

Staples Sister Says, “Get used to seeing Mavis. I’m not going anywhere”
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By Jesseca Bagherpour

Mavis Staples has had a long, respected career as a Gospel and soul singer that has earned her a spot in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as well as a Lifetime Grammy for her work with The Staple Singers. She won her first solo Grammy this year, an award for best Americana Album for 2010’s *You Are Not Alone*, produced by Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy.

After decades of maintaining a legendary status and garnering numerous accolades, Staples remains a down-to-earth, hopeful voice for the poverty-stricken and downtrodden.

“I know so much about [poverty] and I know what it is to be in that position ... in my heart, you know ... I’m sincere about it,” Staples says. “It just comes easy. I love helping. I love giving hope and giving people a reason to get up in the morning. It just seems that’s what the Lord put me here for. I’ve been doing it all my life and it just feels like that’s what I’m supposed to be doing. I have no problem singing my songs because they inspire me to keep on keeping on.”

Staples’ father, Roebuck “Pops” Staples, brought his family of vocalists together to form The Staple Singers in 1950. He put 11-year-old Mavis, his youngest child, in the lead. Pops and siblings Cleotha, Pervis and Yvonne backed her.

Because of Pops’ friendship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which started in 1960, The Staple Singers became key figures in the civil rights movement. Many of their songs were inspired by, and in turn inspired, the movement. And they directly inspired Dr. King, giving private performances of his favorite song, “Why Am I Treated So Bad,” before his speeches.

“Dr. King’s presence was so strong,” Staples says. “He was such a great man. I really loved to hear him laugh. It was such a pleasure, a rarity, to hear him laugh. Most of the time he looked serious and he looked worried so I really loved to see him laugh. It was just an honor and a pleasure to see this great man and to shake his hand. He didn’t talk much to us girls, he mostly talked to Pops. He was just a great man and to have stood by him and to know him and to look at his face ... I cherish those moments.”

The group played at civil rights rallies and music festivals around the country throughout the ‘60s, spreading their message of peace and hope wherever they went.

Staples continues to be a key figure in the push for equality in America. After she and Tweedy performed on *The Colbert Show*, host Stephen Colbert invited them to play at the Rally to Restore Sanity that he and “host Jon Stewart organized.

“To look out on the audience and see all of those people ... 250,000 people ... it just took me back to the times of the flower children,” Staples said. “And it was so peaceful and so happy and inspiring. It reminded me of the hippie era ... that was the feeling that you got there at the rally. It also reminded me of the times with Dr. King. We were trying to save the world, to help. Any time I’m invited to something like that, it’s a joy, it’s an honor. I’m just a lucky old girl. To be there with our old friends and new people, the younger generation ... Jeff Tweedy and I singing “You Are Not Alone” and all these young faces smiling, it makes you feel good.”

As for where America stands in the fight for civil rights, Staples says “we still have a ways to go.”

“We’ve come a long way,” she says. “Dr. King brought us a mighty way. But there’s still a lot to do. The struggle is still alive. There’s still a lot of prejudice. Right here in Chicago, I can turn on the news and see a black family move into a white neighborhood. And it’ll be fine at first but then they wake up and see the “N” word on the garage ... they may burn crosses in the lawn. And it’s so sad. You see the news, read the paper and see how blacks are still being treated. It’s heavy on my heart to see how black people are treated. I wonder if I’ll live to see the day when everyone is treated equally, everything is peaceful and we can all live together.”

Despite how long the struggle has gone on and will continue to go on, she has hope because of the positive changes the country has recently seen.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day when we’d have a black president,” she says. “I didn’t go to the rally but I saw it on TV and when it was announced [that President Obama won], I went around the house and I talked to Pops and Dr. King. And President Obama has done a great job with what he had to start with. I think he’ll make another round. Through all the backbiting and all he has against him, he’ll be back. Hopefully he’ll have a second term and it’ll go smoother for him.”

Staples’ continues to be as passionate about music as she is about politics. Last year’s *You Are Not Alone* put her triumphantly back in the spotlight and won a 2011 Grammy, her first after a slew of nominations.

“When I won the Grammy, I was so in shock,” she says. “I’ve been nominated so many times ... I went to the Grammys this time and I said ‘I’m just going’ and I just never thought I would win. When they said ‘Mavis Staples,’ I thought I would jump out of my skin.”

The Grammy orchestra held back the music normally reserved to play people out, allowing Staples to continue her ecstatic speech. During the speech, she said, “It’s about time.” She also thanked producer Jeff Tweedy.

Tweedy and Staples met after her 2008 performance at North Chicago club The Hideout, recorded for a live album by the same name. Not too long after that show, Staples got a call from her manager that Tweedy wanted to produce her next record. So they met for lunch to discuss it and hit it off.

“Tweedy let me into his life, I let him into mine,” Staples says. “As a teen, he worked in a record shop and had access to our music. He fell in love with The Staple Singers. He loved how Pops played. He knew all our records from the ‘50s and ‘60s. He talked about his family, his father. And that did it for me. Pops always told us how important family is ... That sold me.”

The two worked together in Wilco’s loft, a space that includes a recording studio as well as a kitchen, living room and sleeping areas. Band members would bring their babies and puppies during recording sessions, making the atmosphere warm and relaxed.

“The session was like a love fest,” Staples says. “The studio is homey. Very comfortable. That was the best session that I’ve had in a long time. I hated when that session was over. I said to him, ‘Can’t we just do one more song?’ and he said, ‘Mavis, it’s over’.”

The songs they did record – new songs written by Tweedy, covers, and re-imaginings of old Staples Singers classics – did Staples proud and might be the beginnings of a great musical partnership.

“He’s a good producer and very smart ... when we finished I said, ‘We have to do this again’,” says Staples. “We’re hoping to make another album together.”

All of this – the collaboration with Tweedy, the album, the rally – might not have happened were it not for Staples’ sister Yvonne. When Pops died in 2000, Mavis entered a deep depression and was determined to stop singing. But Yvonne brought her spark back.

“I was a pitiful child when he passed away,” Staples says. “I told myself, ‘You’ve been singing with you father, seeing him for 50 years.’ I just felt so empty. Yvonne came by my house and said ‘You get up. Pops would want you to keep singing.’ In fact, she told me off ... she said some words that I won’t even repeat. She said, ‘Daddy would be so disappointed in you, Mavis.’ I’m so grateful that she told me off. I’m so glad she talked to me the way she did. If it wasn’t for her, I’d still probably be sitting there depressed. I know Pops was happy [seeing me sing again]. How could I even think that I couldn’t sing anymore?”

When Mavis returned to performing it was with a band, but she was a solo Staple Singer. Without hearing her father on guitar or her siblings singing with her, she felt alone. So she convinced Yvonne to sing with her. They’ve been touring together ever since, continuing the work that their father started.

“I have to keep my father’s legacy alive,” says Staples. “My father was another great man, like Dr. King. It seems that more and more, I’m just getting stronger and stronger every day. And to make Pops proud, I continue to sing, to do good for the world, keep the world together, keep Dr. King’s dream and Pops’ dream alive ... they both had a dream.”

As for whether retirement is in Staples’ future, she has a few choice words to say about that.

“People say, ‘Mavis, it’s about time for you to retire’,” she says. “And I say, ‘No, I think they’re gonna have to bring a big shovel and scoop me up off the stage.’ I’m going to sing until I die. Get used to seeing Mavis. I’m not going anywhere.”