he did so many initiatives to help children. Children were a huge,

were very important to him. And so he was also very just very compelled to embrace and help children, you know? Can I ask you Dr. Mattera if, you know, if you recall, did you, the, you, the poem was given to Ashe when he came to visit in 1973, did you, you, did you write that poem while he was here while he was there in South Africa?

DON MATTERA ([19:08](#))

Well, it was not another poem for him. He went into a place where kids are [unclear] Yeah. But what hurt him was when we went to that place on, that shop Maponya And they met him too, and others, youngsters met him too. And they even danced when they saw him. My beloved people. What sits here is not the Don of yesterday. And life is in the hands of God and God is not in the hands and the likes of these priests and these people who sell God, who sell God, this country is terrible. Did they tell you that we have a white race, a black African race, a colored race, and other races of people must this, the children grow up. There's only one race and it is the human race.

HESTER

Yeah.

DON MATTERA

And he, he was clear about that. I was clear about that's and I wish you well, and I wish the people, his favorite people. Yeah. Like . . .

HESTER ([21:09](#))

Can I ask you one final? What can I ask you one final question? What was

DON MATTERA ([21:20](#))

I'd like to introduce you to my ex-wife, but I live with her. It would be nice to see here, come and sit with me. Here's another nigger. (Mattera is being sarcastic and everyone laughs).

HESTER ([21:41](#))

Hello. Hi. Nice to meet you. I wanted to know what was the impact, the significance of Ashe's, in your opinion, what was the significance of his visit at that time? Did it help change anything? Did it help spread the word about what was happening in South Africa?

DON MATTERA ([22:05](#))

Well, and it made us think about how they, where they were lived and how they were suffered and, and how they spoke about freedom. We are not Negroes. We are people. And she saw him and my ex wife who died. She also saw him. We brought him here in Soweto. We took him to other places and there is no poem, no poem that you can write for this man. This man was a lover of human beings. Caring for people like this group caring for this. Yeah. (Sound of a child in the background) It's it's just playing. It's close to the heart.

HESTER ([23:15](#))

Yeah.

DON MATTERA

In Islam we speak about mizan, balance of life. There must be a balance. Where there is no balance, there is chaos and I, if he was alive, he would, he would have spoken against this terrible thing of racist people at [unclear], even in Cape town, it is terrible, terrible. But do we have to go on? And our motto of our organization is life is a race. In this race, you must take other people on the road, as you run they go with you, there will come a time when you fall in a hole and there's no one with you and you will have nothing, nothing, even the money, even the power, even everything. I don't want to speak, speak about the African National Congress. I will not do that. The black consciousness, I will not speak of. The young man that died, where I was tortured to, he died there. Yeah. They know, they know. (Mattera raises his shirt to show a picture of Steve Biko) Steve Biko.

HESTER

Yeah, yeah.

DON MATTERA

Steve Biko. He's what he said is outside. But we have, we have hope that things will come right, because the African-Americans stood by us. They were there. I taught for a long time there, I traveled, I think about the 30 schools and one, they tried to named after me. And I said, no, give it to somebody else. My angel, I would like her to say something about [unclear].

MELODY MATTERA ([25:42](#))

No, Arthur Ashe, because she wanted to know, you know, so much difference was made by him, particularly in Soweto, which was a disadvantaged area, a township. And he made tennis to be recognized and to be loved. Many children resulted. Even my son started playing tennis because of the influence of Arthur Ashe and he build, there's a stadium named after him, after him. Yes. That's. That's the greatest. Yeah.

HESTER

Can you tell me your name? Just so I have it on tape.

MELODY MATTERA

My name is Melody Mattera, I was married to the doctor and we were blessed with so many kids and we have a last born named after him.

DON MATTERA ([26:48](#))

The group tell you about our foundation.

HESTER

Yes.

TEDDY MATTERA

Yes we have. That's why we are. That's how Elvis introduced us and Yolanda found us.

DON MATTERA

Life is a race in this race you must pick up people to come with you because if you leave them and they will turn against, we even went to the Boers, the so-called Boers. And we went to the schools and Northwest, and it was a terrible thing. And he was in that university, but memory is a weapon and it is also a bomb. It can heal. Oh, Jesus says, if anyone of you harm one hair on the head of these children, it will be better for you not to be born. That was what our work and we still do that work. And I cried. We went to that shop shopping and the children [inaudible]

MELODY MATTERA

They were crazy. They were really mad. It really made an impact.

