Swing low the STAPLE SINGERS

NOTE: The beginning portion of the following liner notes are modified from an article by Opal Louis Nations for the April 1998 issue of Blues & Rhythm magazine called The Staple Singers: Early Days. This part of the notes deals with the influence of the blues on Pops Staples' music. The final section of the notes were written in January of 2014 to discuss Uncloudy Day.

The Staple Singers began with Roebuck Staples, born the seventh of fourteen Staples children in the tiny rural Delta town of Winona, Mississippi, one hundred miles south of Memphis on December 28, 1915. Bill Ellis, a journalist for the Memphis Commercial Appeal, insists that Roebuck was born a year earlier, however. Raised by kin in Drew, MI on Liston Sage's upper cotton and corn plantation apportionment between Greenwood and Clarksdale, the young Roebuck was pulled out of school at age eight to work in the cotton fields and potato patches of William O. (Will) Dockery (1865-1936) in Sunflower County. Roebuck earned himself the handsome sum of ten cents a day.

Dockery is described in Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow's book on Charlie Patton (*King of the Delta Blues*, Rock Chapel Press, 1988) as an austere six-foot abstentionist of Scottish descent. The Dockery plantation consisted of nearly ten thousand acres which Dockery himself cleared and drained. He had acquired the parcel for "something around" five dollars an acre.

Liston Sage was the Staples family landlord from whom they rented living accommodation. Warren Staples, Roebuck's father, owned all the livestock. While the Staples were residents of the Listons' upper apportionment, blues singer/guitarist Charlie Patton lived in the lower acres. The Staple Singers' Rosebud Agency Web site biography asserts that Roebuck's earliest exposure to music came from a traditional, inspirational source. "The first music that I listened to was a cappella singing in the churches. I was always into gospel right from a boy on up. I got into blues stuff after the gospel when I got to be twelve, thirteen, fifteen years old."

In his 1982 article "Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues" (U. of California at Berkeley), Dr. David Evans states that some of Roebuck's brothers played guitar around Drew. Roebuck insists that his early musical tastes were influenced by people like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Ida Cox. "Those were the ladies I liked to hear," Evans quotes Patton saying. "I heard some of the finest blues singers, Barbecue Bob (Hicks) and Charlie 'The Masked Marvel' Patton. And records by people like blind Lemon Jefferson, Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim and Blind Boy Fuller."

Roebuck told Bill Ellis that Dockery had a big general store to service the needs of both the upper and lower Liston Sage plantations. "We'd all meet at the general store about the first of the month," says Roebuck. "That's the way we had to live. We'd get a month's supplies on credit. That's where I met Patton. We sat out in front of the store on a big porch, and I watched him play. That's when I swore I'd play guitar someday."

In an interview with Pete Welding conducted by Leonard Watkins, Welding says he knew Roebuck well and wanted to record him singing blues but he would never consent to the making of blues recordings. "He would sit around and do Charley Patton songs." He goes on to say that Roebuck learned to play guitar from Charlie Patton. Dr. David Evans believes that Roebuck, although impressed with Patton's work, was probably influenced directly by Willie Lee Brown, one of Patton's many disciples. To be fair on Patton, Roebuck admired Patton's many Paramount gospel recordings cut almost as early as his blues output. Under the pseudonym Elder J. J. Hadley, Patton recorded "Prayer of Death (Parts 1 and 2)." On "Prayer of Death," Patton gets his guitar to talk by making the instrument preach the minister's prayer. This early masterpiece must have had some impact on the young

Roebuck, as some of his later Vee Jay recordings do at times evoke a similar atmosphere.

Even so, Patton played spirituals with a knife. Roebuck did not. Willie Lee Brown, born August 6, 1900 in Clarksdale, worked on the Jim Yeager Plantation near Drew. Brown frequently played guitar with Patton on the Dockery plantation. According to Paul Oliver in his book *The Story of the Blues* (Chilton, 1969), "Brown possessed a rasping, abrasive voice and had developed a dramatic guitar technique." It is likely that the knee-high Roebuck saw Brown perform and might have memorized a few pointers. Brown's use of colorful, dramatic effects on the guitar certainly must have stayed in Roebuck's mind.

Roebuck definitely encountered Chester Arthur Burnett, a.k.a. Howlin' Wolf, who worked as a child on the Young and Myers Plantation in Ruleville, just south of Drew. Burnett played at hops, suppers and fish frys in the Drew area and must have impressed Roebuck considerably. Roebuck says "Howlin' Wolf used to come through and stand out on the street and play right at the farm depot. Folks would pitch nickels and dimes. Out of all the blues singers, he was my idol." After both had moved North to Chicago, they would wind up living two blocks from each other.

