

Bobbie "Mercy" Oliver: The Texas Blues King

Hillary Ragsdale
12th Grade
Linden-Kildare High School

Bobbie "Mercy" Oliver – the Texas Blues King

Bobbie "Mercy" Oliver's gritty determination to learn music allowed him to leave the cotton fields of East Texas behind and embark on a career as a blues musician. That same drive and determination enabled him to overcome numerous obstacles, personally and professionally. Through triumph of spirit, he faced every obstacle in his path to forge a successful career as a blues musician. Oliver has made it his mission in life to share the blues with everyone. He presents the blues to schoolchildren and often volunteers his time playing for various retirement home residents. Oliver's devotion to his craft and sharing the joy of the musical genre of the blues has earned him the distinction as the Texas Blues King.

Bobbie Oliver was born in Atlanta, Texas, in 1939, to Claude and Mary Lee Oliver. He was one of twelve children. The Oliver's earned their living as sharecropper. According to Oliver, "We were just poor sharecroppers working from farm to farm for white people on halves; that is half of whatever we raised was due to the owner of the farm for allowing us to live on his place and work his fields. We were only allowed one milk cow for the family; if we had more than one we had to sell them and keep only the one milk cow."¹ Oliver also recalled having to leave home to work the fields and staying away so long that the grass had grown so tall the family had difficulty seeing their home upon their return. "I went to school whenever the weather was bad or we could not work in the fields or haul hay. We had to eat whatever food we could raise or my father could kill

in the woods.”² Despite these hardships, the Oliver family grew up surrounded by love and made do with what they had.

Hardships were nothing new to Bobbie Oliver. As the oldest boy (there were three boys and nine girls), Bobbie had to assume many adult responsibilities to help his family. “I picked cotton, went to school when I could, and hauled hay after school. I also had to milk the cow before I went to school. I would catch the school bus and have to go to the back of the bus to sit, that is, if there were any empty seats. If there were vacant seats marked off for whites only all the rest of the black children stood at the back of the bus.”³ Such was the life of African-Americans in the rural South in the 1940’s. “Though he [Oliver] grew up with love all around him, he still came to know what the blues were – right down into the very core of his being.”⁴

The blues began to manifest themselves when Bobbie Oliver was around nine years old. After working in the cotton and hay fields all day, the family would gather to hear their father play the guitar. “Claude Oliver, with his guitar tuned to the “key of E,” played to express his own soul and to entertain his family. In Atlanta, Texas, 1939, that’s what people did. There was no TV, no movies – none of today’s modern technology – just old fashioned conversation and music made the authentic way.”⁵ Fate intervened one afternoon when a deliveryman, who was a guitarist, came to the family farm and began playing with Oliver’s father. This chance encounter would change Oliver’s life.

Bobbie grew up listening to his father’s version of the blues, a version he did not prefer for himself. He had heard Jimmie Reed on the family’s battery

operated radio and decided that he wanted to play guitar just like Reed. It was not until the arrival of the deliveryman that Oliver was able to fulfill his dream. "Dad sent me to the house to get his guitar. When I came back the man tuned it and began to play and sing just like Jimmie Reed. I was hooked on playing guitar and when I learned he played harmonica and sang I was determined I could teach myself."⁶

Bobbie Oliver needed determination and stamina because he did not have anyone to teach him to play the guitar or harmonica. He taught himself to "play on a cheap Sears & Roebuck guitar his sister ordered him (to the surprise of his father when the bill came)."⁷ Oliver learned to play by listening to records he bought with his own money. His first record purchase was "Oh Baby You Don't Have to Go" by Jimmie Reed. He recalled, "I would start inside the house and my dad would say, "Boy, go outside with that fuss" and then I would have to get on the ground because he [Oliver's father] said I was making too much racket keeping time with my feet."⁸ Oliver further recalled the fun he had trying to learn to play the guitar and the harmonica simultaneously. "I set out on a long journey and after many man and butt hours I finally managed to learn both the harmonica and the guitar."⁹

Bobbie Oliver credits his father as a direct influence on his decision to become a blues musician. "Had it not been for him and the driver of that feed truck I probably would not have become interested in the instruments of my choice, the harmonica and guitar, especially since I had tried to play trumpet in my high school band, never learning one note. But, I was good at faking it."¹⁰

Music and the love of his family helped Oliver survive the turbulent 1950's and 1960's. "Life in the fifties, sixties, and early seventies was really tough with all of that Jim Crow stuff."¹¹ The Jim Crow laws were enforced in the United States from 1876 until 1965. The laws mandated segregation of the races in all aspects of life. The Supreme Court had ruled in *Plessy Versus Ferguson* (1896) that states was not in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment as long as states provided "separate but equal facilities." The Jim Crow legacy was overturned in 1954 in the case of *Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka*. The Supreme Court ruled that mandated segregation was unconstitutional.

