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PUSHING THE LIMIT

For Rock-Climbing Guru, the Sky Is His Roof

By [MICHAEL BRICK](#)

SACRAMENTO — He was known as the king of the Yosemite lifers, that proud band of rock climbers, tightrope walkers and seekers who made camp on the margins of the law, sleeping under the black oaks and sequoias and California stars.

On his shoulders he carried an 80-pound constellation of canvas stowage, books and sweatpants, bottled water and mushy food, a sleeping bag and a reserve sleeping bag meant for some encountered companion of the road.

To the government, he was Charles Victor Tucker III, scourge of Yosemite National Park, fixture of the lodge cafeteria. To acquaintances, he was Chuck, harmless and stoned jester of the mountains. And to climbers the world over he remains Chongo, the Monkey Man, named for the sticky soles he had once fashioned from Mexican rubber.

“I learned a lot from Chongo,” said Ivo Ninov, 32, an accomplished guide from Bulgaria, “because he was the father of big wall climbing.”

But the fullness of Chongo’s legacy would appear only through his disappearance from rock climbing, a passage from sylvan to urban wilds that has made him a stranger to his sport and an outcast from his home, now reduced to sleeping under a tractor-trailer. Along the way, he would find a new kind of homelessness, and a new sense of mission.

Even among outliers, Chongo, 57, had always diverged. In a time of corporate sponsorships, he lived on charity, scavenging and bartering handmade wares. In a time of brand-name gear, he rigged worthy contraptions from found parts. In a time of speed-climbing records, he gained renown for his comically deliberate ascents. Once, he stretched an assault on El Capitan across two weeks, including three days spent pausing to consider some half-forgotten existential puzzle.

Dumb jokes congealed around his legend, for he projected a familiar and comforting sort of weirdness. Around a campfire or a cafeteria table, tourists and weekend warriors could find in Chongo a certain box to cross off, the obligatory aging hippie recounting unintentionally hilarious misadventures, denouncing the prison-industrial complex and rhapsodizing on junk science.

Chongo would claim, for example, to remember the fear he had felt at his own birth. He would say he did not believe in the afterlife, partly out of a feeling that to do so demeaned our plane of existence, but also because he reasoned that certain principles of quantum mechanics negated such a concept.

“He has (supposedly) lived in Mexico, spent years in college, spent years in jail, been a computer programmer, been shot, done some serious partying, written books, climbed big walls, resoled shoes, made clothing, been there, and done that,” one online diarist wrote. “Most of it’s true; some of it is fabricated lore.”

As natural recreation in America gave way to luxury resorts, adventure travel and extreme sports, tales of Chongo grew outsize. He remained fiercely true to his vision of the outdoor spirit. While others burned out, joined the establishment or cashed in on televised feats of daredevilry, Chongo spent his days at Yosemite, revising manifestos on climbing, physics and philosophy.

“He’s kind of like this force of energy that people gather around,” said Pam Gutsch, a rock climber from Nevada. “Maybe it’s based on this philosophical idea of Chongo. He’s kind of a center. He’s not the top climber, but he’s a climber, and he can discuss it with anybody.”

Nearly three years ago, Chongo abandoned climbing altogether. Rumors of his whereabouts began to trade around the big rocks and rope-walking fixtures of the Western states. Expelled from Yosemite, he found his way to Sacramento, where he beds down in a trailer yard, eats lunch at a day shelter and types articles on science in the ramshackle office of a homeless advocacy group.

Yosemite’s Ethos

After nature itself, Yosemite National Park owes much of its grandeur to John Muir, the Scottish conservationist who claimed to have sought directions “to any place that is wild.”

In his 1912 guidebook, Muir likened the towering rock formations known as Half Dome, Sentinel Rock and El Capitan to the sight of a temple lighted from above.

“But no temple made with hands can compare with Yosemite,” he wrote. “Every rock in its walls seems to glow with life.”

A century later, paved roads now carve long stone tunnels through the mountains, bringing carloads of visitors to hotels with wireless Internet access, conference rooms and wedding facilities. Those who lay claim to Muir’s philosophical inheritance have long protested the commercial development. In the late 1960s, hippies living in the park began to draw the attention of the superintendent, Lawrence C. Hadley, described in news accounts of the day as “a brawny, soft-spoken man with tattoos on his arms.”

On July 4, 1970, around 7:30 p.m., park rangers sought to disperse a crowd of several hundred from Stoneman Meadow.

