

Mavis Staples  
By Dave Hoekstra  
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Through 50 years of fellowship, patriarch and guitarist Roebuck "Pops" Staples would have his family stand in the same place. Pops would position himself at the far right as the group faced every audience. Pops was swing leader, daughter Mavis was lead soprano. Her sister Cleotha was minor tenor and stood next to Pops. The third sister Yvonne, the baritone, would stand between Cleotha and Mavis.

The family stood tall, they stood together.

"From day one that's how we stood," Mavis Staples says in an interview in her South Shore home. "Now I look down where Pops would be, and I come back grinning."

Pops died in December 2000. Cleotha is battling Alzheimer's disease. Yvonne is semi-retired. But Mavis is pressing on. On Tuesday, she will release her first post-Pops solo album, "Have a Little Faith," her debut for Chicago's Alligator Records.

"I used to be able to tell people I still sing with my family," Staples says. "Now, it's just me. It feels strange. But I want to carry on what my father started when we were kids in 1950. He would go to rehearsal with the Chicago gospel group Trumpet Jubilees, and sometimes they wouldn't show up. Daddy got disgusted. He came home, went into the closet and got his pawnshop guitar. He sat us all down on the floor in a circle and said, 'I'm going to sing with my children.' And we did that ever since."

The first song Pops taught his family was "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," and it is the last track on "Have a Little Faith" (see Page 9 for a review). The family has recorded the song at least eight times, but this is the first time Mavis has been featured vocalist. "Normally my father would sing lead," she says. "And I would be singing to his electric guitar. Now these are acoustic guitars. There's one electric guitar in the background."

That's electric guitarist Jim Weider (the Band, 1985-2000), who plays with a force that recalls Pops on his Telecaster. "I'm not saying I won't sing with electric guitar in the future," Staples says. "But for this album, the sound is softer. I meant for this album to be healing. It seems the world is in turmoil. But you can't live in fear."

The seeds of "Have a Little Faith" were planted as early as 1997. The tracks "I Wanna Thank You" and "There's a Devil on the Loose" were recorded under Pops' watchful eye in the spring of 1997 at a studio in Waukegan. In the

fall of that year, he became ill.

The project evolved after Sept. 11, 2001, when co-producer Jim Tullio and LeRoy Marinell wrote the anthem "In Times Like These" as a tribute to two of Tullio's friends who perished in the World Trade Center attacks. Tullio attended Holy Spirit High School in Atlantic City, N.J., with John O'Neil, who had just started a new job as head of security at the World Trade Center on Sept. 10, 2001. For the previous 31 years, O'Neil headed the Terrorist Investigative Unit for the FBI. Another friend was a pilot on the ill-fated United Airlines flight out of Boston.

"In Times Like These" features the Chicago Music Community Choir, led in part by gospel legend Jessy Dixon. "I liked that song, and it reminded me of Staple Singers music," says Staples, who co-produced the disc with Tullio.

The title track, written by Tullio and Weider, features a warm gospel B-3 groove by longtime Chicago keyboardist Chris Cameron. Richard Gibbs, son of Chicago gospel legend Inez Andrews, plays piano on "I Wanna Thank You" and "There's a Devil on the Loose."

Philadelphia-born songwriter Phil Roy wrote "God Is Not Sleeping" for the new record. He also composed "Hope in a Hopeless World" for Pops' "Father Father" (1994) album. (The song was later covered by Widespread Panic, who thought Pops had written it.)

"Phil gave me 'God Is Not Sleeping,'" Staples says. "I played his demo right here." She nods towards a boom box on her kitchen table. "I put that song on and my skin started moving on my bones."

At this point, she breaks into song: "In the stillness of the night / in every corner of the world/While we are sleeping/He is still working. ... Everything I own is temporary/Only God's love is necessary."

When she first heard those lines, "I just sunk down in my chair."

The next day she recorded the song in one take.

Staples has a simple formula for picking material. "If the lyrics hit, that's it," she says. "Most of the time I'll change the groove. I visualize as I sing the song. 'God is not sleeping! God is alive!' I could feel myself singing that song.

