

Malcolm Davis: Shino Warrior

An Interview

*Potter and Carbon Trapper
Iron Lover, Alumina Brewer, Alkaline Flexor
College of William and Mary in Virginia
Union Theological Seminary in New York
Universität Basel, Switzerland
Radical Activist and Civil Rights Reformist
Ecumenical Chaplain and Street Minister
Friend of Martin Luther King
Escort of Queen Elizabeth
Consort of Black Snakes
Teacher, Lecturer, Performer
Advocate of Peace and Justice
Lover of the Planet*

FIRES OF TRANSFORMATION

Martin Luther King was murdered in
Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968.
The response to his assassination was



An Interview

FIRES OF TRANSFORMATION *continued*

immediate and national. Cities all over the nation went up in flames. There was a real rebellion against a system that would not only allow his death but set up the circumstances for the murder to take place. The leader, the hero, the hope was gone. At once there was anger and frustration, all leading to devastation. Flames and smoke poured out of every urban center in the country.

Washington, DC was burned. My wife and I lived in a second-floor apartment off Dupont Circle in the northeast corner of the city, and all along 14th Street houses were in flames. As soon as I heard that Martin had been killed, I got into my little VW Beetle and drove up to the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) office on 14th and U Streets NW. Flames, noise, explosions were everywhere. My car was surrounded by people so I couldn't go forward or backward. I was the only white person to be seen. My radio was on and the news reported that a man had been pulled out of his car and beaten. I was alarmed. I jumped out of the car, pulled a black raincoat over my head, and ran into the Southern Christian Leadership Conference office where I was safe until I could get out.

The city of Washington was occupied by the National Guard. Judy and I sat in our bedroom on the second floor and watched the tanks go up and down the street, with men pointing guns at us. That was a sobering experience. It was the closest I could imagine to what people in Iraq or Palestine or Afghanistan might feel like on a daily basis.

There was a curfew in DC. No one was allowed on the streets without credentials. I was part of a coalition of people breaking the curfew to gather food, clothing and blankets for people of the inner city who were burned out, victims of their own rage. The food gathering and distribution was based at the Institute for Policy Studies around the corner from our apartment, and took place under the scrutiny of the tanks and the military. The fires came very close to our apartment. Although it was not really a question of survival, nevertheless it was an emotionally difficult time.

As a result, I became more ashamed and radicalized. The escalation of the war in Southeast Asia became the focus of a new movement. I think I lost sight of much of the non-violent aspects of the civil rights movement. The Left was splintering, universities were being blown up. Children were getting their heads busted open by law officers on horseback. Students were being shot dead in Ohio and Mississippi. The government was bearing down hard on any kind of protest.

We also became targets of oppression. My office was bugged, and later bombed. The stress began to take its toll; I was burned out and frightened. Judy and I were both on Nixon's enemy list, among the thousands of personal enemies of the State who would be rounded up and confined should the President decide to declare a state of national emergency. Later, when we had access to our FBI files through the Freedom of Information Act, we got hundreds of pages on our activities during that period, mostly blacked out. Much of the anti-war action at that time was organized out of my little office, in the heart of George Washington University campus. The National Mobilization Against War (David Dellinger, Jane Fonda, Abbie Hoffman, Rennie Davis and Tom Hayden) used that little two-room office as one of its bases because it was centrally located. And the FBI set up surveillance cameras in the basement of the public school across the street.

REDEMPTION

In 1974, in the midst of all this turmoil, my next door neighbor, who taught music at American University, invited me to go to a class at the DC Department of Recreation. I thought it was to be an evening lecture, so I went from work dressed in my clerical collar. But it turned out not to be a lecture. Instead, the man in charge gave each person a bag of red clay as they entered the room.

I was 37 years old, and had never touched clay before in my life. And I didn't want to now, either. I didn't want to get my hands dirty. So I sat down and waited and watched. People around me were starting to pound and slab the clay. I was becoming bored watching grown people playing with clay. So I went back up and asked if I could have my bag of clay now. Somehow I rolled a coil out of the clay and wrapped it around and around. And soon I had a little bowl with three feet. I thought, That's cool!

The next week I went back. This was fabulous! This was something concrete. It was not like saving souls or changing capitalism. I've got something in my hands I could see and evaluate. In three hours I achieved something to show. I had spent my life trying to achieve the new society, with nothing to show for it except that Nixon was still president.

My little piece had been biscuit-fired. We took small glaze jars and brushed glaze on. There was a tiny test kiln; I didn't know what a test kiln was. The leader put all the things into it and explained about cones; again, I didn't know what he was talking about. There was one wheel in the room, so we were all doing handbuilding.

The third week I had this fabulous pot, a little cone 04 thing. I decided it was a soap dish, so I took it home and put soap in it. It worked for years, but finally it just dissolved. It didn't break; it just dissolved.

I was hooked. That little six-week session came to an end and I knew that my life was changed. I knew that clay would be in my life. At the time I didn't know what was ahead because I didn't even know what a potter was, nor had ever seen a handmade pot in my life. No one gave us pots when we married. We got Lenox. Handmade objects were not a part of our life, unless it was the crocheted bedspread on our bed, now a cherished possession.

In a matter of weeks I was transformed. It was as if there was that potter in me all my life just waiting to get out, and just never had the opportunity. And the moment I came in contact with the real material, that potter got out, through my heart, through my hands, whatever. It was loose and free, and I was never able to get it back under control again.

GENESIS

I was born in 1937 in Newport News, Virginia. My parents soon moved to next-door Hampton, and I grew up on the Hampton roads. My father was a banker, and my mother a homemaker and active community volunteer and leader of many organizations including the church.

It was a huge extended family, and I grew up surrounded by a lot of people. My grandmother was the dowager, and her broken hip was repaired with a pin and confined her to bed for the last dozen years of her life. She ruled the family with an iron hand. It was quite a hierarchy at the Thanksgiving tables when we were all commanded to be present. Now, they are all gone.

