

Mavis Staples
By Dave Hoekstra
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Gospel singer Mavis Staples smiled as she turned the pages of a scrapbook on the kitchen table of her South Shore apartment. Like a highway, the family album ran from the early years of the Staple Singers folk group to Staples' recent collaborations with Prince.

Every picture told a story.

"We had some times," Staples said in a two-hour interview. "One time we parked on the side of the highway. It was Thanksgiving. We didn't want to go to any more segregated restaurants. We bought cold cuts and made sandwiches. And don't you know there's cows staring us down. That was it - a cow don't even want to see us! And the cow was black and white. It wasn't even integrated. I thought, 'Well, we have to go again and move from this spot.'"

An accomplished solo performer as well as lead voice in the Staple Singers, the Chicago treasure will make a rare club appearance with her four-piece band Saturday at the Gulf Coast in Lincoln Park.

Long before Staples and the Staple Singers won over the likes of Bob Dylan (whom Staples almost married), Bill Cosby and Prince, the family was a voice in the embryonic moments of the civil rights movement.

Every time the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. traveled with the Staple Singers, he requested Pops Staples' swampy sermonette "Why? (Am I Treated So Bad)," recently reprised on Pops' Grammy-winning "Father Father" album.

In 1991, Columbia; Legacy released "Freedom Highway," a compilation of 18 Staple Singers civil rights and gospel anthems. These roots explain how Staples' stirring contralto is drawn from of love, hope and glory. Dylan has called Staples the best female vocalist he has ever heard.

In 1935, Roebuck "Pops" Staples, his wife, Oeola (who died in 1987), and their 1-year-old daughter, Cleotha, moved to Chicago from Drew, Miss., about 100 miles from Memphis. Pops, now 80, was looking for better work. His first job was in the Stockyards, shoveling fertilizer and working the hog kill for 50 cents a week.

Mavis, sister Yvonne and brother Pervis were born in Chicago. They first sang together in 1948 at the church of Pops' brother, the Rev. Chester Staples. But Pops, Mavis, Cleotha and Yvonne (who replaced Pervis in 1970) delivered the group's mid-'70s hits, such as "Respect Yourself," "I'll Take You There" and "Heavy Makes You Happy."

By crossing over to the pop market, the Staples broke down musical barriers. Their music remains a uniquely engaging blend of country, blues and gospel. Duke Ellington once told Pops Staples that the family sang gospel in a blues key. But it wasn't until the family met King in 1964 that they found the confidence to move into a political, populist arena.

"We were playing strictly gospel for, really, about 20 years," Mavis Staples said. "We were doing a Saturday night concert in Montgomery, Ala. Pops said, 'I've been thinking about this man, Martin. We should go to his 11 a.m. service tomorrow.' Coretta (King) was singing in the choir. We met Dr. King after the service, and when we got back to the hotel, Pops said, 'We could write some songs about what he's preaching.' So we started writing protest songs."

In a recent interview, Pops Staples said, "We said if he can preach it, we can sing it."

The Staples did many benefits for the civil rights movement. King handpicked the group, which had a large Chicago following, to sing Saturday morning concerts at Operation Breadbasket on the South Side. The events were aimed at drawing attention to a young, little-known preacher, the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

Pops Staples wrote the funky "Freedom Highway" in 1965, based on the four-day voter-registration march from Montgomery to Selma, Ala. And with Pervis on lead vocals, the family turned a traditional country ballad like "Be Careful of Stones That You Throw" into a timely statement about brotherhood. You can hear the haunting tremelo riffs of Pops' Fender Telecaster, the trademark of his recent solo albums.

"I remember 'Why? (Am I Treated So Bad)' came after we were watching the news," Staples said. "The kids in Little Rock (Ark.) were trying to get on the bus. The government had given permission, but police were keeping them off. Daddy said, 'Now, why are they treated so bad?' and began the song."

The Staples sang from the trenches of the movement.

In 1965, the family was taken to jail in West Memphis, Ark., after they were mistakenly fingered for holding up a gas station in Memphis, Tenn. Staples, 55, gingerly recounted the never-told-before story: "It was all about me. I was the night driver. I did two tanks of gas, Jackson, Miss., to Memphis."

Mavis Staples was at the wheel of the family's green 1964 Cadillac. Pervis was in the back seat, sleeping underneath a pile of coats. He was to drive the next shift en route to Chicago. Pops was also asleep in the back, with

Cleotha riding in front with her sister.

"I came up to a gas station at Third and Union (in downtown Memphis)," Staples recalled. "I filled up the car and asked the attendant to wash the windshield because it was full of bugs. When he finished, I asked for a receipt. He looked at me for what seemed to be a long time and said, 'You have to come over to the office if you want a receipt.' The office was far away. Pops woke up and said he'd get the receipt."

Mavis watched from a distance. The young, tall, white attendant wagged a finger with intensity, first in the face of Pops - then 51 years old - and next toward Mavis.

"He kept doing that, and soon Daddy was right on him," Staples recalled. "They fought into the grease pit. Daddy had on his slippers, and he fell down. While he was down, the guy grabbed a crowbar. By this time Cleo was in there, trying to make sure he didn't hit Daddy."

"The attendant got up and ran to his office. We thought he was going to get a gun. Pervis woke up and put on his coat like Superman. Asking no questions, he caught up to him and went up and down on this guy."

The family quickly piled into the car and left. Pervis suggested that they chill at the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis, an oasis for blacks in the segregated South. King often stayed at the Lorraine and was murdered there in 1968. It is now the site of the National Civil Rights Museum.

"But Daddy said, 'We're going home' and told me to drive," Staples said. "Man, I was driving the getaway car." Mavis didn't make it far. West Memphis police pulled the family over just as they crossed the bridge over the Mississippi River. The cops had guns pulled, and German shepherds were barking. "They found the money we made that night and said it was what they were looking for," Staples said.

Pops told the cops the money belonged to the family.

"An officer answered, 'How did you get it?' Daddy said we sang for it. The officer said, 'What kind of singing do you do, boy?' He called my father a boy." Police then found a gun that Pops kept in the trunk. He was handcuffed to the car ; door; handle, and Cleo was handcuffed behind her back. The police were running out of handcuffs, so they handcuffed Mavis and Pervis together.

It soon became apparent to the Staples what was coming down - the gas station attendant told police that they had robbed him. "But the receipt saved us," she said. "Daddy got that receipt, and he had it in his pocket."

The reception the Staples got in jail was typical of the rootsy reach of their music, especially in the South.

"Daddy started walking in with his hands behind his back," Staples said. "And here was this black man, cleaning the jail floor. He looks up and goes, 'Pops Staples! What are you doing here?' Daddy told the police chief that anyone in Memphis could tell him who we were. We had pictures, records. We were gospel singers.

"But to this day, Daddy hasn't told me what that guy (at the gas station) said about me."

It may be the only time in the colorful Staple Singers legacy that silence has been golden.