

August 29, 2010----

The voice of Mavis Staples has more dimension than any other contemporary singer. Like a butterfly in a garden, it can be difficult to capture. There's a lifetime commitment to gospel, a folk music ethic, the soulful beacon of the civil rights movement and echoes of pop.

Staples embarked on a solo career in 1969 with a self-titled solo album for Stax Records, produced by Steve Cropper, who dressed up the music (especially with a scorching version of the Dionne Warwick hit "A House Is Not a Home"). Prince later brought her funk. Ry Cooder stripped down the sound in 2007's "We'll Never Turn Back."

But producer Jeff Tweedy heard something that has escaped others: the heartbeat of an American journey.

You don't need to adorn these truths.

Staples, 71, releases "You Are Not Alone" on Sept. 14 on Anti-Records. The 13-song album was recorded last winter at the Wilco loft on the Northwest Side. Tweedy understood how to frame Staples' voice and let it breathe in a landscape of empathetic collaborators.

Wilco's Patrick Sansone plays keyboards and Chicago MVPs Kelly Hogan and Nora O'Connor contribute background vocals. Tweedy wrote two songs for the project: the gospel-folk title track and "Only the Lord Knows," filled with rich hooks reminiscent of early '70s radio of the Watts 103rd Street Band and/or the Winstons ("Color Him Father").

"Voices are what's most immediately affecting about the Staple Singers records," Tweedy said during a conversation with Staples in the studio kitchen. "Mavis' voice in particular and Pops' voice. But also the economical use of everything else: deceptively simple guitar playing and a clear presentation of everything. I like that a lot."

And Tweedy put it into play.

The edgy "Only the Lord Knows" is an example of how Tweedy created room for Staples' voice to move up and down and all around.

Staples asked, "Remember the song Pops wrote after Hank Aaron hit number 755 and broke Babe Ruth's record?"

She started singing the scat/hip-hop wordplay of "Whicha' Way Did It Go?," which Stax Records released as a 45: "... Which-a-way, which-a-way did it go?..." Then

she switched to Tweedy's line, "When I get feelin', hurtin' and reelin'..."

"This song sounds like something Pops wrote!"

Tweedy added, "It's a riff I had an idea for. Then I stole some of Mavis' and Yvonne's her sister conversations to fill it in: 'I talked to my deacon'. It's something to sing about right now. Especially when someone pretends to have all the answers and has ruled out any other possibility. At that point, they are people to be avoided."

- - -

"You Are Not Alone" also includes Pops Staples' traditional "Downward Road," a stark take of Randy Newman's "Losing You" and a deeply convicted version of Allen Toussaint's "Last Train." Tweedy's father worked for 43 years in the Alton & Southern railroad switching yard near downstate Belleville.

"We used everything we recorded," Tweedy explained. "If something wasn't working, we didn't finish it."

Staples delivers the universal goods with a measured, moody take of John Fogerty's "Wrote a Song For Everyone." Fogerty is a longtime champion of Roebuck "Pops" Staples.

After Pops Staples died in December 2000, Fogerty told me, "Pops' guitar is the earliest guitar sound I remember. We had a rhythm-and-blues radio station out of Oakland, and on Sundays, they'd play gospel. That's where I heard Pops.

"The sound of that guitar was -- and still is -- one of the spookiest things I've ever heard. When I met Pops, I told him there were a few of my songs that had his guitar sound all over them, such as 'Born on the Bayou.' He was much too modest to think he influenced anybody."

Tweedy said, "It's a strange song in the Creedence catalog. It sounds more like the Band, and with Mavis singing with the Band 'The Weight', that perked up my ears. It's right in her wheelhouse on that level, but it's a great song message-wise: 'I wrote a song for everyone but I couldn't even talk to you.' A lot of people feel like that."

- - -

Staples and Tweedy enjoyed recording in the comfort zone of their hometown.

"But this is still not the typical studio people would walk in and say, 'I know what to do here,'" Tweedy explained. "You have to be a band that can play live. There's not a lot of separation or isolation booths. You have to be able to put in the air what you want it to sound like. Lots of people don't do that. They put things on one at a time and hope they sound good when they're mixed together."

Producers who work with artists that have Staples' legacy can be enamored by using vintage equipment -- old microphones, Ampex reel-to-reels and mixers that warm the sound.

"We're not purists," Tweedy said. "I prefer a lot of older gear, but mostly I prefer simple gear. Everything is a tool. There's an infinite palette with Pro Tools, but we keep it simple in the way you would use a recorder. We'd record the basic track on tape and finish it in the computer.

