

# 'I Gravitated Toward That Street Life'

*Scott M. Bock Interviews Texas bluesman Orange Jefferson*



*Orange Jefferson, East Side Kings Festival, September 2014. Photo: Scott M. Bock.*

**O**range Jefferson is the kind of character that shows up in a Hollywood film playing a larger than life tough guy. In his case, he is not acting. Jail time and prison sentences, a fascination with guns, and a long history of drug abuse provide more than enough of the real material.

This barrel-chested man sports a clean shaved head and a radio deejay voice. When he enters a room or steps on to a stage, he gets attention without any obvious effort. It has something to do with how he carries himself.

A fresh start in a new city after a long prison term, he has been clean now more than twenty years. He makes it clear that holding on to his day job and caring for his four kids comes first and music has to wait until he has the time and the money to actively pursue it. In the meantime, Jefferson works on his harp and sax playing, takes occasional gigs, and writes remarkable lyrics for the songs he hopes to record down the road.

He easily could have gone unnoticed in his adopted Austin if not for a brief stint at Antone's Club long ago. A few songs have shown up on two compilations including the hard to find CD, 'Texas Redemptors', on the Milagros label in 2002 and for Dialtone Records more recently on 'Texas Harmonica Rumble'. Ironically, Jefferson's biggest break was appearing in an award winning film, 'The Trash Dance', that showed off his harp playing but was really focused on his job as a street sweeper for the City of Austin.

So, Jefferson chooses to wait for his time and his notebooks full of songs – really poems – grow. He says that he listens to all kinds of music – explaining that he started out with church music but found himself enjoying rock harmonica player, Lee Oskar. When he is on stage, however, Jefferson is most likely to play country blues reminiscent of Lightnin' Hopkins or Sonny Terry. Jefferson's harp work is evocative and he uses the instrument and his worn, comfortable voice to help tell the stories he has lived. At one point, as if his account is not authentic enough, he explains that he always managed to play his harmonica behind prison bars.

Always hustling to make some money, Jefferson found time for a first interview on a break from a construction job with one of his sons. He looked at home in work clothes covered with paint and plaster. The next evening, he stepped out of his truck wearing a neatly pressed suit, spit polished shoes, and a fedora – equally at home blowing harp and singing to fans at the East Side Kings Festival in Austin.

"My real name is Orange Jefferson – Orange Stanley Jefferson. The guy that was like a grandfather to me, he was named Orange, so they

named me after him. I caught hell through school behind that name – I got teased and a bunch of stuff like that. I got beat up until like the seventh, eighth grade. I started like standing up for myself a little.

I grew up in Houston in the Heights area. Across the tracks were oak tree lined streets and big houses – old houses. There were bought houses on that side. Those houses are still there. But, on the other side of the track was some little rent houses – two bedrooms, bath, living room, kitchen, dining area. That's where we lived. My elementary school is gone – condos!

I was born 7th February in 1955. It was just me. I was the only kid until I was seventeen. I lived with my grandmother and my grandfather bought me a Marine Band harmonica and I started playing the harmonica. I guess about seven – six or seven years old

I don't know why he bought me a harmonica. He was just old timey and somebody might of gave it to him. They called him Porter. So, evidently he was a porter at one time – in the buildings or something.

I would just play with my grandmother – playing 'Jesus Keep Me Near The Cross' and any other old gospel songs. She'd sit in her old rocking chair and hum and I started realising that I had an ear to hear, so I'd play. I'd just kind of play along and I didn't know it was nothing unusual about that.

Eventually, I moved with my mother. My mother and father divorced early – I was seven years old – that's when they divorced and I started living with my grandmother. It was off and on and it was just rocky – a lot of stuff.

Church was another thing – we came up sanctified church. Somewhere down the line, I picked up a guitar and started playing guitar. I lost that ability to play now. I don't know how I got it. I don't know whether I got anointed or something in the sanctified church but I started playing guitar in church. When I was about seven or eight, Mama took me every night to an old brown tent on Jensen Drive where mosquitoes swarmed the lights. The floor was made of sawdust as the sisters' arms would flail. And them sisters did a holy dance as the Hammond organ wailed.