My father had grown up as what was called a "guinea-man." He was born and brought up in an area called Bena and Achilles. They had their own dialect, and were all watermen. My grandfather was a fisherman and built boats. My father followed him as a waterman, but went bankrupt building fishing sailboats. So he went to the big city of Newport News and got a job as a bank runner, working his way up to teller. He met my mother, who was secretary to the President of Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company. When they were married, and I came along first, there was no childcare. My mother wanted to continue to work and I was dropped off to spend the day with my bedridden dowager grandmother and her three daughters, a spinster, a widow and a divorcee. They doted



*Malcolm Davis
before clay, 1967.*

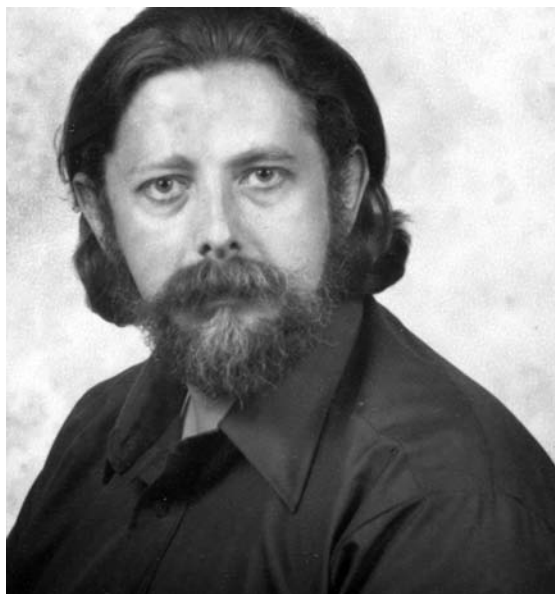


on my mother as a young person, who was the last of thirteen children, and me as her first-born. I was spoiled beyond belief. And I miss it to this day.

ACADEME

I grew up in Hampton (the oldest continuous English-speaking settlement in America, I might add!), where I went to high school. In school, I didn't have any particular goal in mind. I've been incredibly lucky to have things just fall in line, and I usually went with whatever it was. Whenever I had a plan, it didn't seem to work, so I usually stopped trying to plan. I probably assumed I would end up being a banker because my father was a banker. My younger brother also became a banker. I did work in the bank when I was in high school, and loved counting money, so was given the task of calculating (by hand) interest rates on people's Christmas savings.

In high school I wanted to be good academically. I was not interested in sports, but I really loved studying and excelling as a student, and was active in extra-curricular activities such as drama. My girl friend and I were always in competition to see who could get the best grades. We both had A's all the way through. I decided in the senior year to take an easy class, so I took art, knowing I wouldn't have to study and could have some fun. I went to the class and thought I was doing what I was supposed to do, following instructions and assignments. I remember I did a perspective drawing of architecture. But the teacher was not happy. It was not what she wanted and flunked me. I had never gotten an F; I was a straight A student and had never even gotten a B before, much less an F. The F was absolutely devastating. My girl friend got to give the valedictory address at graduation. I learned to avoid art because it would screw up my life. Everything else interested me, but Art was not it. Get rid of it! I went on to college and didn't even think of taking art. I took languages, science, physics. I enjoyed and was equally good at everything, which made choosing a major impossible.



*Political activist,
Malcolm Davis,
1969.*

I wanted to go to Duke University, but it was an issue of money, and I ended up going to the College of William and Mary, a state school. I just took a broad curriculum, finally majoring in mathematics. It was the easiest thing to do and I didn't have to work too hard. I didn't have to write papers or make footnotes. And I began to have a more active social life.

It so happened that the 350th anniversary of the settling of the Jamestown Community occurred in 1967. A celebration was held at William and Mary to welcome Queen Elizabeth of England to Williamsburg and Yorktown, where she was to present manuscripts on the occasion and speak. I was one of two students chosen to represent the college for all its official activities.

On the first day of the Queen's visit, we gathered at one end of The Duke of Gloucester Street by the old Colonial Capitol. The street was laid with red carpet (not really carpeting). We were to get into various carriages and proceed up to the Wren building on campus, where the Queen was to give her address. The carriage for Her Majesty and company was the biggest and most elaborate, drawn by six white horses. No one knew beforehand who her company would be, but it turned out there were four people in the carriage: besides the Queen, there was John D. Rockefeller, head of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Alvin Duke Chandler, President of the college, and me, Malcolm Davis, representing the student body. I was terrified, excited, nauseated, but willing.

The hoopla began. The Queen arrived by automobile and began to mount her carriage, helped by a footman. The three of us already in the carriage, being proper gentlemen, stood up. The weight of the carriage, however, was not on the Queen's side, so as we stood up the whole carriage tilted to the opposite side, throwing the Queen backward into the arms of the coachman. It was a moment of utter and complete hysteria. We were

immediately embarrassed. We had spent months on proper protocol for behavior in the presence of Her Majesty. We learned one never initiates a conversation. So we all just sat down to level the carriage, and Her Majesty could lift herself up into the carriage. She did so gracefully and merely greeted us in a polite way.

The carriage proceeded slowly. The Queen had a very distinctive wave, using the elbow in a slight, slow-motion movement. We all tried to mimic her. The carriage swayed slightly to this little beat. Suddenly a woman in the adjacent crowd broke free from the red velvet barrier and ran up to our carriage on the opposite side from the Queen. She grabbed my arm before the police pulled her back. At that moment, I started laughing hysterically. Everyone in the carriage looked at me. Not remembering the rule about never initiating a conversation with the Queen, I said the first thing that came to my mind which was to explain why I was laughing. I said, "Oh, that woman who grabbed my arm must think I'm your illegitimate son or something." All elbows stopped waving for half a second, which seemed like an eternity. I had crossed all lines. The president of the college stared at me, his mouth open. The Queen had a little handkerchief in her lap, and she put it to her face and just giggled. I felt redeemed. The next day I was called into the President's office and told I had irrevocably destroyed English/American relations, and he wanted to throw me out of the college. But he couldn't because I was a straight-A student.

