

# Mavis Staples A Fresh Awakening

Photo/Shirley Mae Owens

BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

It's been a long, rewarding journey for Mavis Staples—gospel Queen Supreme. It all began one rainy night in 1951 when the eager Staple Singers family, whose repertoire amounted to two untested songs, made their debut at The Holy Trinity Baptist in Chicago. Fifty-three years on, Mavis, now a twenty-five year veteran soloist of social conscience, is as good a trouser as she will ever be. Her testimonial moans, shouts, squeals and baritone colorations are still in place, as is her trademark stance of defiance in the face of adversity—her fist planted firmly on her hip and the “worried” drifts into exalted ecstasy, the alchemy of turning sorrow into joy.

Her new domestic CD collection – “Have A Little Faith” (Alligator 4899) - is her eighth and perhaps most impressive solo outing to date. She gives songs like “Step into the light” a swamp-dipping and she lays all of her “trick-bag” on the transcendently beautiful “God is not sleeping.” In addition, she gives a clever resurrection to a “Dying man’s plea” and applies a cool-groove to the remake of “Will that circle be unbroken” of 1960 on Vee Jay Records.

Mavis clearly demonstrates that first and foremost she is still a “message singer,” not just one whose songbook is tied firmly to the expected church traditions and its own pulpit-applied view of the world. Mavis belongs to all.

A stroke of luck has showered upon us a retrospective look at the Staple singers with the release of “The Ultimate Staple Singers – A Family Affair, 1955-1984” (British Kent 2-240.) On this double disc dip one can once more enjoy the anguished, tortured pipes of Mavis soul-searching her way through the reverberating firmament on the family’s first Vee Jay chart-topper, “Uncloudy day” (1956). Then wonder at the tear-sodden “Too close,” again from the Vee Jay classic period (1960). Moving on eleven years, we can catch “Respect yourself” (Stax), an indelible opus Mavis always includes in her live performances. As a bonus, the double includes for the first time on CD the original “Sit down servant” with Evelyn Gay on piano and Pops relegated to a rhythm guitar background. This was label-copied as “You won’t sit down” by United Records who released it as the group’s first waxing over Christmas 1953. Also included is the lilting soul anthem “Why” (am I treated so bad), cut for the outfit’s third Epic album in 1967.

Mavis, the integral Staples’ first lead, helped carry black country gospel over into the traditional folk realm before the inevitable metamorphosis into soul, funk and disco, where the group rode the cash-cows of happening music.

But in the early 1990s things changed. Pops was drawn to his roots. As a consequence, he waxed the elementary Kershaw session for Strange Roots in 1995. This gave us imaginative Delta guitar and vocal impressions of Charlie Daniels’ “Older woman” and the song most beloved by Dr. Martin Luther King, the aforementioned “Why” (am I treated so bad.)

Mavis preaching the gospel of love at the 2004 Poconos Blues Festival



Pops’ haunting Delta guitar playing had its beginnings on the upper plantation of the Liston apportionment of William O. Dockey’s acreage around Drew, Mississippi during the 1920s. Charlie Patton worked Liston’s lower plantation. Both often greeted each other at the commissary. Although Pops listened to many topical country blues artists at local juke joints, it was Patton’s guitar signatures that exerted the most influence on his style as it evolved into its own later on. Life was hard in every way down on the farm.

After a brief courtship, Pops married Oceola Ware. The couple was set on raising a family but wanted to give their offspring all the advantages and opportunities country life had not afforded them. The couple’s first child, daughter Cleotha, was born April 11, 1935. By now Pops had saved enough money and was ready to head for greener pastures, namely Chicago where his brother told him working folk could make a better life. Pops moved to Chicago and labored in the stock yards, packing plants and steel mills.

By late 1936 Pops had moved his wife and baby to the home of his brother, a minister. His brother introduced him to the Trumpet Jubilees who were affiliated with his church. Pops sang third lead. The couple moved to a place of their own in 1938. Second daughter Yvonne was born on October 23rd that same year. Mavis came along on June 10th 1939 and Purvis, the only son, followed a year later. The late Cynthia Marie, the Staples’ last child, was born just when the U.S. entered World War II.

Pops’ tenure with the Trumpet Jubilees was not going so well. Members began making the flimsiest excuses not to show up for rehearsals. It was then, after buying a Kay model guitar at a pawn shop, Pops decided to form a family group to end his frustrations. Fireside sing-alongs were a popular past-time among Christian families in the Southern states. Pops gathered his brood around the fireplace and began teaching them

songs. The family’s initial tryout that wet night at The Holy Trinity Baptist was an overwhelming success. To aid in finding bookings at local ministries, the Staples recorded “These are they” and “Faith and grace”—the only two songs they had fully conceived, issued as a vanity pressing at Royal Recordings. Through the efforts of Evelyn Gay and Aunt Katie the family—Pops, Mavis, Cleotha and Purvis—were able to secure their first recording contract with Leonard Allen at United Records. Pops, a natural-born accountant and legal mind, always negotiated the best possible deals for the family. During her childhood, Mavis was challenged with two life-threatening incidents. The first was an accident; a swallowed tack had lodged itself in her throat. She spent many days on her back wait-

ing for the obstacle to pass naturally through her system. An operation was thought a risky measure. For months, she complained of a pain in her side. The family thought little of it until a sudden spasm lead to surgery for a burst appendix.

Mavis had a stubborn streak and the will to do whatever she pleased. She was often reprimanded for singing “The turkey is a funny bird” around the house. At the age of six, Mavis spent a while with her grandmother in Mississippi where she started schooling. One of the most popular blues and rhythm recordings at that time was Ella Johnson’s “Since I fell for you” on Decca. Mavis loved the song so well she sang it all over her grandmother’s neighborhood when she walked to and from school. She wound up singing the song at the school’s variety show after which she endured a good whipping from her grandmother. Mavis complained to her mother in Chicago which led to her immediate return. Mavis recorded “Since I fell for you” for her “Only For The Lonely” Stax album in 1972.

When she was twelve the family had acquired a regular fifteen minute radio spot over W.T.A.Q. Soon, Mavis was switched from background tenor to bass and second lead behind Pops, parts Purvis had sung. Mavis did not want to switch and threw a tantrum. Only the threat of a whipping made her comply. Yvonne took Cleotha’s place in the group for a short while. Purvis quit to set up his own management company in the early 1970s.

The Staple Singers were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1999, a year before Pops’ demise and Cleotha’s fatal battle with Alzheimer’s. The Staples called it quits shortly thereafter. Mavis, with Yvonne taking care of her personal needs, is out blazing trails from coast to coast as we speak. She will sing herself up to glory one day and we will hear the rolling thunder as she takes her place alongside the angels. You can bet she will not be throwing a tantrum then. Copyright © 2004 Opal Louis Nations