“For the next three hours, they raised hell,” Hadley later told reporters, “carrying on, boozed up, pounding their bongo drums. A lot of them seemed to be high on dope.”

Calling in support from nearby police departments, the rangers cleared the meadow and detained nearly 200 people. The young campers who had been whiling away their days climbing rocks and balancing on chains would long remember the confrontation. But the sports they were pioneering would lead down similar paths, split by accusations of commercial exploitation.

Some, like Dean Fidelman, 52, would sleep in the park intermittently for years. Fidelman, a photographer who sells calendars depicting nude women climbing big rocks, still practices a form of rope-walking for exercise, meditation and pleasure.

“It’s very noncommercial, there’s nothing here to sell,” Fidelman said, standing by a slack-line tied between two trees. But, he added, “Then you have sponsored climbers. They come in, they do their thing and then they leave. And they have a photographer.”

Younger athletes like Dean Potter and Steph Davis, a married couple who are among the most successful climbers in the world, have lucrative deals with apparel companies. Their exploits have been chronicled in magazines and documentary films.

“People who have been climbing a long time, like Chongo, might say, ‘Oh, it’s becoming more mainstream,’ ” Davis said. “At the same time, it might help climbers get more recognition.”

‘He Was the Connection’

Chongo parted his hair in the aimless manner of a river, a slapdash press of gray tangling down his neckline turning dun. Hash marks made a small gridiron of his forehead and wrinkles like ripples emanated from the corners of his lips to his gaunt, high cheekbones. Leathery skin, knowing eyes and a dilettante’s smile gave him the cabalistic twinkle of a movie pirate.

He seemed to have found his conversational stride sometime in the early 1980s, incorporating skater slang terms like bitchin’ and rad into his vocabulary long after they had fallen from fashion.

He draped his 5-foot-8, 155-pound frame in layers of cotton, the better to adapt to temperature changes without adding much weight. Around his neck he carried a cellphone that looked as if it had come skidding to his feet from the window of a moving car.

By his own account, Chongo was born on an American military base in Japan, son of an engineer, the oldest of seven children. He attended Van Nuys High School in Los Angeles’s San Fernando Valley, took a single calculus course at the [University of Arizona](#) and worked for a few years as a computing contractor. He started rock climbing as a teenager, learning to use a basic piton and hammer at Stony Point and Tahquitz Rock in Southern California.

“I finally got to know what I was doing in my 30s,” he said. “And knowing what I was doing was knowing a lot. A lot of people claim to know what they’re doing. No matter how well you plan, things can still go wrong.”

In the 1980s, Chongo moved to Mexico City, he said. He later told climbers that he had found the odd rubber he used to resole their shoes in the violent Tepito barrio, a claim that gained credence from his proficient Spanish. He stayed there for eight years.

“There were a lot of pretty girls in Mexico, and I’ve got blue eyes,” he said, “so that kept me down there.”

Returning across the border, Chongo eventually made his way to Yosemite and found a favorite climb in the

gorgeous, temperate and arduous Steck-Salathé route up the north face of Sentinel Rock. He learned the form of tightrope walking that was developing into the sports now known as slack-lining and high-lining.

“I saw these guys walking on a chain,” he said. “I just knew that was something I could do. I knew that was a game I could play.”

In the 1990s, Chongo started making the campgrounds and forests of Yosemite his permanent home. He befriended serious climbers, helping newcomers meet partners and borrow gear.

“Pretty fast, all the dirtbag climbers started knowing Chongo,” Ninov said, “and he was the connection.”

Chongo earned respect as a journeyman climber, with accomplishments like rope-walking on the Lost Arrow Spire, but he gained more attention as a tinkerer. Climbers trusted him to resole their shoes. They studied his jury-rigged ropes and harnesses. But when they spoke of the spiritual aspects of rock climbing, Chongo played the spoiler.

“You go spend all this money to do something that basically only improves the world by improving your outlook on it,” he would say, “and if you don’t take it and do something with it, it’s narcissistic.”

Chongo’s innovations and eccentricities came to seem intertwined. Once he designed a complex set of tools allowing him to, in essence, hitchhike up the face of El Capitan. He stayed out on the rock for days on end, asking passing climbers to pull up sections of his gear.

“He had all these systems where he could haul all these massive loads with these multipulley systems he had made up,” Davis said. “Just stuff to live on the wall for an indefinite time period.”

