



1960s Austin Gangsters: Organized Crime that Rocked the Capital

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Timmy Overton of Austin and Jerry Ray James of Odessa were football stars who traded athletics for lives of crime. The original rebels without causes, nihilists with Cadillacs and Elvis hair, the Overton gang and their associates formed a ragtag white trash mafia that bedazzled Austin law enforcement for most of the 1960s. Tied into a loose network of crooked lawyers, pimps and used car dealers who became known as the “traveling criminals,” they burglarized banks and ran smuggling and prostitution rings all over Texas. Author Jesse Sublett presents a detailed account of these Austin miscreants, who rose to folk hero status despite their violent criminal acts.

1960s Austin Gangsters: Organized Crime that Rocked the Capital Details

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Bill Rodgers says

A fun read. Jesse did a great accumulating information through interviews and research, then putting it into this entertaining book.

Michelle Lancaster says

Texas history

Sublett, Jesse

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1960s Austin Gangsters: Organized Crime that Rocked the Capital is Jesse Sublett's history of the Overton Gang, "Austin's locally grown white trash mafia" (part of what is sometimes termed the "Dixie Mafia"). Tim Overton and his cohorts did their very best to control the criminal underground in Austin from approximately 1960 until 1968, when the gang went to trial on federal conspiracy charges of running an interstate bank robbery and prostitution ring. The Overton Gang of "safecrackers, pimps, drug dealers and Cadillac-obsessed hoodlums" did not content itself with Texas but went regional with "heavy connections to the Italian counterparts in the Big D, Cowtown, the Little Man in New Orleans, Biloxi, Oklahoma, Florida and Chicago."

It is evident that Sublett conducted many interviews and exhaustive research. He is fond of his subject and it shows. The profiles of the individuals involved are interesting and include backstory, exposing the "dysfunctional backgrounds" that undoubtedly contributed to their career choices. For these reasons, it is a particular shame that the book could have done with a more careful edit and copyedit. It is intermittently disjointed and sometimes difficult to follow.

There is plenty of humor here, sometimes dry, sometimes sardonic. "It's an important part of Austin history," said Nick Kralj, former club owner and longtime Austin backstage historian. "You always had a connection with the outlaws and the lawyers and the politicians...because they all like the same things." The author describes Corpus Christi as "the city on the Texas Gulf Coast named after the Son of God—ironically so, as in pre-European settlement times the area was inhabited by the Karankawa Indians, who were known to eat people."

Sublett has a colloquial style that borders on the lyrical, which makes sense when you learn that his Austin band, the Skunks, was inducted into the Hall of Fame. For example: "Even before the "Summer of Love" in 1967, you only had to drive down the Drag to see Austin's old, square corners melting into new, cooler shapes." And: "In the fall of '63, as Sean Connery showed Americans how slick double-zero agents committed government-sanctioned sabotage and murder, Dr. Timothy Leary was spreading the gospel of LSD, and Austin thug culture was still in an old school groove."

Austin Gangsters is an engaging cultural history of Austin's growing pains and class distinctions as it transformed from a "sleepy state capital and college town to the creative class/music mecca that we know today." While engaging, it is cluttered with minutiae: dates, street addresses, lists of items and amounts stolen, and details unnecessary to telling the story well. You may feel as if you need an organizational chart. There is even some rather startling conjecture involving JFK assassination theories. Austin Gangsters belongs firmly in the Truth is Stranger than Fiction category.

Originally published by Lone Star Literary Life.

Deadbeatgrandpajoe says

First off I picked up the book because the subject seemed interesting and The authors name was somewhat familiar from the Austin music scene.

I thought the book was good but not great. It was well researched, but could have used some editing.

One of my problems with it was he seem to insert himself into the story. Mentioning turning down a steak dinner with some former law man I don't feel was pertinent.

I feel this would've been much better if written by someone like T.J. English

Stephen Boiko says

Small slice of Austin's not so pristine history. Very informative.

Megdelasur says

Moved to Austin and fell in love with it while it was a small town masquerading as a city. It grew up while I lived there and did lose some of the small town feeling, but retained enough quirkiness to be a place you'd still fall in love with.

My love for the city was nothing like Sublett's, though. He was one of the old school, everyone knew everyone Austinites. The information, firsthand accounts and history was astounding. I can't believe these stories aren't part of the legend of the city, shared by all newcomers.

