



Mavis Staples
Feb. 22, 2002

[Chicago Sun-Times reporter Dave Hoekstra recounts his experience as a first-time writer and producer on the Chicago Stories documentary "The Staple Singers." Hoekstra's deep respect for the group - headed by late patriarch Roebuck "Pops" Staples - is rooted in the Staples' dedication to both the civil rights movement and their art.]

By Dave Hoekstra

The Staple Singers are jewels in the crown of goodwill. Over the past 18 years I have discovered the many genuine dimensions of the Chicago-based family that always sang with a message.

In 1984, I interviewed patriarch Roebuck "Pops" Staples in his Calumet City apartment for the Suburban Sun-Times. I wrote his obituary in 2000. And over the years at the Sun-Times I profiled lead singer Mavis Staples and wrote about the family's role in the civil rights movement, in Chicago's gospel community and their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

These stories evolved into a friendship that led to the making of a documentary on the Staple Singers, which I produced and co-wrote with Jamie Ceaser, another longtime friend. The documentary, part of the "Chicago Stories" series.

The half-hour program includes rare footage of the Staples and interviews with family members Pops, Mavis, Pervis and Yvonne, as well as Harry Belafonte, Jerry Butler, Gene Chandler, Bob Dylan, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Chicago radio veteran Herb Kent, Natalie Merchant, gospel legend Albertina Walker and gospel star BeBe Winans. It's narrated by Grammy-winning musician and vocalist Bonnie Raitt, who collaborated with Pops on his "Peace to the Neighborhood" album.

It's an impressive list of people.

Not one person we approached to participate turned us down. It is a testimony to the universal admiration for the Staple Singers.

The family has taken their message of compassion and peace to Washington, D.C., Asia and throughout Chicago. In 1976, the Staples were to appear at a theater in Johannesburg, South Africa. When family patriarch Roebuck "Pops" Staples heard that blacks were allowed to sit only in the balcony, he refused to play. The concert was moved to a soccer field in Soweto, marking the first time blacks and whites sat together in a South African venue.

Jamie Ceaser and I met in 1985 when she co-produced the WTTW documentary "Veeck/A Man for Any Season," about the former owner of the Chicago White Sox. She has a passionate eye for detail and knows how to tone down my sometimes-effusive writing style.

Jamie and I wrote and produced an eight-minute video montage for last summer's "Tribute to Pops Staples" concert at Ravinia. This project was born out of that.

We were not neutral observers, which, I learned, is probably an "un-documentary" approach to such a project. But how can you be middle-of-the-road toward a subject as spiritually uplifting as the Staples? We tried to kick up our heels, open our hearts and celebrate one of the most remarkable stories in American roots music.

In presenting our treatment to "Chicago Stories" senior producer Mike Leiderman, Jamie and I chose to focus on the Staple Singers as the soundtrack for the civil rights movement. We believed that most Chicagoans did not know the depth of the family's commitment to the movement. As I became more familiar with the Staples over the years, I could see how their dedication was empowered by the values of community and family that Pops and his wife, Oceola, bestowed upon their children. Oceola died in 1987 after 53 years of marriage.

"They became stars but like low-hanging grapes of the vine," the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson told us. He appeared with the Staples, Isaac Hayes and other Stax artists at the 1972 WattsStax concert in Los Angeles. (Stax executive vice president Al Bell was a supporter of Operation PUSH.) "They were stars we could touch," Jackson said. "The Staples became an everyman's group, as it were. Chicago does not appreciate the Staples like the Blues Brothers, but it ought to. The Staples are very much a part of our huge cultural tradition."

The Staples' contribution may be overlooked in some corners of Chicago, but not by Bob Dylan. The Staples met Dylan at the 1960 Newport Folk Festival. He told us he had been listening to the Staples since he was 12.

A one-on-one on-camera interview with the reclusive Dylan is virtually unheard of. Dylan's agent couldn't believe he agreed to talk to us. I had to submit a list of my questions in advance, which is something I never do at the Sun-Times. But I was in no position to negotiate. Dylan was doing this as a favor to the family.