During the subsequent festivities, the Queen actually gave me an invitation, sealed with her waxed stamp, to visit her in Buckingham Palace if ever I was in England. It so happened the following summer I did go to Europe to help build a church in Austria. I stopped in England and immediately went to Buckingham Palace. There I ran into Lord Mountbatten, whom I had met at Williamsburg, and after showing him my regal invitation,

*People's Union,
Washington DC, 1970.*





was invited to a Royal Garden Party the next day. He picked me up at my youth hostel and took me to the palace. I wore my shabby corduroy suit, while all the men wore spats and the women were in elegant dresses with parasols, just like “My Fair Lady.” The entire Royal Family was there in a receiving line. When I got to the Queen, I didn’t say a word because I was sure she didn’t know who I was. But immediately she took my hand and said, “Oh, the young man from Williamsburg.” That was all. I was thrilled that she just remembered me.

When I graduated from William and Mary, I was number one in my class, Phi Beta Kappa, and carried the Colonial Mace in the graduating procession. I graduated in 1959 with a BS in mathematics. It was the year when the Russians sent Sputnik into space and the space war was on, and it was the only year in my life when everyone out there wanted me. It was a most glorious year; I was interviewing for jobs during the whole entire year. General Electric wanted me. General Motors wanted me. Every insurance company wanted me. I was flown all over the country, and I stayed in hotels where I was wined and dined. It was like a party. My parents were so proud of me. They had put me through college and paid all those bills; this was their payoff.

I was never too good at making decisions, so the easiest decision, after graduating from William and Mary, when it came time to decide where to work, was to choose the place that offered me the most money. Simple! So I took a job as an actuary with the Connecticut General Insurance Company. The starting salary was \$13,000, which was phenomenal. No one had ever graduated from William and Mary with that high a salary offer. I was the talk of the campus.

So off to Hartford to become an Insurance Magnate! I found a furnished apartment, and on Monday I reported for work. They showed me my office, which turned out to be a desk in the middle of a room, surrounded on three sides by 3-foot high partitions. The desk was piled high with ledgers, and a hand-operated adding machine. So on Tuesday I looked at the place with no windows and fluorescent lighting. On Wednesday I left. I didn’t really resign. I just left. I never even went to payroll to get my two-day pay. I just got the hell out of Hartford, which I had grown to hate in a short time. I knew I didn’t want to be there and that I would be miserable if I stayed. I knew it right off and acted on impulse.

My parents couldn’t believe it. After being so promising, I quit the job after three days. I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t go home. I didn’t want to go to graduate school in mathematics. While in college I had been very active in the Virginia Methodist Student Movement. I was on the state board, active in youth work. The Methodist Church sponsored a series of work camps all over the world, recruiting students from one country to go to another to do physical labor or teaching. I signed up with a group to go to Santurce,

Puerto Rico and work in a Methodist private girls’ school. Our job that summer was to paint the school, especially the metal dining room furniture which rusted every year because of the salt air.

We were led by Richard Nutt, the campus minister at Penn State. When I think back on it, Richard Nutt is probably responsible for everything that has happened to me since then. During this period, when I was confused and frightened and didn’t know what I was doing to do, he suggested I might go to seminary. I said I did not want to be a minister. He told me it would be a good place to go and get my head together and figure out what I wanted to do with my life. He suggested Yale Divinity School. Think of it as an interim transition, he said.

I went home and packed, but before I could get to New Haven, I ran into a friend I had grown up with. He had gone to Union Seminary in New York the year before, and said it was the place to go. He was just elected President of his second year class there and raved about it. So he put me on a Greyhound bus and took me with him to New York City. I had not even applied. When I got to Union Theological Seminary he took me into the office of Henry Pitney VanDusen, the president of the seminary, a



*Malcolm Davis,
1970.*

huge man, overbearing and gruff, but brilliant and powerful. He scared me to death. I had never been so scared of anyone in my life. I don't know what happened in that interview, but when I left he welcomed me to the seminary community. I didn't have to apply or go through any normal steps. Bang! There I was in Union Seminary.

The next day I got in line to register. There was a woman in front of me in the line, and we chatted. Her name was Judy Friedenstien. She was from Washington, DC and had gone to Muskingum College in Ohio. This September we will have been married forty years, although it took us five years to get married. Both of us went through the three-year Master of Divinity program, but only I decided to be ordained (United Church of Christ).

I loved New York, and Union was a most exciting place to be. It was the most stimulating community I had ever been in. The faculty was wonderful. Reinhold Niebuhr was there, and Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth. We had programs in Reception Hall where Eleanor Roosevelt spoke, as did Martin Luther King, Edward Albee and Tennessee Williams. It was just phenomenal.

I was not prepared academically. I was a mathematician, and did not know how to read and understand theology or the philosophy of religion. My first paper was rejected. The tutor said he couldn't even give it an F. He had never seen a paper like this before; not one footnote and I had plagiarized the whole thing by copying it, without credits. This was the hardest year of my life because I had to really learn how to study and what discipline was. But I made it. Other students had that academic confidence that I as a mathematician did not have. They had all come from Ivy League schools, and I just faked it. There were these esoteric discussions about Tillich, and I would just say, "Absolutely." Finally I figured out what they were talking about. I also learned to use my sense of humor to get through it. I was elected the president of the class the first year.

After two years at Union, I took advantage of an Interim Year and accepted a one-year assignment with the Chicago City Missionary Society for grassroots ministry and training. Judy also signed on, as did six others from Union. We each were assigned an area of Ministry in Chicago: theater, journalism, labor, youth, etc. I was assigned to the West Side Christian Parish. Judy was assigned to an ecumenical ministry in the north Chicago area, in Lill Street, soon to become the center of a huge ceramic operation.

STREET MINISTRY

My job was street ministry. We worked out of a storefront near a big housing project. There was a clear line/division between the Black and Latino communities. There was incredible tension. It was like "West Side Story" and its rumble scene. There were gang fights and warfare. I worked with the gangs. I was terrified, but it was my assignment. These street kids had very little respect for preachers. If you were called a preacher, it was a sign of disrespect. In my first week I was mugged in a back alley. They ended up calling me a Reverend rather than a preacher, and that was quite an accomplishment. They called themselves the Emanons, "No Name" spelled backwards. How strange to recall these things forty years later.