If you want to feel like you were part of the history of Austin and know what it was like in the 60s and 70s, read this book. You won't get a better account of how the city grew up. Sublett writes in a sort of train of thought that can be hard to follow. It's almost like a series of short stories that were put in a book without a strong-handed editor to give it an overall flow. Sublett is a powerful storyteller and the subject matter is fascinating.

Ronni sue winters says

I lived thru this era and had heard of the "Overton Gang" but had no idea of the depth of their crimes.

If this book is factual then everybody that lived thru this era should read the book. Being a 4th generation Austinite the history that is exposed in this book is fascinating to read. I heard of the Overtons, Hattie Valdez, the M & M Courts, La Grange chicken ranch, went to kindergarten with Rocky Ericson and loved the New Orleans club and the Armadillo World Headquarters. I had no idea that the Overtons and their gang were so widespread and had their fingers in so many muddy pies!! Recognizing a lot of the attorneys and judges names was a real eye opener!! I loved growing up in Old Austin and have a ton of super memories. Wonder if they ever went to Soap Creek Saloon? Remember the LAI fondly. Great read!!!

Kate Walker says

Not long ago, I headed up to Austin's great independent book store, Book People, to hear Jesse Sublett, semi-legendary Austin author, artist and musician, play a few songs and read a few pages from his new book, "1960's Austin Gangsters: Organized Crime That Rocked the Capital." I'm so glad I went. Jesse opened the reading with a musical performance of his hilariously morbid song, "Maryanne Won't Marry Me Till I'm Dead." He played a couple more songs and then poured us all a tall glass of carefully researched and well-told Texana. The object of his study is a gaggle of Austin gangsters; a group of blue-collar rednecks who burgle everything in sight.

The Overton Brothers are the gruesome twosome at the center of the story. They were big high school football stars, but losing the game that would have taken them to the championship crushes them, and they take a nefarious path after high school. They rub shoulders, literally, with Charles Whitman, notorious UT Tower shooter, playing poker. Charles runs up a debt with one brother, and escapes retribution only because the guy he owes the debt to ends up in jail. In an odd way, its too bad the gangster did go to jail. Had he been free, he might have killed Charles and prevented the massacre.

One gentleman in the audience at the reading brought up the topic of the JFK conspiracy. Everyone behind him started chuckling under their breath, including me. Then Jesse mentioned that his book did in fact have an appendix on the topic. "The Overton's in JFK Conspiracyland." We all flip to the back of the book and start reading. Oh boy. Jesse's book was just enough introduction to the JFK conspiracy to send me running way down the road. I guess that's one of the dangers of life in Texas. If the guns and the floods and the gangs don't get you, the conspiracy theory vortex will.

Maybe it was all the free beer and wine on hand, but there was a lot of conversation as people lined up to get their book signed. People flipping through their books, looking at the photographs, chatting about their connection to the story. I ended up meeting a woman ahead of me in line. We got onto the topic of Jesse's memoir, "Never the Same Again." One part of his fascinating life story was his miraculous recovery from a very serious illness. The woman in front of me mentioned, humbly, "I was his doctor." I told her, "You're a hero!" She demurred. When it was her turn to have her book signed, she asked him to address it to her medical staff. He signed the book, "To my gang." I thought that was really cool.

I've read a few of Jesse's books, including his crime fiction and an interactive e-book "Gravedigger's Blues" filled with his wonderfully lurid artwork; a pastiche of collage, photography and painting. But my favorite of his books is the memoir. I picked it up and read it straight for two days till I was done. It's a gripping account of his remarkable life, including a terrible true crime story of his own. We also get a first hand history of the 1970's Punk Rock scene in Austin, of which he was a central figure. Sublett was the lead singer and bass player for The Skunks, a trio also featuring Austin musicians "Fazz" Eddie Munoz on guitar and Billy Blackmon on drums. Later, Jon Dee Graham joined when Munoz left to join the Plimsouls. The book

delivers an on-the-ground, up-close look at life in a band. I imagine many musicians would relate to his account of playing gig after gig, building a rep, then heading out to New York to get more exposure. Lots of gritty days on the road in an RV. Surviving on lettuce soup, a recipe from Patti Smith, and plenty of cheap booze. There's a really sad scene where the band gets all their equipment stolen. And then a funny scene, in which Lydia Lunch tries to put the moves on Jesse. She purrs, "I like you tall Texan boys. You're so cute." That was a LOL from me. Beyond the music, we also learn about his writing career and eventually, parenthood. But the beating heart of it all is Lois Richwine, his wife of 30 years. "Never the Same Again," is about as moving portrait of a marriage as you'll ever read. If you want to see what a lifetime romance looks like, there you go.

