

# Prisoner combines art and radical politics

## *Penitentiary walls hold him in but don't confine his creativity*

By Natalie Weinstein

**H**e doesn't expect it. But if Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa could leave prison tomorrow, he says he would probably do a lot of the same things he does now. He would write, paint, sculpt. He would teach.

Of course, he would make up for some lost time. Nearly 19 years now.

He would travel to Africa and throughout the United States. He would take a long walk and wouldn't stop until he felt like it.

Mondo, who was known as David Lewis Rice until about six years ago, is serving a life sentence at the Nebraska State Penitentiary for the murder of an Omaha police officer in 1970. Mondo says, as he always has, that he is innocent. He has appealed the conviction numerous times . . . unsuccessfully.

Despite spending nearly half of his 42 years in prison, Mondo does not seem to fit. His slender frame, his melodic voice, his relaxed gestures contrast sharply with the steel doors, the bare walls, the constant tension.

Mondo knows he doesn't belong.

Sometimes he feels "like a bird that has been mistaken for a turtle." Someone has covered him with a shell, he says.

"This is not my shell."

Prison does more than keep people off the streets, Mondo says. It can turn them into monsters. It can make them feel mentally impotent. Not Mondo. He has grown intellectually, philosophically, spiritually.

The walls hold him in, he says, but they can't hold him back.

"I never allowed this place to have a profound effect on me," he says. "I never accepted this place as home."

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**Revolution automatically involves two things, destruction and construction. It seems to me that an artist is involved in exactly the same process.**

Mondo

Since he entered prison, Mondo estimates he has written nearly 800 poems, hundreds of articles, at least 50 short stories and about 10 plays. He has published five collections of poetry: "OM," "Erogenous Zone," "Life, Death and Love," "Poetry/Volume Four" and "Lock This Man Up."

He currently is negotiating with Third World Press about the publishing date for "Morning of the Bright Bird," a book of fanciful tales for children.

Mondo has written columns for the Lincoln Journal since 1981 and for the Milwaukee Courier, an African-American community weekly, since 1987.

In 1980, Mondo earned an associate arts degree from Southeast Community College.

He is a member of the prison art guild, the writers' workshop and Harambee, an African cultural organization.

Many of his hundreds of paintings and sculptures have been shown throughout Nebraska, including in Omaha at the College of St. Mary, the Antiquarium and the Great Plains Black Museum.

Mondo says he creates the stories, poems and paintings for a variety of reasons. He wants his audience to question conventional ideas. He wants to maintain his integrity in prison. He wants to help fellow African-Americans.

Most of all, he wants to change the world. "It's not crucial what the odds are against what I'm trying to do," he says. "The question is whether or not it's important that it be done."

His work, as well as his attitudes, didn't originate in prison. They are a continuation of what he was doing and thinking in Omaha during the late 1960s and early 1970s, before he entered the penitentiary.

Mondo says he has gone through three stages of development. He began his life thinking of himself as an American who happened to be black. He later considered himself a black American. He now sees himself as an African who is convinced that "Western culture is killing us."

He believes strongly in his African roots. His full name is a combination of four African languages. In English, Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa means "Wild/Natural Man Child of the Sun." He wears a dashiki, a traditional African shirt. He makes his own shoes from single pieces of leather.

The changes did not happen overnight.

Experience after experience opened his eyes to what he calls the suffocating racism that pervades America.

He was born and raised in Omaha. He attended St. Benedict's, a Catholic grade school, and went on to Creighton Prep, a Catholic all-male high school where he was one of only a handful of African-Americans.

During high school, he began working in the civil rights movement. He joined a group that worked toward the desegregation of the Peony Park swimming pool in the mid-1960s.

He always had considered himself "one of the boys," however, until the Homecoming Dance in 1963, his junior year at Prep.

When the event drew near, he invited a white friend to the dance. She said yes. Within a week, his schoolmates began threatening him. Mondo decided he wasn't going to let anyone bully him. It was nobody's business who he took to the dance, he says.