In the midst of all this I received a grant from the Rotary Foundation to travel to Basel, Switzerland, to study theology and to work with Karl Barth (a major Protestant theological figure) at the University of Basel. He held weekly seminars above a beer hall in Basel. We drank beer while he read from his writings. Then each of us would take a certain passage and write a paper on it. Most of the teaching was in German, and it took me half of the



Malcolm in 1970.



year to take any notes and understand what was going on. But it was a wonderful year.

When I returned home Judy and I married. She had finished at Union and graduated. I came back to finish my third year, and she supported us by working at St. John the Divine Cathedral.

I finished Union, but had never wanted to actually be in the ministry. I had gone to Union to get my head and life together, and stayed because I was challenged academically and socially. This was 1959-1964 and in the early stages of the civil rights movement. I attended a social action committee meeting in the hope of meeting women. I didn't really know what social action was, but it turned out they were planning a demonstration at a Woolworth store near us at 125th Street in the center of Harlem. At the time the SCLC had begun the Sit-in Movement in the South to oppose Woolworth's policy of segregated lunch counters. So we wanted to support the struggle and decided on a picket line at the Harlem Woolworth. There we were, a bunch of white boys walking up and down in the middle of Harlem with pickets, the only white faces in sight. What an irony! To have a group of white students picketing a black Woolworth in Harlem for segregation!

In 1960 Martin Luther King was arrested in Atlanta on a trumped-up traffic violation. In jail for a traffic ticket! He was in jail quite a long time, so we organized a caravan of buses of white Southern seminary students from the North (Union, Princeton, Harvard, Yale). We went down to Atlanta and sat in front of the jail and had a pray-in. We were arrested.

My father, who was a typical Southern gentleman, a man of his time and place, thought Martin Luther King to be Satan personified. We had grown up where you drank water in one place if you were white, and drank water in another if you were black. Of course, it was separate, but NOT equal. One night my father turns on the television to see his son and all those white boys praying in front of the Atlanta police station, when he thought I was learning to be a preacher. He has a heart attack.

I didn't learn of my father's heart attack until I returned to New York. He was only 56 years old; it was very traumatic for me. I felt it was my fault, that I was going to kill my father over this somewhat flippant act. I had to come to terms with this: If my father was going to have a heart attack over what I believed in, was it based on something real, or not? I finally had to accept that racism was wrong, that it is a contradiction of all that I had been raised to believe, and that I had to stand up against it. And if my father and family could not accept that, that was their problem, not mine. They did finally accept it, and my father and I had a reconciliation. In his later life there was a great connecting. His love and respect were always there, even though there was anger and disappointment on both sides. They thought I had become very snooty in Union, and I thought my parents were just backward and uneducated. We had awful fights, but eventually we got beyond all that.

I became increasingly involved with the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King came to Union and spoke.

This was the time when everyone was building bomb shelters and there were air raid drills in New York City. Union students demonstrated on the steps of Grant's Tomb just up the street, and were arrested singing "Nearer My God to Thee," and carted off to jail for "loitering at Grant's Tomb."

When I graduated, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want a church; I didn't want to preach. I ended up in Vermont as the Itinerant Campus Minister, where I became known as



Malcolm officiating at a wedding at Dumbarton Oaks, DC in 1970.

the Campus Minister à GoGo. My seminary roommate, who had graduated a year ahead of me, had created this ministry, traveling 700 miles a week around the state to work on campuses of the four Vermont state colleges. He was ready to leave, so put my name in as a candidate. I went up and was interviewed and got the job.

Judy and I were now married, and we moved to Vermont in 1964 and I joined the staff of the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ in Burlington. My first job was on the state staff, where I did campus ministry. I tried to develop a ministry that focused on issues of racial justice and social change. I organized a group of students from one of the campuses to travel to Washington to march against the war in Vietnam. The next year I took some students to Petersburg, Virginia to do voter registration in the black community. The SCLC, NAACP and the YWCA had organized to help newly franchised black voters to register. It was a heavy time, very scary. The Klan was active. We were shot at. The Vermont kids got a very quick education.

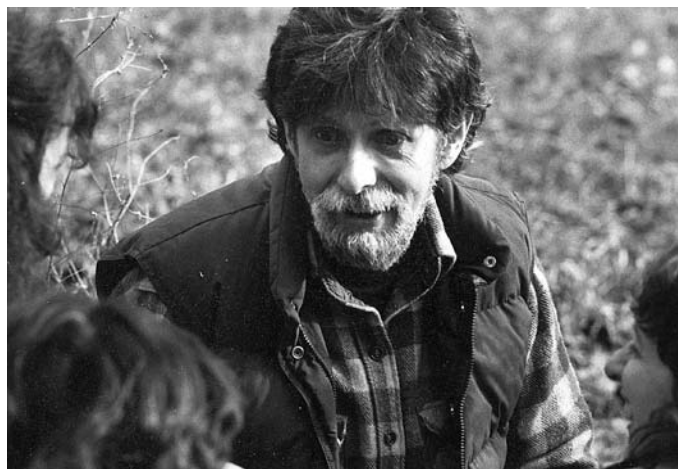
The concern for the war in Southeast Asia was growing among those of us who wanted to work for peace and justice and racial equality. So I began a little draft counseling center, with the Vermont Council of Churches. It was a fledgling operation, but the Burlington *Free Press* got wind of it and wrote an editorial that rebaited us. I was fired from the job, but was given a year to continue working and look for another job. I was very hurt and disillusioned. I was hired as the United Campus Minister at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. Judy was from Washington and we were excited about going to a place where we might make a difference.

