

Paying tribute to poet, journalist and activist, Don Mattera

Veteran poet, legendary journalist and renowned author, Donato Francisco "Don" Mattera passed away peacefully on Mandela Day. His life stretched from a gang leader in the romanticised slum of Sophiatown, in the western part of Johannesburg, to a murder charge, to becoming a leading voice in South African society.



Source: © Mail & Guardian [Mail & Guardian](#) Veteran poet, legendary journalist and renowned author, Donato Francisco "Don" Mattera passed away peacefully on Mandela Day

Tributes to his life have come from the president to filmmakers and colleagues.

President Cyril Ramaphosa expressed his sadness at the passing. "As a nation, we are saddened by the loss of Don Mattera's eloquent, rousing and revolutionary voice for justice. As we observe International Nelson Mandela Day, we remember Bra Don as a patriot, who in the spirit of this commemorative day, did what he could, with what he had, where he was. May his soul rest in peace as, in his own prose, he sleeps the sleep of freedom."

An icon and poet

Anant Singh says that South Africa has lost an icon, a poet and an exceptional human being. "His legacy lives on in his writings."

The filmmaker calls Mattera a remarkable activist and creative mind who used the power of words to great effect. "His works, as an author and poet, focused on his life experiences and the struggles of our people," he says.

“He was deeply committed to his people and is well-known for his community work, especially for taking gangsters off the street and ensuring that they reformed to become upstanding citizens, as he was once a gangster,” adds Singh.

From gangster to activist and poet

Mattera was in his teens when he got involved in the maelstrom of gangsterism.

News24 says: “Quick with his knife, he rose to the top leadership of the Vultures, a gang that terrorised the communities of Sophiatown and Western Native Township.”

He was stabbed and shot at by rival gang members numerous times and when he was 20, he was charged with the murder of a rival gang member and spent time in jail as an awaiting trialist before his acquittal.

After his acquittal, which was at the height of protests against the demolition of Sophiatown, he was introduced to Father Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest who was active in Sophiatown and surrounding communities.

This is when his political consciousness started, and he joined the ANC Youth League. In his lifetime he would be arrested 202 times and spend 12 years in jail during the apartheid years. He is also credited for being a founding member of the Black Consciousness movement and was a director of the black consciousness publishing imprint, *Skotaville*.

This is also when Mattera started writing poems, plays and short stories.

A great humanist

The South African National Editors’ Forum (Sanef) also paid tribute to Mattera through its various members who knew and worked with him.

Media stalwart Dr Mathatha Tsedu describes Mattera, who was fondly called Bra Don, as a great humanist who hated pity and charity.

“Mattera would refuse handouts even when he was financially down, insisting on being given responsibility so he can earn whatever he would get.

“But he would give without asking for anything in return. And many a time, at political rallies when spirits would be down, he could rise and rouse the crowd with his incisive poetry, showing that the commitment to telling truth to power is not restricted to media as we know it,” Tsedu says.

Journalist with a capital J

Mattera worked as a journalist at *Sunday Times*, *Sowetan*, and *Weekly Mail* (now the *Mail and Guardian*). Among other credentials, he is also cited as a founding member of the Union of Black Journalists and the Congress of South African Writers.

“Bra Don was a much wider personality than the narrow confines of journalism. But even as a journalist, it was with a capital J because he was so colossal in that sphere,” says Tsedu.

“He was an author who was banned by the apartheid government from 1973 to 1982 for his political activism. He also taught journalism and produced many whose by-lines and sign-offs litter our pages, screens and airwaves,” he says.

Former Press Ombudsman Dr Joe Thlooe says he still remembers the peculiar position at *The Star* newspaper, where after negotiations between the newspaper and the Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger, Mattera was allowed to continue

working as a sub-editor but was not allowed to write any copy or headlines. All he could do was edit the work of others.

In all this, Mattera remained optimistic to the last and went on to write: "I knew deep down inside of me, in that place where laws and guns cannot reach nor jackboots trample, that there had been no defeat. In another day, another time, we would emerge to reclaim our dignity and our land. It was only a matter of time and Sophiatown would be reborn."

"For the children of our beautiful land, and to the memory of our freedom fighters who gave their lives...May freedom reign." - front cover quote, *Azanian Love Songs*, published in 1983, one of Don Mattera's most celebrated books,

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