"We were in Telluride Colo. last month. I was standing on the stage, and it was the most beautiful sight: the mountains, the sky. It was a picture of God's beauty. I sang 'God Is Not Sleeping,' and it just took me. I lost myself."

"Have a Little Faith" has re-energized Staples. She is thinking of learning acoustic guitar. "I can't play any instrument, but I can see myself standing onstage with a guitar. Years ago I told Pops that. When I was little, he had me cut off my fingernails and bought me a training guitar. He'd say, 'You go down to Lyon & Healy then at Jackson and Wabash. Well, I was 11 or 12 years old. If I had been older, I would have gotten the basics. I wanted to pick the guitar like Sister Rosetta Tharpe. I saw her and wanted to play. I didn't know ladies played guitar. If I had gone on to Lyon & Healy, Pops would have been able to show me more. But I still feel Pops' presence. I really do."

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Mavis Staples remembers the first time she sang apart from her family.

Her singles of Burt Bacharach and Hal David's "A House Is Not a Home" and Sam Cooke's "You Send Me" from her 1969 self-titled solo debut were hot in Detroit, where the Staples were headlining a Stax Records bill with Isaac Hayes.

"I got scared when we drove up and saw my name on the marquee," Staples says. "The Staple Singers sang first. Then it was my turn. It was a big stage, and I'm out there by myself. Our band played for me. I sang 'A House Is Not a Home.' 'You Send Me.' 'Endlessly.' It felt lonely. When I made that album, I wasn't planning to do a solo act. But when we got to Detroit, Daddy said, 'Mavis, you're going to have to sing 'em.' That was the very first time I sang onstage by myself."

After the Steve Cropper-produced "Mavis Staples," Staples recorded the solo album "Only for the Lonely" (1970) for Stax. The dramatic cover photo features a closeup of Staples with a big tear running down her left cheek.

"I wanted to share my life as a woman," she says. "I did all secular songs. As long as they aren't dirty, I don't mind singing secular songs -- love songs. I had been in love and had my heart broken. I was married seven, eight years. I was getting a divorce when I was doing that record 'Mavis Staples'.

"Yvonne's husband told me how my husband was in the doghouse, and the guys would play 'A House Is Not a Home' on purpose to see how he'd take it.' Then on 'Only for the Lonely' album, I sang 'I Have Learned To Do Without You.' Those albums were different than 'Have a Little Faith.' This is a solo album. This is my life after my father. I am on my own. I took my own money nearly \$80,000 to make this album."

Staples had been negotiating with labels from Blue Note to Lost Highway. She had no problem signing with Alligator, a label best known for blues artists. "I like the blues," she says. "Alligator is in Chicago. I wouldn't get lost in the shuffle. Besides, my father played the blues on his guitar. The others, what kind of labels are they? They sure aren't gospel."

"Originally, I went in to finish up an album we started on as a group. That one due next year will be Pops' album. We put off doing background on that album because Daddy really wanted to sing. There's only three songs on that where we're singing background."

Now, at age 64, Staples is comfortable in the forefront.

She sang "America, the Beautiful" before John Kerry's acceptance speech last month at the Democratic National Convention in Boston. It was the latest in a long long line of command performances. The Staple Singers sang gospel for President John F. Kennedy at a Washington, D.C., banquet. They also sang for Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton on the mall in Washington. "I was proud to sing in Boston," Staples says. "I picked the song. I'd rather sing 'America, the Beautiful' than 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' It's just a more robust song -- you can really let 'em know."

"I saw P. Diddy there. Ben Affleck. Willie Nelson hugged me and gave me a bandana."

Let's hope that's all Nelson gave Staples.

She laughs. "It felt good because people knew me. My manager said that when we passed by the Mississippi delegates, he heard them say, 'Stand up, that's Mavis Staples.' The convention was a great moment. Even at the end of the song, I said, 'Have a little faith!' "

Staples looks across the living room at Pops' Gibson guitar.

She comes back grinning.