In 1967 we moved to Washington, DC. I was hired by an ecumenical board representing six different Protestant denominations, but independent of the University. I had a little storefront in the heart of the campus, provided by the University for counseling and ministry. We were directly involved in issues of social change and justice. The university was a very conservative place, but didn't have any control over what I did or my salary. J. Edgar Hoover was chairman of the Board of Trustees; the Selective Service Headquarters (the Draft Board) was down the street, and the State Department and White House were only a few blocks away. The Pentagon was just across the river.

The first major program was a tutorial project called SERVE; we placed hundreds of student volunteers in poor neighborhoods, inner city schools and community centers, jails and prisons to provide tutoring for the disadvantaged. I tried to develop what I called an "incarnational" ministry that was immersed in the real struggles of real people for justice and peace, equality and humanity. That was the call for me. It was a ministry of active involvement in the struggles of daily life, not a ministry of escapism or spirituality.

From the beginning we were in trouble. The SERVE project was the least controversial in the university and the churches, but the Black Power movement came into being and their voice said, "Whitey, Go Home! We don't need your help, we don't need your paternalism or your condescension. We need to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, to find our own sources of strength, and build our own institutions and to rediscover pride in our own blackness." We were told that our "help" was not needed and not wanted. Eventually the project dissolved as we focused on more activist forms of social change.

Other things were happening. The civil rights movement was growing. Martin Luther King was becoming more confrontational. Soon after I got to GW, the SCLC began to organize the Poor People's Campaign. A call went out to poor people throughout the land, sharecroppers, welfare mothers, union organizers, unemployed, farm hands, all victims of racism and poverty. The call was to march on Washington and demand access to resources in society, better health, more pay, better schools, etc., etc. And they came. They came by the thousands, caravans of people in cars and buses, in mule trains and on



Malcolm on the verge of leaving campus ministry to be a potter in 1981.



foot. There were lines of people, many miles long, crossing the bridges into Washington. They set up a shantytown on the Mall, stretching from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol Building, fully in sight of the White House. It was an instant village of sheet metal, plywood and cardboard boxes. Some were intricate masterpieces, but most were jury-rigged to provide cover. There were food tents and first aid tents. There were gathering areas to meet and pray and sing and talk long into the night. And it rained and rained and rained. The place became a swamp. There were planks from tent to tent with people trying to walk through the mud. Everything was floating.

I joined the SCLC to help plan this march on Washington. There were three or four of us White Lieutenants. I worked under the leadership of Jesse Jackson to plan the Poor People's University, only one small aspect of the entire operation. There were a few times when we all gathered for inspirational sermons by Martin Luther King. It was inspiring and awesome to be part of it all. In fact, it changed my life.

The purpose of the Poor People's University was to use the people themselves as experts. Rather than study economics from academics, sociologists and historians, our faculty were the people who lived in poverty and were the victims of racism and injustice. We held seminars in churches, community centers, parks, parking lots, and a few hotel lobbies. Sometimes we were thrown out. We gathered on campuses to hold teach-ins and open mikes, but were not allowed into the classrooms themselves. I remember vividly gathering under a tree on the GW campus to hear Fannie Lou Hamer, a founder of Mississippi's Freedom Democratic Party, talk about being a black woman and a welfare mother in the South. It was overwhelming.

It was soon after this, early in April, that Martin was murdered in Memphis. The effect was devastating. The leader was gone, and Washington was in flames, as were many urban centers throughout the country. There was a huge vacuum and internal struggle within the SCLC; Mrs. King carried on the mantle of Martin, but it was a very difficult time.

Much of the Left realized the need for serious study if we were going to be successful in building a new society. Our vision was of a socialist society free of racism and sexism, militarism and imperialism, homophobia and all the other chauvinisms. We began to form study circles on social theory and change. They grew and grew, and became known as MLM Study Groups (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist), and were committed to disciplined study of the history of socialism in order to develop a theory and structure for a new society

that eliminated injustice, where imperialism and militarism were no longer viable. It was a very idealistic and hopeful time. We knew that at some point there had to be revolutionary change. There was a growing feeling that non-violence only brings out violence in those whose power is challenged.

As the groups continued, China became a model of socialism, and Chairman Mao and his *Little Red Book* our metaphor for the new society. I went to China in 1975 with a group of academics. Mao and Chou En-lai were still alive, but China was not open to foreigners or tourists. There were few facilities and our travel was limited. We were there to study socialism in action and how higher education was being carried out. I was amazed. Here was a society in which everybody had health care, everybody had work of some sort. Everyone worked hard, everyone had a roof over his or her head, there was no such thing as homelessness. Women held up half the sky. It was a poor country with peasants toiling in the fields, academics and professionals were required to spend time working in the fields of rural communes. I thought it was fabulous. The president of the university had to know the difference between a weed and



an onion, and where potatoes came from.

Back in the good ole US of A, we activists had become targets of oppression. My home was under surveillance and my office bombed. We found out later we had been placed on Nixon's Enemies List. Judy and I were both on this list of eleven thousand Americans that were considered enemies of the state, to be rounded up and confined if the occasion warranted. The Left was splitting up into sectarian groups with specific agendas. The Weathermen were conducting acts of sabotage and had gone underground.

EPIPHANY

It was in the midst of all this turmoil that my next door neighbor invited me to attend a class at the DC Department of Recreation. When I arrived it turned out not to be a lecture but an experience with a material they called clay. I was handed a bag of clay. What's this? I asked myself. I didn't want it. That's not what I came for. I didn't want to get all dirty. But eventually I took the clay and somehow rolled out a coil, wrapped it around a form, and soon had a little bowl with three little feet.

I think I had been burned out by the intensity, struggles and dangers of the previous five or six years. I had also become aware of the changing nature of the campuses, as more and more students were less and less concerned about the world around them, and more focused on getting degrees and jobs and making money. The Left had gone so far left that it was scary. I didn't feel in touch with that community as I had before. Our family of those days were those people with whom we sat in endless meetings, with whom we had gone to jail. Our godchildren all came out of those times and relationships.

But the fact was that I had discovered in clay something so tangible, so malleable, so alive it superseded much of what went on before. This dirt out of a bag had changed my life. It was so responsive. If I pinched it, it stayed pinched; if I dropped or hit it, it changed. Through this material called clay I touched and discovered a part of my spirit never before accessed.