As for Muddy Waters' influence on Roebuck Staple's music, the former stuck pretty close to home, the Stovall-Clarksdale area, during the 1920s and '30s. Roebuck might have made the trip to Clarksdale to see Waters perform in a juke joint, but apart from the occasional gig with Scott Bohanna, Waters spent most of his time plowing fields and planting crops. It is most likely that the Waters influence came later, after Roebuck had moved to Chicago in the mid 1930s. You don't have to try very hard to detect that "Delta stink" in the Staples' sepulchral sound.

Swing Low Sweet Chariot was the Staple Singers' third and final release for the Vee Jay label. Material was drawn from five sessions, covering 1958 through 1960. The earliest of these, January 9, 1958, brought us "Let's Go Home" and "This May Be the Last Time." "Let's Go Home" seemed to be a popular and steady favorite of the folks who ran Vee Jay as they included it on all four of the group's albums (three studio and one compilation). In this instance here, "Let's Go Home" is an arrangement of "Get Right Church And Let's Go Home," a song first recorded by a black artist in 1929 by the Empire Jubilee Quartet on Victor. "Get Right Church" has been recorded

by many artists, notably Rev. Gary Davis and the Dixie Hummingbirds. The moaning "This May Be the Last Time" was also recorded back in 1945 by the Deep River Boys, and as This May Be Your Last Time" by Rich Amerson five years on. All this indicates a lengthy vintage.

From the August 19, 1959 session comes the joyous "Good News" which was probably inspired by Brother Son Bond's reading of "Ain't That News" recorded in Chicago in the early 1930s. The second song from this date is the funereal "The Day Is Past And Gone." The first known black recording of this was cut by The Biddleville Quartet back in 1929. Roebuck's arrangement of course is entirely idiosyncratic.

The remainder of the album was culled from the January 20, 1961 session, unfortunately their very last before waxing briefly for Mike Hanks' Detroit-based D-Town imprint. The seven songs included the seasonally jovial "Born in Bethlehem," which incidentally was also recorded by the Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham in 1950 and the Five Sons of Strangers on Lance before that.

One of the album's highlights is the impassioned Mavis interpretation of "Stand By Me," a song whose origins probably date back to the old spiritual days. The first black artist recording goes back to 1928 when Hattie Parker and the Pace Jubilee Singers had a go at it for Victor. Its secular, dissimilar version has recently gained a new life when Mark Johnson chose it for "Playing For Change" (Hear Music 31130-00), a 'songs around the world' collection.

The sorrowful "I've Been Scorned" or "I've Been Buked + I've Been Scorned" dates way back to the old spirituals when college choral groups like the Tuskegee Institute Singers recorded it for Victor in 1916. Praise be given to Roebuck for not straying too far away from the original intent of the song.

The eerie "Sit Down Servant" or "Sit Down And Rest Awhile" began as a song-sermon, which means a sermonette would be rendered first by a preacher and the singer or soloists or congregation would follow with their voices. Two early prime examples are that of Rev. J.M. Gates & His Singers on OKeh from 1926 and Rev. J.C. Burnett with sisters Granger and Jackson on Columbia from 1929.

"Two Wings" is again another Heavenly Gospel Singers standard, but it is the electric guitar evangelist Elder Utah Smith who is the best remembered connection to the song. This is because the Sister Rosetta Tharpe version is more closely attributed than the rearranged Staples version. The Work Brothers' song "Swing Low" is beautifully arranged by Roebuck and takes on quite different shadings. One of the oldest Afro-American versions was by the Dixie (Pace) Jubilee Singers for Brunswick in 1924, but it has remained unreleased to this day. Other released versions date back to an even earlier time. Most were recorded by large ensembles sprinkled with a few smaller jubilee quartets. Finally, "Calling Me," which seems largely a Roebuck construction, is another joyous, jumping, jubilee-sounding song.

Despite the fact that the Staples quit Vee Jay only a short time after the album's release, it did very well and is perhaps the best received collection of the three. Charts like "Stand By Me," "Swing Low" and This May Be the Last Time" find the Staples at the peak of their form. Mavis was never better. 1961 also marked the group's twelfth anniversary at Chicago's own Marty Fayer's McCormicks Place. This was a weekend performance following an amazing Channel 7 appearance on "Marty's Morgue."

- Opal Louis Nations

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All photos courtesy of Opal Louis Nations
A Mississippi Records/Change/Yeti Records coproduction