

Pops Staples
By Dave Hoekstra
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The journey of Roebuck "Pops" Staples began on a humble plantation in Drew, Miss. Along the way, he became one of the most eminent voices in American soul, blues, gospel and folk music. Mr. Staples died Tuesday morning in his south suburban Dolton home. He was 85.

Mr. Staples was the patriarch of the Chicago-based Staple Singers, which featured his daughters Mavis, Cleo and Yvonne. The group had mid-1970s pop-soul hits such as "Respect Yourself," "Heavy Makes You Happy" and "I'll Take You There." The family was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last year. In 1998, Mr. Staples was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

With a haunting tremolo sound from his Telecaster guitar and honey-soaked vocals that held the promise of a new morning, Mr. Staples set the group's empathetic tone.

Every time the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. traveled with the Staple Singers, he requested Mr. Staples' swampy sermonette "Why? (Am I Treated So Bad)."

"Many singers are indifferent to the politics of our time," said the Rev. Jesse Jackson, a friend of the Staples family for 40 years. "Pops and his family turned political pain and agony and put it to music. They never lost their joy, they never sang with a heavy heart. Pops was a real piece of the culture of the 20th century."

Mr. Staples was born on the Dockery plantation, about 100 miles from Memphis, Tenn. The youngest of 14 children, Mr. Staples would join his entire family in a singalong to unwind after a long day of picking cotton under the steamy Mississippi sun.

The colorful characters hanging around Dockery's General Store made an impression on Mr. Staples, including legendary rural bluesman Charlie Patton.

Each time Roebuck and his brother Sears (yes, they were Sears & Roebuck) visited the store, Mr. Staples would plunk down 50 cents as a down payment for a guitar.

He bought his first guitar for \$5. "I took that guitar and learned how to play the blues and a few uptempo numbers," Mr. Staples told me in 1992. "So when I left the blues (in the 1940s) to go with my children into gospel, I

still had that blues feel. I couldn't get that out of my system. That's why we're not like all other gospel singers."

In 1990, Pops Staples Park was dedicated among the old oak and pecan trees of Drew. It serves as the site of the Pops Staples Park Festival, which featured John Fogerty, former Creedence Clearwater Revival frontman, in its inaugural season.

"Pops' guitar is the earliest guitar sound I remember," Fogerty said Tuesday. "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 in Drew, 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."

John Lee Hooker, Mr. Staples' 80-year-old compatriot, said, "Pops was a very, very good man and a great musician. We can think back on what a wonderful person he was. He led a great life and made a lot of people happy."

Mr. Staples and his wife, Oceola, who died in 1987 after 53 years of marriage, came to Chicago in 1925. For 50 cents an hour, Mr. Staples got his first job shoveling fertilizer at the stockyards.

The Staples family never even had a backyard until the early 1960s, when they bought their first home, a brown, brick four-flat at 89th and Langley. On every Fourth of July, Mr. Staples and his family hosted a neighborhood barbecue. Soul singer Gene ("Duke of Earl") Chandler was an annual guest, as was gospel singer Albertina Walker, and the late gospel great Mahalia Jackson, who would buy a new sundress for the occasion.

Mr. Staples' final solo album was "Father, Father," for which he won a 1995 Grammy Award. He was also nominated for a Grammy for his 1993 solo album, "Peace to the Neighborhood," which featured Bonnie Raitt and Jackson Browne.

Mr. Staples had been working on a Staple Singers album due out early next year. The tracks were recorded in Chicago, Memphis and Waukegan. Mr. Staples finished his parts earlier this year. "He sang quite a few tracks," Mavis said. "He started (in 1997), before he got his ear infection and (continued) while he had Bell's palsy."

One of Mr. Staples' favorite new tracks was the traditional gospel song "Better Home." Through tears, Mavis sang, "I have started out/to find a better home . . ." She said, "I think that's what we'll call the album. He's

found a better home now."

Besides his daughters and son Pervis, Mr. Staples is survived by 13 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Funeral services, which are pending, will be at the Trinity United Church of Christ, 400 W. 95th St. in Chicago.