The Jim Crow laws and the subsequent Supreme Court rulings directly affected Bobbie Oliver. He recalled, "All black people had to stay in the back of everything; [they] couldn't even go in the front door of a white establishment. If you happened to be black, you had to address a white man or woman as Mr. or Mrs., say 'yes ma'am' or 'yes sir' or something bad would happen to you."¹² Black musicians hired to play for the night could not enter a business through the front door and were forced to enter through a rear exit. Life was difficult, but as Oliver would later recall, it "enabled me to become the man I am today."¹³

Anxious to experience new adventures in life, Oliver and his newly formed band, The Oliver Trio, left Texas as soon as he graduated from high school. "Someone told me I could make a lot of money in Chicago. What they failed to tell me was I would have to work three jobs plus gigging on the weekends in order to buy me a home and send my mother money to help pay for our home in Atlanta and to help her send my siblings to college."¹⁴ Oliver's band consisted of

his sister Mary on the bass, Cleo (his wife at that time) and himself on harmonica, guitar, and vocals. "I want to note that I taught my sister how to play bass one song at a time. We steadily gigged in the 'chittling' circuits of Chicago on weekends from the sixties to the early seventies."¹⁵ During a performance of the song "Scratch My Back" by Slim Harpo, Oliver was approached to sign a recording contract. "I was the only one that could play it ["Scratch My Back"] besides Slim. We were sitting in with a band and a producer heard us and he told us he could put us on a recording and have us on the radio within a month. I was young and inexperienced and decided we could not let our manager go to do the recording. I did not know we could keep our manager. That was the way I missed my opportunity to gain a recording contract. It also inspired me to start my own recording company, BEO Incorporated."¹⁶

The loss of the opportunity to sign a recording contract and a divorce were factors that influenced Oliver to return to Texas in the seventies. Disenchanted with the music business, Oliver set aside his guitar to work in his brother's air conditioning business in Marshall, Texas. Fate intervened in Oliver's musical life a second time when, while responding to a service call, he met a woman who would forever change his life, Eva. "Upon learning that I once had a blues band she was sold upon the idea of me starting another band after she heard me sing and play "I Know Its Wrong" by Jimmie Reed (Oliver's idol). She bought me a brand new red Washburn guitar and some Lee Oskar harmonicas. We bought new and used amps to begin with."¹⁷ Oliver also credits his greatest personal achievement, learning to read, to his wife Eva. With renewed purpose, Oliver,

with Eva by his side, embarked on a new journey with the blues. "They are still the blues but not so much the sad and unhappy lowdown blues. My blues are based on "Old School" blues with a slightly new twist. I sing happy blues because today I am free and happy, blessed to be alive, able to sing and entertain audiences."¹⁸

Filled with new enthusiasm Oliver formed a new band, Bobbie Oliver and the Jam City Revue, in 1996. He also began drawing on his life experiences as he composed and arranged a majority of the music the band began to play. "I write all of my music from all the experiences I have had during my 65 plus years in various aspects of my life. A writer is only as good as the things he or she knows about from experiences or something that was told to them and they dared to repeat."¹⁹ Oliver believes "the blues should stay around forever because they are the daddies of all other secular music. In order for them to survive, they must be played and heard throughout the nations."²⁰

Keeping the blues alive gave Oliver renewed energy. "Music legend Bobbie "Mercy" Oliver can be found hitting the stage at night. By day, he's teaching area school children the blues. 'I love kids,' he said. 'If there's anything I can do to make kids interested, I'm going to do it. That's how I got my start.'"²¹ During his performance at area schools, Oliver's wife Eva also gives students a history lesson on the blues. "Going into the schools to teach lessons on how the blues originated was an experience I enjoyed because the students were most interested in how the blues originated. It was an experience I enjoyed because the students were most interest in the blues and blues techniques. I emphatically

emphasized the fact that a person had to have had the blues or lived the blues in order to portray the blues in their real sense. Do you think working on Mr. So & So's farm, hauling hay and picking cotton for 50 cents a day wasn't the blues? I don't think so. It doesn't get any bluesier than that."²²