We couldn't listen to blues in our house – not in the sanctified church. My mother didn't do that but my aunt and them would listen to secular music. In my room, once I got a little older, I could listen but that was the rock set then. I got into blues later on.

So, I played harmonica for a while and then the music bug got me and I started playing the clarinet. They had a music programme for little black kids in that area where they had horns we used in school. And, I played clarinet from the age of eight all the way up.

With the clarinet we were doing band stuff – classical stuff. Sometimes, I would just play – just listen to stuff and play. My cousin and them, they was all so excited. They said: 'He can play anything he hear'. I couldn't play anything but they didn't know. But, I could play a lot of stuff that I hear. I guess it's just a gift. I look at it as a blessing.

I learned to read music and I played all the way through high school. I never let the bullies take my clarinet. My mother bought me a clarinet eventually. And, then we moved. It was a whole different ball game – tough – back in the day. There were bullies. It was pretty rough. Kids could go to school until they were 21, if they played ball or something.

And then later on, I got bit by the bug and started hanging in the clubs and my dad's brother came along and he played harmonica and he kind of gave me the blues' licks. And then, I heard Lee Oskar and started playing that and kind of got more interested in a little bit more complex playing.

I was in high school in the 1970s. High school went so bad for me. My mother she was going through a lot. And, I didn't understand. I tried to get away and I got her to sign me into the military at seventeen.

I was too young and I got in trouble for minor offences. It was the Army and I managed to get out honourably. I was in for ninety days – Basic and Advanced Individual Training. I was a damn good soldier. It was instilled in me – just the discipline from Basic and AIT. I'll go to work now spit-shined. That's the way I keep myself motivated.

I got out of the military mad. I didn't get into trouble right away. But, the job thing – I wanted to be a cop. And, me and my buddy – we both came up with that, because we were both gun fanatics. Well, he got accepted by the police department and I didn't.

And, this is the thing today that I stress to my kids. If you don't finish stuff, your self-esteem sucks. And, so he went down and put his application in. I looked at mine and it said: 'Have you ever smoked marijuana? Now, me and him had smoked marijuana together. When you get in an environment where you have to make split second choices – I made a bunch of wrong choices and that was just the beginning.

And so after that, I gravitated toward that street life and that was another wrong decision. Because ain't nothing out there but drama. It took three trips to prison for me to finally figure it out.

I wore nice clothes and I wore glasses. And, I had a smooth conversation, so girls always thought, 'Are you a pimp'? And, I was kind of smart, so I was always thinking, 'How does that dumb ass go to prison three times'. I didn't realise the second time around, 'I'm back in trouble again'. Never again!

I did two 2 year stints in prison and each time I got a break on them. And, the third one, they gave me eighteen years. It was for drugs. I had none but I was with guys who had them. They were under surveillance. When the cops surrounded us, I had nothing, but I knew I was going down. I had just asked the day before, I prayed, I said: 'God, I can't do this no more'. And, the next day that's what happened.

And, when I went before the judge, I copped out for the twenty. And, the judge said: 'You seem like an intelligent young man. Have you ever been seen by a psychologist or been in a mental institution?' I told her for drug abuse. She said: 'Mr. Jefferson, what's the longest you've ever been clean?' I told her 'One year and one day'. She said: 'I'm not going to give you twenty. I'm going to give you eighteen and I hope you come out and do something with your life'.

I ended up doing four years and nine months. I never got in trouble in there. The warden liked me. I was in the first gospel singing group – a cappella singing group. Ironically, one of the guys I went to Sunday school with was in there with me.

George Beto was the first prison. It's in Texas. The second I went to the real place, Ramsey, and they were stabbing people the first day.

But, because of my prison record and working with the warden, they moved me to the trustee camp. And the third time, I was in the field at 37 years old picking spinach. That's the lowest thing you can pick. And, I was kind of slow bucking trying to act like I was old. And, the boss told me: 'You don't need to be out here. You get down work hard for me, I'll get you out of here'. Next thing I know, I was a dog trainer. I wrote a song about it. They teach dogs to catch men. I got out in 1995. I'll never go back.