Mondo talked to his date. She felt the same way. Then parents of Prep students sent a letter to her parents telling them about the date. Her parents told her to break it. She did.

Mondo says that until this incident, he had never realized the illusionary existence he had been living. There were boundaries he could not cross -- boundaries he didn't even know existed.

He entered Creighton University in 1965. Mondo says he wanted to become an English teacher. He dropped out after his first year, mainly due to money problems but partly from a lack of interest. What he was learning outside the classroom interested him more than what he was learning inside it.

Gradually, he became more involved in the African-American community.

Between 1966 and 1969, he worked for a number of alternative newspapers: Asterisk, Buffalo Chip, Black Realities, Lake Charles Project, Everybody Magazine, Franklin Community Council. Mondo says he wrote about the Vietnam War and the African-American community, criticizing local politics, schools and police.

He eventually chose to follow Malcolm X rather than Martin Luther King Jr. Mondo respected King's efforts, but his own life convinced him that revolution -- not reform -- was needed.

Mondo joined the Omaha chapter of the Black Panther Party in 1968. He later became the leading spokesman for the Nebraska chapter of the National Committees to Combat Fascism, an offshoot of the Panther party.

He worked for Greater Omaha Community Action from 1968 to 1970, informing the poor of available services.

His experiences in Omaha's Northside African-American community during this time, as well as the death of a neighborhood girl in June



"Alone" is among the hundreds of paintings and sculptures Mondo has produced.

1969, further cemented his new philosophy.

Vivian Strong, a 14-year-old African-American, was shot in the back of the head by an Omaha police officer when she ran from him. The officer was fired and charged with manslaughter, but was later acquitted and reinstated. If the girl had been white, Mondo believes, either she would still be alive or the officer would have been convicted.

Mondo's involvement in the Panther Party continued to grow. His writing appeared in the national Panther newspaper. In 1970, he was one of at least four local members of the National Committees to Combat Fascism elected as delegates to the Douglas County Democratic Convention. Mondo went to the state convention and was selected co-chairman of

Ward Two in Omaha. Mondo says he and the others eventually wanted to use the mainstream political system against itself.

The death of Larry Minard changed everything.

On Aug. 17, 1970, Minard and several other Omaha police officers entered a vacant North Omaha home in response to a phony 911 call. Minard was killed instantly by a bomb planted in a suitcase.

A jury convicted Rice and co-defendant Edward Poindexter of first-degree murder on April 17, 1971. Both were sentenced to life in prison.

From the beginning, Mondo has maintained that he was framed because of his political beliefs.

His conviction was upheld by the Nebraska Supreme Court but was overturned in U.S. District Court. The district court's verdict was upheld by the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. In 1976, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed both federal decisions and reaffirmed Mondo's original conviction.

Last month, yet another appeal was dismissed in U.S. District Court. Mondo is now preparing an appeal to the dismissal.

Mondo still holds parts of the Panther philosophy. But he resents his work being pigeonholed.

Some of his work is political, some social commentary, some humorous. Sometimes he is just experimenting with words or colors.

"I write about all kinds of things: trees and generals and love and sex and people being poor and people being neurotic."

Mondo says he spends time expressing himself because he believes human beings have a responsibility to themselves and to the planet. Some people, he says, feel their time is their own.

"I think everybody in the world owes some of their time to other people."

He also creates for spiritual reasons. "The way we give praise and homage is by respecting who we are and the rest of creation," he says.

Mondo was raised a Catholic. He followed Islam for three years. He now believes in the existence of a spiritual force that is responsible for life, but he doesn't adhere to any organized religion.

He is a vegetarian, practices yoga and does calisthenics but has smoked filterless Pall Malls for years.

Not every piece he creates has an obvious meaning, but Mondo doesn't believe artists create from a vacuum.

"Everybody has an agenda, whether they are consciously aware of it or not," he says.



Photo by Natalie Weinstein

Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa has published five collections of poetry while serving a life sentence at the Nebraska State Penitentiary.

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