I did not know how to make a pot, but I was aggressive in exposing myself to clay. I took three courses in three different places, and also studied at the Corcoran School of Art for a semester. I found a used Shimpo wheel and put it in the basement, and a used kiln that I put in the backyard. I was approaching 40, and it was undoubtedly a midlife crisis.

I actually began making and firing pots. I had a little show in my home for friends, selling pots for a few bucks. Clay was becoming more dominant in my life. I took a course at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina for two weeks, and another at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine. I exposed myself to a lot of things and teachers.

In 1978 I returned to Penland School as one of the weekend cooks. There were six sessions, and in return for cooking I received free board and room. During those sessions I studied with six different people. Bob Turner was the first. Another was David Keator, who made us all work in porcelain. As soon as I touched porcelain I was once again transformed. I knew immediately this was my material. I couldn't center or throw with it, but I loved it. I never touched stoneware again, except to roll out my cone packs.

I had reached a breaking point. Because I wanted to be in my basement making pots, I could no longer play at being campus minister. So I resigned. Judy agreed to support us but she didn't want to move to Penland. I returned to Penland and rented a house and studio,





each for \$50 a month, to be there and learn how to become a potter. The studio was fully equipped, and I went to work.

It was a heavy decision. I was leaving my profession of twenty years, giving up a regular salary, life insurance, disability insurance, health insurance, and an annuity. It was frightening, but Judy and I were relatively young. Judy agreed to stay in Washington, and I stayed in Penland and drove the nine hours back and forth to Washington on holidays.

This was not a hobby. I wanted to be a potter. I wanted to make pots that were mine, that were identifiable, though didn't know what that meant. I made Karen Karnes pots. I made Cynthia Bringle pots. I had strong teachers and they influenced me in various ways. But I needed to get it all out of me, or integrate it, or bring it into me so it was honestly mine. I was driven. I got up early and worked late, hardly ever playing. I never worked so hard in my life. I just made pots, recycled them, and threw them again. Over and over. Then I began to notice things that I liked; things that were different and fresh; things that were mine. Then things began to happen and I started to save pieces.

Then I realized I had to figure out how to market and sell. I needed slides. I needed an artist's statement. I began to apply for shows, only to receive rejection after rejection. Occasionally someone would come to the studio to buy a pot. And I finally got accepted into my first craft show, the American Craft Council Show in Dallas, which turned out to be their last show in Dallas.

At the time I was making a production line of porcelain work. The pots were slip-trailed with porcelain slip and glazed with a clear glaze, white on white. But soon I became very tired of firing just white pots. I was happy in what I was doing but bored with white.

Then something happened which changed my life again.

SHINOSOPHY

On a grant from the Middle Atlantic Arts Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, I went to work at the Baltimore Clayworks for a year, thanks to Debbie Bedwell. One of the potters there was testing what she called "shino" glazes. I had never heard of shino, but was able to access her leftover glaze tests, and ignorantly mixed them all together. Then I dipped a pot into the glaze, not knowing what I would get, and put it in a kiln fired by another potter. When it came out it was magic. It was everything that my white pots were not. There was incredible variety and drama on the pot. It was peach, then gray, with carbon-trapped oily spots floating on the side. It was the most exciting pot I have ever made. I didn't know it at the time, but it wasn't the pot itself but everything that had happened to it in the kiln.

I wanted to get the same result, but didn't know how. It took me a good year to make something similar. Actually, I could have used the same glaze on pots for the next hundred years and not achieved a similar result, but I didn't understand that at the time. I will keep trying to understand shino until the day I die.

Shino is a glaze surface that appeared in 16th-century Japan. It was in the Momoyama period, a relatively short period, but a time of transition from feudalism to pre-industrial society, a time characterized by an incredible flowering of the arts. Today it is considered to have been the Golden Age of Japanese ceramics. The simple Zen Buddhist ceremony of tea was being transformed into a much more formal celebration of tea and the handmade object. Tea masters were becoming arbiters of taste as they collected handmade items for the tea ceremony: tea bowls and tea caddies, water jars, and vases and prints.

Shinaware emerged from the kilns of the Mino and Seto areas, along with Yellow and Black Seto ware, as well as Oribe ware. The early masters responded to the irregularities of the glaze and its surface. We don't even know what the word "shino" means. In fact, the term was not used until the 18th century. My theory is that there was this tea master named Shino who loved these pots, bought them out, and many years later the type of pots was named after the guy who loved them and collected so many of them.

I call what I do "carbon trapping." I search for that illusive surface in which specks of soot and carbon are trapped in the glaze surface. Early shino was quite different. Those

early pots were fired in underground kilns with long, damp firings, and the temperature never got above cone 3. Their glazes were basically feldspar with a little ash. Now, in this country we have more complicated shino glazes. I have collected over three hundred shino formulas. A recent show at the Babcock Galleries in New York called "American Shino," was a wonderful presentation of work by American potters who have taken this glaze type and re-interpreted it, using our materials and aesthetics.

One thing all shino glazes have in common: they are all high in clay, therefore high in alumina and rich in silica; all are fluxed by intense alkaline melters (mostly sodium), as opposed to alkaline earths (calcium or magnesium), which very few shinos have. The flux comes from sodium and potassium, which melt early in the firing.

Because the glaze has alumina it is very stiff and doesn't move on the surface, and tends to pinhole, craze, and crawl. It crazes because of the high coefficient of expansion of the sodium. Spodumene (or other lithium compounds) lowers the expansion and is used to counter the crazing and to encourage the richer, orange, fire-color of shino.

What I am after from the kiln is carbon-trapping. I want the drama of trapped crystals of soot. For me it is like the Fourth of July. Fireworks! I want those little Dalmatian spots that explode all over the pots. Unfortunately, they are elusive and rare.