"Limitations are always good for creativity."

- - -

Tweedy met Staples backstage in 2007 after she recorded "Live: Hope at the Hideout" at the esteemed Chicago music room. "I left there saying if they were ever serious about letting me help make a record, well, that sounded like fun," Tweedy recalled.

Staples countered, "I was familiar with Wilco. We decided to meet and have lunch at Orly's in Hyde Park. He let me into his life, I let him into my life. He knew the Staple Singers and that was surprising to me. We talked 2œ hours. I saw that he was a family man and you know how Pops was about family. That was it."

A couple weeks later, Tweedy invited Staples to the Wilco loft to hear a dozen songs he had gathered. "He played songs from the Golden Gate Quartet," Staples said. "I go, 'Tweedy, you're taking me back to my childhood. These songs are older than me.' They were a capella, and Pops played them for us when we were kids."

Tweedy looked across the kitchen table and told Staples, "I thought that was a good sign that I'd picked some songs that Pops had played on 78s."

The gospel conviction manifests itself on the record's close-out track, a sterling medley of Prof. Alex E. Bradford's "Too Close To Heaven" (with Donny Gerrard of Staples' touring band on lead, with Staples, Hogan and O'Connor on background vocals) and Staples taking over to lead Brad Pathway's "I'm on My Way to Heaven Anyhow." The dovetail to the heavens is a perfect conduit for Staples' journey, ranging from the grit of a Mississippi field to the praiseful stars of the church.

Tweedy asked Staples, "You know what Spencer said about that song?"

Staples wondered aloud what Tweedy's 14-year-old son thought of the gospel tribute.

Tweedy continued, "We listened to the original the other day driving around. He said, 'It makes the hair on my arms stand up just as much as the new one.' You made it so a lot of other people can hear how great that song is."

Staples was not alone in that mission of deliverance.

THE WORKING RELATIONSHIP: MAVIS AND JEFF:

Mavis Staples and Jeff Tweedy are two of the most prolific figures on the American roots music scene.

What did they learn on making "You Are Not Alone" that they can apply to future projects?

"To me, its just encouraging to be able to work with someone as great as Mavis Staples and not feel like I'm messing things up," Tweedy said. "That's something you need to learn. I don't know if before these sessions if I had the confidence that would be the case. That was important. I learned the Wilco loft studio works for other people. This is the first time I've worked with other people than Wilco here.

"Its good to work with people that have recorded records for a long, long time. Standing in the same room and hearing Mavis sing into the air has allowed me to go back and listen to not just Staple Singers records, but other records from that time and feel like I can get more inside them -- which is what my whole life has been about. I care about records so much. No matter how much I know about how the music is recorded, I've always pictured records as being performances, something really happening in a room. I'm able to envision that better after seeing how Mavis works and what it sounds like without it coming through electricity, speakers, stuff like that.

"That is priceless to me."

In a career that dates back 60 years this year to the formation of the Staple Singers, Staples said she has never had food catered at a session.

"Tweedy had a caterer every day!" Staples reported. "Lasagna. Mashed potatoes. Macaroni and cheese. Then we started telling him what we wanted. He made the most beautiful salads." Staples looked over her right shoulder into the studio, lined with an army of guitars and said, "Tweedy would be over there setting up and we could smell the food. We were lickin' our chops. And he'd go, 'Nobody gets to eat until this song is finished!' So we would jump on it and not make any mistakes so we could get back in the kitchen to eat."

Tweedy: "Hungry takes are good takes."

Staples: "And another thing I've never seen in a session was a TelePrompter. Normally my lyrics are on a music stand. The TelePrompTer was the best. It was also good to have the band I've been working with the past three years to be playing on the record. Tweedy saw that when I played the Hideout. They know me

and I know them, so these songs were right on time. And Tweedy is funny, he just comes with stuff. You know you're going to get your tickle on. The first thing I asked him today was what he thought about the pigeons pooping on those guys Kings of Leon."

And what did he say?

Tweedy: "When we were starting out, we considered it a luxury when a pigeon would shit on our stage. I still don't understand it. How can you walk offstage in front of a bunch of people? The show must go on, that's the way it used to be. I can think of 1,000 things worse that have happened to me. That's a lesson they're going to learn. It means a lot to people when you walk offstage. I think we've only canceled one show in our whole career. I was in rehab. That's a good reason. That had to happen."