Getting back to the Austin Gangsters, it is certainly a colorful tale, told with Sublett's signature musical writing style. I liked the women in this true story the best; the molls and madames. We definitely need a whole book, or a movie, (paging Quentin Tarrantino) on Beverly Oliver, former moll, self-proclaimed "Babushka Lady" of JFK-assassination intrigue, and born again Christian. She survived the Dixie Mafia and is now a traveling entertainer on the End Time Revival and Revelation Bible Conference circuit. She is just about too good to be true. Jesse researched the heck out of the story, laid out the history, and apparently all this insanity really did happen, believe it or not.

Now, for the second printing, (or would that be the third?) we need another appendix on the shoot-out at the bikini bar, the motorcycle mafia, 2015 edition. Somehow the state keeps churning out these scuzzy, lowdown losers, but God help us all, they make for a fascinating study.

Carolyn Appleton says

In March, I happened to spy a notice about a supper gathering of Austin writers being held at Threadgill's on North Lamar. I was curious, and having recently returned to Austin after being away some 20 years, I was also eager to visit a favorite haunt from my early Austin days. Included in the group of writers reading from their books was musician and author Jesse Sublett. It was a delightful event, and I purchased a copy of the book from Jesse who was kind enough to autograph it.

"1960s Austin Gangsters" is thoroughly researched, and I can't help but think it should be turned into a movie. Jesse has infused the book with his subtle sense of humor, which makes reading it all the more enjoyable. Even though the crimes he describes are shocking, his humor helps tamp them down.

As I have been combing through the streets of Austin remembering my old hangouts the past several months, I enjoyed his descriptions of crimes scenes. For instance, "Today, there's not much to see in the 4700 block of Harmon Avenue, an ugly stretch of pavement running parallel to the west side of IH-35, unless you're on your way to a nude modeling studio, cheap motel or the Spy Shop, but in 1964, it was the focus of an intense undercover stakeout."

The book traces the nefarious activities of a group of criminals based in Austin across the city, across Texas, and into other states. Jesse's descriptions are rich and evocative as well as entertaining. I burst out laughing when he wrote, "The loot from the Bertram bank, mostly in coins, weighed down the trunk of his Ford so much that on the ride back, [he] had to strain to see over the hood." The criminals Jesse discusses have no shame; in fact, they enjoyed their work quite a bit.

Suffice it to say, this is an enjoyable and genuinely enlightening work. I will never think of The University of

Texas at Austin football team in the same way again, UT Tower "shooter" Charles Whitman, former Austin Police Department chiefs, nor some of our better known musicians, honky tonks and attorneys. And, having been skeptical of JFK assassination conspiracy theories, Jesse has opened my mind just a tad in that regard. I am glad I read "1960s Austin Gangsters," and I think you will enjoy it, too.

Peter says

A nice reminder of Austin's once obvious seediness, now almost completely papered over by hucksterish consumerism. It's obvious that Sublett knows this material and he gives us some good details - Charles Whitman butchering a deer in a shower in the Goodall Wooten dorm, a glimpse into when whites lived in the Chalmers Courts PJs - but this book was obviously slapped together. It desperately needs an editor, 200 additional pages, and an index.

J.K. George says

I'd give this a "2" rating based on writing quality, organization, and coherency, but since it pertained to Austin, and several of my old-line book club members were there, and even went to Austin High School with "Timmie" Overton and others, the discussions were lively and brought the story out in additional lurid detail. So ... I'll give it a "3."

There are a ton of photographs, and the story seems to go on and on. One wonders just how such a low-life group could continue to continue, with serial bank robberies, etc. Finally, Tim Overton is murdered by a fellow low-life. This book certainly does nothing to make one feel comfortable about the quality of law enforcement in the area at the time. At least the gang helped the sales of gaudy new Cadillacs for a while.