The secret of carbon-trapping is in one ingredient: soda ash. My particular glaze has about 18% soda ash. Many shinos have no soda ash at all and are glazes used by potters who do not want carbon-trapping and are searching for a more traditional Japanese surface. I love those pots, but I am obsessed with carbon and soot.

Carbon-trapping occurs in the early part of the firing in what is commonly called "body reduction." At about cone 012-010 (1590-1630°F), I starve the kiln of oxygen by increasing the gas entering the kiln, while cutting back on the source of air (pushing in the damper and cutting back on primary air). The result is a dirty, muddy atmosphere in the kiln; and black smoke immediately begins to appear at the chimney, the spy holes and any other crack in the kiln's walls or door. Reduction is achieved by incomplete combustion of the fuel, and free carbon molecules will form, just like soot in your fireplace. The soot settles on the pots before the glaze melts (as well as on the shelves, stilts and the interior of the kiln). The soda ash in the glaze has formed a sodium scum or skin on the surface of the pots during the drying process, and that scum begins to melt early in the firing (cone 012-010), capturing the soot that has settled on the pot and sealing it in. That's what we call "carbon-trapping."

If the carbon blows off or is oxidized before the melting sodium scum captures it, you get orange pots (with my glaze) that I hate. Too much reduction or too thick a glaze application can result in totally black pots or what is affectionately called "snot green." I don't like the solid orange colors in shino and I don't like solid black, either. I am after something in the middle. It's not so much a color as a variation of surface; I strive for a pot with flashes of orange, salmon or peach next to areas of black and gray. The most prized of all are those little black crystal-like spots captured in the glaze that appear to be floating on the surface of the pot. I don't want a monochromatic surface; it's those spots that I am after.

I strive for a pot that has good form, good scale and proportion, good balance and weight, and hope that in the process of glazing and firing the kiln god will bring me a magical surprise. When we put pots into the kiln for firing, we have expectations of what is possible. Then we close the kiln and only have limited control over what happens within. When we open the kiln in the end, it's not always what we expect.

The first shino tea bowl I fired in my West Virginia kiln was far beyond what I wanted. It was crazed and pitted and the glaze crawled away on the inside – all the imperfections I had avoided when previously firing celadons. I was disgusted and threw the pot into the trash bin. Weeks later, when I was taking out the trash, I noticed the tea bowl had not broken, and pulled it out. And Lord! I began to see all the magic the kiln had given me that I had not noticed two weeks earlier. I saved the pot and it won first prize in several shows, earning me thousands of dollars in prizes. I still have that pot, and wouldn't part with it for the world.





A BALANCED LIFE

When I left Penland and Baltimore, it became clear to me that I needed to find my own place to work. Judy and I searched for a year before finally finding a mountaintop farm in West Virginia. I moved there in 1985 and I began setting up my studio. Judy remained in Washington to work and continue singing in several choral groups. I spent springs, summers and falls in West Virginia. It is a gorgeous spot, separated from the rest of the world. I have grown to appreciate and need the solitude of that space. I work in an old chicken coop with a dirt floor, no heat or insulation, no water, and makeshift windows.

I bought a small Bailey kiln, which I can fire frequently and achieve test results more quickly than with a larger kiln. Black snakes live in the hollow of the wall, so I am not alone. And because of the snakes I don't have any mice or rodents in my studio; they are all in the house.

What more could I ask? I work alone, which has to do with the solitude I enjoy. Clay is a medium through which we discover ourselves, and express ourselves in ways we otherwise might not do. For me, making work is a time for meditation and reflection, a kind of prayerful act. I'm surprised I've come to that. But I also need people and social interaction. So I return to DC for the winter to live with Judy and Miss Freckle The Feline, working in a group studio at the Lee Art Center in Arlington, another of my homes.

I think I am beginning to understand the continuity in my life. Somehow it is whole, in spite of all the fragmentation and traveling. The clay is my center. I had always assumed

I had broken with the past and created a new future for myself. But it does flow from one to the other in a strange way. I always struggle with the validity of making pots in such an imperfect world. My commitment to social justice and my desire for social change continually pose the question: Can I justify making pots? Once I was hoping to change the world, and now I am making dishes. Am I making any contribution at all? Or is it just self-indulgence? I would like to believe that the making of objects that flow from our hands and hearts not only contributes to a more human world, but also is essential and necessary.

I am a potter. I am a recluse, a hermit, a social animal and a performer. I love teaching. I am a man with values that are important to me. My social visions are still very strong, but at age 66, I'm a little disillusioned about and fearful for the future of the world. There are two things, however, that are still important to me: One is People, Community, Networks. The other is Peace and Justice, and the quality of Life on the Planet. I love People, and I want a Healthy Planet for us all and for those who will follow us.

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*Photographs of young Malcolm Davis
courtesy of Judy and Malcolm Davis.
Others by Gerry Williams.*







ADDENDA

A. EXCEPTIONAL SHINO: Shinos are an iron-loving, high-alumina brew, fluxed predominantly by alkalis. (Jim Robinson, STUDIO POTTER)

Shino-type glazes are the exceptions to every rule! No other glaze varies so much in character depending upon how it is applied, dried and fired. Shino is the glaze that breaks all the rules. Its chemistry, mixing, application, and drying are all different from other high-fire glazes.

1. Most glazes have two fluxes: Alkalies (Na, K, Li), and Alkaline earths (Ca, Ba, Mg, Zn), **BUT** shinos have only alkalis (feldspar) – with maybe a tiny trace of alkaline earths.
2. Shinos are very high in alumina and silica. Most shinos have double the alumina of other high-fire glazes. This means the glaze is very stiff and does not run, but also does **NOT** heal. It shows everything.
3. Most high-fire glazes avoid use of soluble alkalis. **BUT** shinos have soluble alkalis, usually in the form of soda ash (2-20%).
4. Shinos craze, crawl and pinhole. Shinos craze badly, due to the high alkaline content. Lithium (usually in the form of spodumene) is often added to counteract this crazing and to enhance color development, as well as rapid fluxing and high gloss. High clay content can cause crawling; calcining part of the clay can help.
5. Shinos fuse early in the firing (often completely melted by cone 3) due to the powerful eutectic that takes place among the alkalis (Li, Na, K) and the silica and alumina.
6. Most traditional high-fire glazes need a strong, clean, even body reduction with little or no smoke. **BUT** shinos prefer smoke and an irregular atmosphere.