The same shenanigans that endeared Chongo to rock climbers drew less favorable attention from the authorities. On July 9, 1993, park rangers issued him a warning for exceeding the seven-day limit at the Sunnyside Campground. Though many people lived in the park for extended periods, few made such brazen spectacles of themselves as Chongo.

In January 1995, park rangers began to suspect him of running an unauthorized textile business from his tent at the Hidden Valley campground. Learning his nickname, they began including it in police reports as an alias.

Under the rangers’ scrutiny, Chongo’s determination to live at Yosemite only increased. He sought out places in the forest to unroll his sleeping bag, or else camped dangling from the great rock formations, out of reach in plain sight.

Again and again, rangers cited him for camping violations like commandeering a bear locker to store his effects. His residence appeared in court records as “transient climber.”

The transient part was accurate. But Chongo was actually devoting less and less time to rock climbing, turning his attention instead to writing. In 1996, he completed the first edition of “The Complete Book of Big Wall Climbing,” a staggering brain dump of instruction and rumination, 576 pages divided into 21 chapters captioned with Roman numerals and Melvillian headings like Raising Anchor, Quarters and The Hold.

He charged \$100 for the book and found plenty of takers. Beginning climbers took his oddball wisdom as a guide to technique, etiquette and culture. Every spring, as the California foothills grew thick with weekenders from San Francisco, Silicon Valley and beyond, demand for the book produced new sales.

“He’s a draw; rock climbers know who he is,” said Debbie Collins, who publishes the books from her print shop in Altadena, Calif. “It’s like he’s got the whole thing in his head. He keeps revising later editions to fix a period or a single word.”

At the same time, Chongo was growing disenchanted with the sport. The park was crowded with tourists, more than 3.4 million in 2000 compared with 2.2 million in 1970. Apparel companies were paying the top climbers to use their gear. The communal spirit was buckling beneath a new emphasis on setting speed records. And as a popular pastime, climbing was moving indoors, to manmade rocks with grooves of plastic. Some of these were erected in shopping malls.

Reading widely, conversing liberally and smoking frequently, Chongo turned his attention to popular physics. Encouraged by sales of the big-wall climbing books, he began to fashion treatises on science.

Reluctantly, he embraced his vagrancy as a sort of gimmick. Though he aimed to be taken seriously, he tentatively titled his magnum opus “The Homeless Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics.”

The science books did not sell.

“He’s spent five years on this,” Collins said. “I try to get it through his head that the audience for physics books is so tiny. He’s got delusions of grandeur.”

The Law Catches Up

On any given day in the first years of the new century, Chongo could be found at a corner table of the Yosemite lodge cafeteria, agonizing over the details of his manuscripts.

Between tomes on science, he produced entertainments like “The Quotable Chongo on How to Be Bitchin’,” a slim volume of aphorisms including “Perfection is mandatory.”

But his greatest exertions went toward completing “The Homeless Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics,” a single-spaced work of unbroken text contemplating humanity, infinity, gravitational forces, space, time and destiny. Its final paragraphs spilled across the back cover, giving the effect of a speaker whose microphone has been cut off. It opened with a poem:

All the dreams

all the schemes

and all the beautiful scenes, that ever were

First never were

Then were forever

Then never, ever were again

In April 2000, park workers found Chongo in their offices making copies. He was charged with misappropriation of property. The next year, rangers impounded his property, 100 pounds of food, bedding and climbing gear stored at the base of the Sea of Dreams route on El Capitan.

“Tucker, who is more commonly known as ‘Chongo,’ ” the rangers wrote, “has told various rangers he has been climbing Sea of Dreams for more than a year and a half, and has had climbing equipment, which is clearly visible from the Valley floor, hanging on this route during this period.”

At first, the rangers tried reasoning with Chongo. But as the years went on, positions hardened on both sides. The rangers issued more violation notices, and Chongo gave them less information.

“I’ve asked Tucker on many occasions where he stays,” Ranger Jack J. Hoeflich wrote in a report. “Tucker is evasive, ignores the question, or states that he can’t tell me.”

In 2004, the authorities set out to prove that Chongo was living unlawfully at Yosemite. He had registered to camp exactly 30 times that year, suspiciously matching the annual limit. On Nov. 17, the rangers started recording every sighting of Chongo for comparison to registration records.

But short of confessing, Chongo did little to disguise his residence. He viewed Yosemite as his rightful home. He voted on a provisional ballot from the park. He rented a post office box. He even bragged to rangers that “if one simply writes, Chongo, Yosemite, CA on a letter, then he will receive it.”