HESTER

Yeah.

MELODY MATTERA

When you are, when you are good in tennis, you, I called by his name.

HESTER

By Ashe's name?

MELODY MATTERA

Yeah. They say you are Arthur Ashe.

HESTER ([28:47](#))

Wow. Wow. And so the tennis is still very strong amongst.

MELODY MATTERA ([28:54](#))

Very, very.

HESTER

Wow.

MELODY MATTERA

And before him, no one ever cared about the tennis sport until he came. Yeah.

HESTER ([29:07](#))

And do you think it was seeing another person who looked like them? You know, same, you know, race and color was what inspired people, young people to start playing?

MELODY MATTERA ([29:20](#))

Yes, yes. You know, I also tried to play tennis, but I couldn't continue to, you know, finances and parents wouldn't let you go that free. You know, we had to travel. We had to go to other places to go and compete. Then I ended up stopping. That's when my son joined also.

HESTER ([29:43](#))

Is it . . .

MELODY MATTERA

He gave the love of tennis to us.

DON MATTERA ([29:46](#))

And his name? Lots of kids were saying, Oh, Ashe, [inaudible] speak about him. And they loved him. Like, what do you call that guy. Good guys.

TEDDY MATTERA

Muhammad Ali

DON MATTERA

Yes.

HESTER ([30:09](#))

The younger people in South Africa, or do they know about Ashe? Do they know about him?

DON MATTERA ([30:16](#))

I think that the ones became like me, old and others died in Eldorado park. Eldprao Park is the place where they dumped the so-called color people. And he came in Sophiatown, also. He was there many times and he loved the people, they loved him. They wanted freedom fighters. And you said, you, you fight for freedom and you not kill for freedom. You must talk. Your leaders are in prison. Talk with these people and let us not take the bomb. Rather take the stone and throw it on the pool and let the ripples come and change these people and our people and our foundation to do, to touch the people's hearts. This country is not freed, my darling. It is not free. Don Mattera poem says "On your marks, get set ready, steady. Before you go turn around to see who you can take with you, because you might fall on the way."

DON MATTERA ([31:56](#))

And he knew, that was our motto. And he had that. I'm telling you in that woman of that cripple child, he cried. I'll never forget that in Soweto and Rockville.

HESTER

Wow.

DON MATTERA

Beautiful man.

HESTER

Yeah.

DON MATTERA

Yeah. The poem says. The poem says "There is no pain, quite being unloved, unwanted among one's own in one's own land." And Jesus is the same. Muhammad was the same. David, prophet. My dear beloved love. I can tell you, We read in our Bible in our house and it was Psalm 43. It's a painful one and Psalm 71 painful one. Where the prophets talk to God. "Why, who are we, why must we suffer?" These things? So, and then of course you go to Psalm 103, 104 and 105 from Psalms. Read those to your children. Ah to read that to people.

DON MATTERA ([33:33](#))

We are of God loving people. And we are human loving people. And we've got that feeling still now. But I fear there will come a time when the dark clouds, if we don't help the people of this world. This country- on your marks, get set, ready before you go, turn around to see who you can take on the way, because you might fall on the way. We have an organization Delivering Legends. And I was one of them and other things, I would be patron. So I have my brother and my sister and my son and others. Please call them, please work with them. And maybe two or one or three, they will get the money and go and speak. There is no pain quite like being unloved, unwanted among one's own in one's own land. Jesus, David and Muhammad [unclear]. I wish you well.

HESTER ([35:09](#))

Thank you so, so much Dr. Mattera, Melody Mattera and Teddy. This was wonderful. And we, we will, what happens? What will happen next? I'm going to turn off the recording, but stay on for a second. Cause we don't need to record this part. Hang on.

DON MATTERA ([35:31](#))

Can you meet him out there?

TEDDY MATTERA

She knows the Elvis.

PRESSLIN

Hi, Yolanda.

HESTER ([35:40](#))

Hello? Oh, hi Elvis. How are you? How wonderful is that? Anyway, who's on the side here next to Teddy. Sorry, I can't see you, but it's so hi. Tell me your name. Oh, I think you're on mute. Did it go on mute? I think it went on mute.

MELODY MATTERA

I am Melody, Yolanda

HESTER

Nice to meet you. Hang on for one second. I'm just gonna stop recording.