MYSTERIES OF SHINO: THINGS TO TRY

1. Rather than mix each batch fresh, add 1/2 batch when old batch is 1/2 gone;
2. Use wax resist to cover parts of a pot;
3. Use plastic wrap to cover parts of a pot;
4. Place glazed ware in dry sawdust, perforated bags, bubble-wrap, textured paper, or packing peanuts to influence patterning caused by drying;
5. Stack glazed pots to dry;
6. Dry glazed pots touching one another or crowded together;
7. Dry with coils of wet clay, shells, etc. on flat surfaces;
8. Apply wax with foam stamps, splatter on with fingers, trail with slip trailer;
9. Splatter water on surface of glazed pots with fingers or tooth brush;
10. Spray soda ash solution on glazed pots;
11. Sprinkle wood ash (or mix of wood ash and soda ash) on freshly-glazed pot;
12. Dry open pots upside down;
13. Dry pots in front of heater or fan or repeatedly mist/spritz with water;
14. Bury in wood chips;
15. For luster, brush/spray high-iron glaze over;
16. Try saggars – or build up around pots with hard bricks/broken shelves;
17. Add some common salt/kosher salt/rock salt;
18. Substitute different feldspars, kaolins, spodumenes, ball clays;
19. Re-fire to biscuit temperature in electric kiln (cone 06);
20. Vary the percentage of soda ash (from 0% to 20%);
21. Substitute amblygonite for ceramic-grade spodumene; it has lower thermal expansion and higher phosphorus content;
22. Soak biscuit in soda ash solution;
23. Test over iron and iron/manganese washes;
24. Fire test tile dipped in copper-red right next to Shino pot; spritz copper-red glaze over glazed pots before firing; or try adding copper carbonate to the Shino glaze;
25. Dampen/spritz areas of biscuit with water or damp sponge before glazing;
26. Aim heat gun or hair dryer across ware board of freshly glazed Shino pots;
27. Spray hair spray over glazed pot;
28. Use thin wash of temmoku glaze or a gunmetal glaze (containing manganese) over Shino-glazed pot;
29. Try spraying Shino glaze, varying placement, overlap, vary density;
30. Apply soda ash or wood directly on pot after glazing; spray first with spray adhesive if pot is too dry for ash to stick;
31. Spatter iron oxide wash over freshly-glazed pot with toothbrush;
32. Try thin washes of ocher, manganese or copper carbonate;
33. Sgraffito – scratch through pattern on shino glaze.

CARBON TRAP CHEMISTRY

by Dave Finkelburg

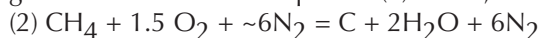


Any hydrocarbon *fuel*, whether natural gas, propane, wood, oil, etc., is made up of molecules composed of *carbon* and *hydrogen*. Natural gas is the simplest fuel; wood is more complex. Air is mostly *nitrogen* (~78%) and *oxygen* (~21%). When we fire any fuel-heated kiln, the proportions of carbon and hydrogen in the fuel aren't very important to us, BUT the proportions of air and fuel are critical!

Heat is released (combustion) in the kiln when oxygen (O) in the air combines with the carbon (C) and/or hydrogen (H) in the fuel. In the case of natural gas burned in an oxidizing atmosphere, a chemist would represent the reaction of fuel and air like this: (1) natural gas, $\text{CH}_4 + \text{air}$ ($2 \text{ O}_2 + \sim 8\text{N}_2 = \text{carbon dioxide, CO}_2 + \text{water vapor, } 2\text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{nitrogen, } \sim 8\text{N}_2$

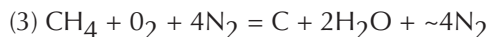
Note that I have used the squiggly line ~ to represent "approximately," because in air there aren't exactly 8 nitrogen molecules for every 2 oxygen molecules, but that's close enough for our purposes. The important thing is to see that the equation balances. There is one carbon atom on the left; and after burning, it is in the one carbon dioxide molecule on the right. There are four oxygen atoms on the left, and on the right two are attached to the carbon, and two are attached to the four hydrogen atoms. The nitrogen was in the air we used to get the oxygen to make the fuel burn. The nitrogen passes through chemically unchanged.

Moderate Reduction: What happens when we put the kiln into reduction? Well, that depends on how much reduction. And, what the heck is reduction, anyway? Reduction, for our purposes in a fuel-fired kiln, is simply starving the kiln for air. Without all the oxygen needed to balance equation (1) above, in moderate reduction we may get:



Notice we only had 3 oxygen atoms at the left in equation (2), so we could only make carbon monoxide. Chemists say in equation (1) we *oxidized* carbon to CO_2 . In equation (2) we only partially oxidized the carbon. In fact, the CO really wants to become CO_2 , so some of it, at red heat, starts finding its own oxygen, by stealing it from iron oxide in the clay body, and chemists call that *reduction*.

Heavy Reduction: If we want to make soot, the black we see in smoke from a heavy reduction fire, then we really need to starve the fuel for air. Chemists represent heavy reduction like this:



What's changed? Nothing, except now the kiln is producing carbon! And we can't get carbon on our pots, to trap it there later when the glaze melts, unless we starve the kiln for air so much early in the firing that we make some carbon! We could starve the kiln for air even more, and have hydrogen leaving the kiln instead of water vapor, but that would be a waste of good fuel, and the temperature in the kiln would start to fall.

NOTE: If after our hour or so of heavy reduction to make carbon, we then let the kiln drift back into oxidation, what happens? The carbon, unless trapped under a coat of melted glaze, will almost immediately burn away. Maintain reduction until the glaze melts and traps the carbon!

For a more comprehensive overview of carbon-trap shinos, see STUDIO POTTER, Volume 30 No. 2.