In jail, I met a guy named Mike. It's best I leave his name at that. He had an affinity for robbing banks. He was another one that helped me in music. The warden wouldn't let me relocate to Houston. So, Mike knew I was going to Austin and he told me to talk to Clifford Antone at Antone's Club when I got out. I talked to Clifford and he said: 'That's my buddy. My place is open to you anytime'. I played Antone's with Long John Hunter but didn't really know Clifford. I've played at Antone's on and off over the years. So, over the years I've been a barber, dog trainer, yard maintenance, and playing in a band.

I met folklorist Tary Owens when I got to Austin. He was real, real serious. He took me to the Navasota Blues Festival and then, when I heard my voice on tape, I thought that was pretty good.



Orange Jefferson, East Side Kings Festival in September 2014. Photo: Scott M. Bock.

Tary worked with guitar player Frank Robinson. He was Lightnin' Hopkins' cousin. He could play. I spent a lot of time with him and I was in the studio for the recording he did for Tary. I did a song called 'Redemption' on a CD Tary did called 'Texas Redemptors'. I plan on redoing that with a real church organ doing it. (1)

I did 'Hey Warden' with Eddie Stout at Dialtone Records and I want to redo that one. That's about an old guy I met the last trip to prison. He drove a tractor. The rumour has it that he got out and he don't have any place to go. And, he just went right down the street, stuck his hand in a paper sack and told people to give him the money – waited outside for them to come and get him. And, he went right on back. It's a little sad.

The latest harmonica player I got hold to is Magic Dick (2). That's the kind of music I used to listen to. Little Walter, I like him. I ate it up – Sonny Terry. I get what they was doing. With 'Hey Warden', I kept it real simple for the emotion. Not a lot of music needs to go with that. You need to just hear it cry.

Once I got to Austin, everybody treated me like they knew me. Everybody I met in the music world treated me like they knew me. It was like this was where I belonged. I ain't the best musician in the world but what I do, I feel. I guess that's what it is.

I got a regular band but by I have to go to work early. I get up at 4:30 in the morning. I'm a sweeper. It's pretty cool driving the street sweeping machine.

This lady made a movie about city workers. So, I got to play harmonica in that film 'The Trash Dance'. They flew me to D.C. You can download it. Because of my day job, I don't play a lot. I could get some gigs but I need matinee stuff – early stuff. That's why I don't just chase it. I've got the steady gigs. Like every year I do Mardi Gras here at Saint Ignatious Catholic School. I've been playing Eddie's East Side Festival here in Austin.

In the joint, I started writing. I've been writing songs twenty years and didn't know why I was writing. I have a book of lyrics. I have a stack of stuff. I have a new stack of stuff I wrote during my divorce. And, that's the real blues. Songs just come. If I don't write it, I lose it. Like when I'm in the sweeper, I have to write the idea down. I've got a little studio room at home and whenever it hits me I go in the room and work. I've got a piano in there and a guitar and a bass and I pick out the stuff on the guitar that I want my guitar player to play. My regular band is four guys and sometimes we pick up an extra. We do a lot of old stuff. We do Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters. We do my songs, of course, and I've got some stuff I'm working on. I play sax some of the time.

When I get on stage, I get electrified. I come to life. I want to do a full recording. I got 21 years I've been clean. I got to have money to make a record. When I retire, I'm going to go wild. I'll be at the perfect age and then I'll enjoy it. Then, I can devote full time to it because really you need that. And, you need money. When I retire, before I spend money on a new car, I'm going to book studio time and make a record. I've lived this shit. I sing '44 Blues', I really had a .44. I carried a .44. I'm a real bluesman. I'm a street guy. That's where I come from".

**Notes: (1): Texas folklorist Tary Owens died in 2003. He recorded Long John Hunter, Grey Ghost, T.D. Bell and Erbie Bowser, Snuff Johnson, and Frank Robinson and Guitar Curtis Colter. He co-produced the 'Lone Star Shoot-Out' album for Alligator Records which reunited Hunter with Lonnie Brooks and Phillip Walker. He also produced historical compilation albums as 'Ruff Stuff: The Roots of Texas Blues Guitar' (featuring Mance Lipscomb, Bill Neely and others) and 'Texas Piano Professors' (with Lavada 'Dr. Hepcat' Durst, Erbie Bowser and the Grey Ghost.**

**(2): Magic Dick is former J. Geil's band harmonica player, real name Richard Salwitz.**