As winter 2004 set in, the rangers began compiling evidence to charge Chongo with four misdemeanor violations of camping regulations, each carrying a maximum penalty of six months in jail. In a police report supporting the case, Ranger Edward Visnovske detailed five years of his observations.

“It is assumed that Tucker has lived most of his life this way, looking for ‘loopholes’ in society to allow him to exist without a job or a home as we know them,” Visnovske wrote. “Tucker had become a master of counter-surveillance and would go through incredible routines to insure that he was not being followed.”

The case of United States of America vs. Charles V. Tucker opened before federal Magistrate Judge William M. Wunderlich of the Eastern District of California on Oct. 5, 2005. In his small courtroom near Yosemite Village, the judge heard two days of testimony.

“When he had his trial here, we had his courthouse packed every day,” said Fidelman, the photographer. “He means something to a lot of people here.”

Several climbers, including Dean Potter, testified for the defense. Seeking to discredit the prosecution’s circumstantial evidence of illegal camping, Potter and others swore they had driven Chongo in and out of the park, putting him up in their homes for weeks on end.

Chongo was convicted on three of the four counts. He left Yosemite National Park by bus.

A New View of the Stars

Along the American River through central Sacramento, the Dos Rios Triangle neighborhood gives way to a nameless expanse of industrial parks, depots, drainage systems and halfway houses where the homeless, the formerly homeless and the soon-to-be homeless pass from station to station.

Across from a pornography shop, the Sisters of Mercy operate an expansive day shelter called Loaves & Fishes. From inside a trailer, the Sacramento Homeless Organizing Committee publishes the Homeward Street Journal, chronicling advocacy efforts. Its back pages carry advertisements, cartoons, obituaries, poetry and, in recent issues, a full-page column on topics like special relativity, credited to “the homeless science writer, Chongo.”

To the regular crowd at Loaves & Fishes, Chongo has become a familiar figure, discussing his thoughts on quantum mechanics and giving demonstrations of slack-lining. He has returned to Yosemite only briefly. Jerry Maciulla, 53, who works part-time in the shelter’s storage shed, said he was aware that Chongo “was supposedly a world-class rock climber.”

“I know what he’s talking about, but I wouldn’t try it now that I’ve got a wife and two kids,” Maciulla said. “You’re taking your life in your hands with those sports.”

But others have found Chongo’s place in sports history of smaller consequence than his gentle approach to everyday troubles. He has forged friendships, or at least truces, with security guards at several transit yards, warehouse facilities and other places considered prime for clandestine bivouacking. In this manner, he has helped negotiate safe harbor for homeless men like John Kraintz, 54, a skeletal figure who wears a rubber band in his beard and sways from side to side when he speaks.

“He’s sort of a guru, sort of a teacher who sort of raises a bar that needs a lot of raising,” Kraintz said. “Inspiration in a place where there’s a lack of hope.”

From the trailer office, Chongo emerged one morning on crutches, which he used to propel himself across the courtyard.

“This place is kind of where you can go and the cops don’t mess with you,” he said. “I’ve learned a lot about the true homeless lifestyle here. This is the jail fodder. It used to be you could go out and stay at these places I stayed at, but as time went on, they made laws against that. You couldn’t just go out and rock-climb and not consume.”

In the dining room, volunteers were spooning out meals designed to provide the full caloric content for an entire day, nacho pie with meat, beans and olives, sliced bread with thick slabs of butter, salad, oranges, Fig Newtons and Gatorade.

Picking at his meal, Chongo spoke of his time climbing rocks at Yosemite.

“I provided a great deal of inspiration to a lot of people to pursue a narcissistic activity, and I wonder if I’ve done good,” he said. Though camping in the park had been a kind of homelessness, he said, “I didn’t understand what it meant. I didn’t realize I was automatically a member of this community.”

Later, as the shelter locked its gates, Chongo hauled his pack through the procession trudging toward the

riverbeds, night shelters and overpasses. He passed a man strapped with an ankle monitor, another marcher in the homeless parade.

“I love to sleep outdoors,” Chongo said. “Fresh air is best.”

At an abandoned parking lot by the Alkali Flats train station, he dropped his knapsack and his crutches and climbed onto a cable drooping between two 4-foot-high poles, momentarily converting this small piece of the urban landscape into a slack-line. He took a tentative step, found his balance and then danced ahead with no partner as the wire tautened behind his weight.

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