Bobbie Oliver also takes his musical talents to various blues festivals in Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and several other states. He was the "first musician to open the T-Bone Walker Blues Festival [Linden, Texas] ever, and this year was sponsored by the T-Bone Walker Estate."²³ On June 17, 2006, Bobbie Oliver & Jam City Revue was "the premiere band for the inaugural T-Bone Walker Blues Fest. Bobbie will be a regular featured performer at the T-Bone Blues Fest."²⁴ Oliver considers the honor of opening the T-Bone Walker Blues Festival as the most memorable event in Texas in which he has participated. "It meant so much to me because T-Bone was one of the founding fathers of the blues and to be born in the same county as he was ever so amazing. I was honored to be the very first artist on the show."²⁵ Oliver's participation in the T-Bone Walker Blues Festival is important because he is giving back to the county of his birth by allowing audiences to witness "old school" blues. "I am from the old school and I intend to be old school as long as I live to make music. I do pep mine up just a hair so it can be easily danced to."²⁶

Oliver also magnanimously donates his time by performing for various retirement homes. "I love to go play for the elderly in retirement homes. Just seeing the joy on their lovely faces truly means more to me than money. When I play and entertain ²⁷them, they move and clap their hands or dance thereby

getting some exercise. It is my desire if one day I live to be an old man someone will do the same for me.”²⁸

Oliver’s charming personality and electric stage presence captivate audiences. “They [Bobbie “Mercy” Oliver and Jam City Revue] know how to rock the house, and make the floor dance. I recommend investing in this [Oliver’s *Mississippi Mud* CD] as an essential collection of contemporary Blues.”²⁹

Reviews such as this provide testament to the legacy Bobbie “Mercy” Oliver is forging in the area of the Texas Blues. “It’s just not right to play the music and not know the history behind it. Bobbie knows everything about the blues and the masters that came before him. “You have to know where we’ve been in order to know where to go.”³⁰

Bobbie “Mercy” Oliver is a Texas treasure deserving honor. He rose from humble beginnings as a sharecropper’s son to earning the title King of the Texas Blues. He overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles to achieve his life’s dream of becoming a blues master/ambassador. His goal is “to keep the original blues alive.”³¹ Oliver has donated his time and energies to sharing his music with the masses. From school students to residents of retirement homes, Oliver finds great satisfaction in introducing or, in some cases, reintroducing individuals to the blues. Despite all the hardships, obstacles and joys in his 65 plus years of music Oliver is emphatic when he says, “You bet I would do it all over again if I had to. Music is the love of my life and my wife is second to it. I want to take these blues all over the world before my time is up. Yes, the close of my life is what I mean.”³²

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- ¹ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 29 January 2009.
 - ² Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 29 January 2009.
 - ³ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 29 January 2009.
 - ⁴ "A Man and the Blues." Bobbie Mercy Oliver. 6 Jan. 2009.
<http://www.bobbiemercyoliver.com/about.htm>
 - ⁵ "A Man and the Blues." Bobbie Mercy Oliver. 6 Jan. 2009.
<http://www.bobbiemercyoliver.com/about.htm>
 - ⁶ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 29 January 2009.
 - ⁷ "Bobbie Oliver and Jam City Revue." 2nd Annual T-Bone Walker Blues Fest. 15 June 2007.
 - ⁸ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 29 January 2009.
 - ⁹ "Bobbie Mercy Oliver: The Texas Blues King." 9 Jan. 2009.
http://www.locoloboevents.com/display_bio.php?id=10232
 - ¹⁰ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ¹¹ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ¹² Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ¹³ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ¹⁴ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 29 January 2009.
 - ¹⁵ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ¹⁶ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ¹⁷ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ¹⁸ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ¹⁹ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ²⁰ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ²¹ Ramirez, Shalina. "Catch the Blues at School." The Paris News 3 Mar. 2008.
 - ²² Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ²³ "Bobbie Mercy Oliver: The Texas Blues King." Jamwave. 9 Jan. 2009.
<http://www.jamwave.com/profileartistsextra.aspx?AID-2182>.
 - ²⁴ "Tourism-Art, Music, and Museums – bobbie "mercy" oliver." 6 Jan 2009.
<http://www.lindentexas.org/oliver.php>
 - ²⁵ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ²⁶ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ²⁷ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ²⁸ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ²⁹ "Mississippi Mudd." Mississippi Headlines & Political Notes. 6 Jan. 2009.
<http://www.mississippipolitical.com/bobbieoliver.htm>
 - ³⁰ "Bobbie Mercy Oliver." Daryl Hayott's Indie Radio Station. 29 Jan. 2009.
<http://rawindieradio.com/station-mercy/mercy.htm>
 - ³¹ Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 January 2009.
 - ³² Bobbie Mercy Oliver: The Texas Blues King. 9 Jan. 2009.
http://www.locoloboevents.com/display_bio.php?id=10232