We were given 15 minutes with the singer-songwriter when he came through Chicago last November. Dylan was guarded in discussing 1960s social issues, but we couldn't get him to stop talking about the Staples' musical

influence, Mavis' voice and Pops' tremolo guitar.

He remembered hearing them for the first time: "We'd listen to the radio, usually late in the evening. 'Dragnet' and 'FBI.' 'Peace and War,' 'Inner Sanctum' and 'Jack Benny.' And then after the radio shows would come on, we used to pick up the station out of Shreveport La. and they used to play rhythm and blues, Bobby 'Blue' Bland, Junior Parker, and Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf and all that. But then at midnight the gospel stuff would start. I got to be acquainted with the Swan Silvertones and the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Highway QC's and all that. But the Staple Singers came on ... and they were so different."

Many people have wondered what it was like to "meet Dylan."

WTTW rented a suite in the North Side hotel where Dylan was staying. We invited Mavis and her sister Yvonne to watch the interview; they had not seen Dylan since Mavis sang background on Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" for David Letterman's 10th anniversary show in 1992. Dylan arrived on time and alone. He wore a black riverboat gambler outfit, framed by a black cowboy hat and black gypsy boots. Like a schoolboy, Dylan tiptoed into the room with a shy stride. He carried a single red rose for Mavis.

They embraced.

Mavis also had a gift for Dylan. It was a Beanie Baby bear. The bear was praying with its hands raised upward. As Mavis handed the yellow and tan bear to Dylan, she said, "This is called 'Hope!' " Dylan cradled the Beanie Baby, smiled and said, "Of course." He was touched.

Dylan and the Staples had some good times. This didn't make it into our documentary, but Pervis (who left the group in 1970) recalled Dylan diving off a board at the motel where they were staying during the Newport Folk Festival. "He jumped off the board and his shorts came off," Staples said. "I went in and got 'em. I thought something happened to him because he had his boots on, too. We got to be friends. We bought some wine, and he wrote 'A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall' on the back of a shirt board." I asked Dylan about this story. He said it "pretty much sounds right" and that he wrote many songs on many different objects.

This was my first experience in television production and writing. It required more patience and economy than newspaper work. Jamie coached me on the three rules of television: 1.) Tell them what they're going to see. 2) Show them what they're going to see. 3) Tell them again what they saw. No problem.

We spent most of the summer and fall doing our interviews. In November, we

screened 20 hours of interview footage. We went over some of it twice, especially to relive the engaging memories of the Staples family. Armed with a large notebook of transcripts, we underlined the sound bites we liked. Jamie's technique is to cut out the highlights with a pair of scissors and spread the quotes on a table. At first this seemed like we were going to write an elaborate ransom note, but it turned out to be one of my favorite parts of the process. It helped me think more clearly.

Through this method, we came up with a rough story line. In December and January we wrote our script, matching audio with video. The script was in revision through mid-January. We wrote 15 versions of the script.

The rest of January involved placement of archival footage and pictures, which drove Jamie crazy. We used 135 pictures in this 27-minute documentary. I think Jamie wanted 1,350 pictures. The Staples were generous in sharing their personal archives with us. I dug around my closet to find a WLS-AM survey from 1971 that revealed the Staples' "Respect Yourself" as a top 10 song. My musician friend Paul Cebal loaned us rare Staples albums he collected over the years. I will never again watch a documentary without a certain amount of empathy toward the production.

Earlier this month we reached the finish line. Bob Furem entered the project for a two-week stint as our editor. He had a good feel for the project. Furem is a music fan and former member of the roots rock band the Sapphires. He helped us arrange the perfect marriage between source material and music. One of my favorite parts of the documentary is when Dylan speaks about Mavis' voice, and in the background you hear her low contralto come in underneath on a current of passion.

We are already considering subjects for future documentaries, but it will be tough to top the Staple Singers' spirit and integrity. The family stood tall and they stood together. They cast a gracious shadow that covers a global community. We are fortunate that the roots of this important family tree are planted in Chicago.