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Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 9 Jan. 2009.
Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 23 Jan. 2009.
Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 29 Jan. 2009.
Bobbie Oliver. Personal Interview. 30 Jan. 2009.

Mr. Bobbie Oliver is the Texas Blues King. He was born in the rural East Texas town of Atlanta, Texas, to sharecropping parents. He offers a unique insight into the struggles African-Americans in the pursuit of their dreams. Limited print media exists on Mr. Oliver. The personal interview was used for a majority of the report as it is about Mr. Oliver and the information has been verified and elaborated on during the personal interview.

Ramirez, Shalina. "Catch the Blues at School." The Paris News 3
Mar. 2008.

This newspaper article was used because it was verification that Mr. Oliver takes the blues into the schools and teaches children its history as well as some techniques. It also shows the impact Mr. Oliver has on his local community as well as the state of Texas.

Secondary Sources:

Bobbie Mercy Oliver." Daryl Hayott's Indie Radio Station. 29 Jan.
2009. <http://rawindieradio.com/station-mercy/mercy.htm>

This site provided background information on Oliver's early life. All information contained in the article was verified in a personal interview with Mr. Oliver. Since little print media is available, this was a valuable source to use as the basis for forming questions to ask Mr. Oliver.

"Bobbie Mercy Oliver: The Texas Blues King. Jamwave. 9 Jan.
2009. <http://www.iamwave.com/profileartistsextra.aspx?AID-2182>.

This site gave an extended biography of Mr. Oliver. As there is very limited print media on Oliver's life this site was used as a basis to form questions for the personal interview conducted with Mr. Oliver

“Bobbie Oliver and Jam City Revue.” 2nd Annual T-Bone Walker Blues Fest. 15 June 2007

This was the official booklet given to patrons of the T-Bone Walker Blues Fest of which Mr. Oliver was the premiere performer. Mr. Oliver is one of the key performers of the festival, which is held in Linden, and provides evidence as to Mr. Oliver’s contributions to the community, the county, Texas, and surrounding states.

Bobbie Mercy Oliver: The Texas Blues King. 9 Jan. 2009.
http://www.locoloboevents.com/display_bio.php?id=10232

This site provided background information on Mr. Oliver and was used to help formulate questions to ask for the personal interview conducted over many days with Mr. Oliver. It helped to provide a base of information for Mr. Oliver and to questions to ask him regarding his experiences as a Texan and Texas Blues King.

“A Man and the Blues.” Bobbie Mercy Oliver. 6 Jan. 2009.
<http://www.bobbiemercyoliver.com/about.htm>

This site helped provide information into Mr. Oliver’s early life and the formation of his band. It was also used to draft questions to ask Mr. Oliver during the personal interview.

“Mississippi Mudd.” *Mississippi Headlines & Political Notes.* 6 Jan. 2009. <http://www.mississippipolitical.com/bobbieoliver.htm>

This site provided evidence that Bobbie Oliver’s appeal stretches beyond Texas and provided additional evidence of facts concerning Oliver’s life. It also analyzes his style of the blues and why Oliver should be included in any blues collection.

“Tourism-Art, Music, and Museums – bobbie “mercy” oliver.” 6 Jan 2009. <http://www.lindentexas.org/oliver.php>

This site was used because it is the official site with information concerning the T-Bone Walker Blues Festival held in Linden, Texas [Cass County]. Mr. Oliver was the premiere performer for the festival and is a native of Cass County. The article provided information on how Oliver affects the city of Linden and Cass County.