



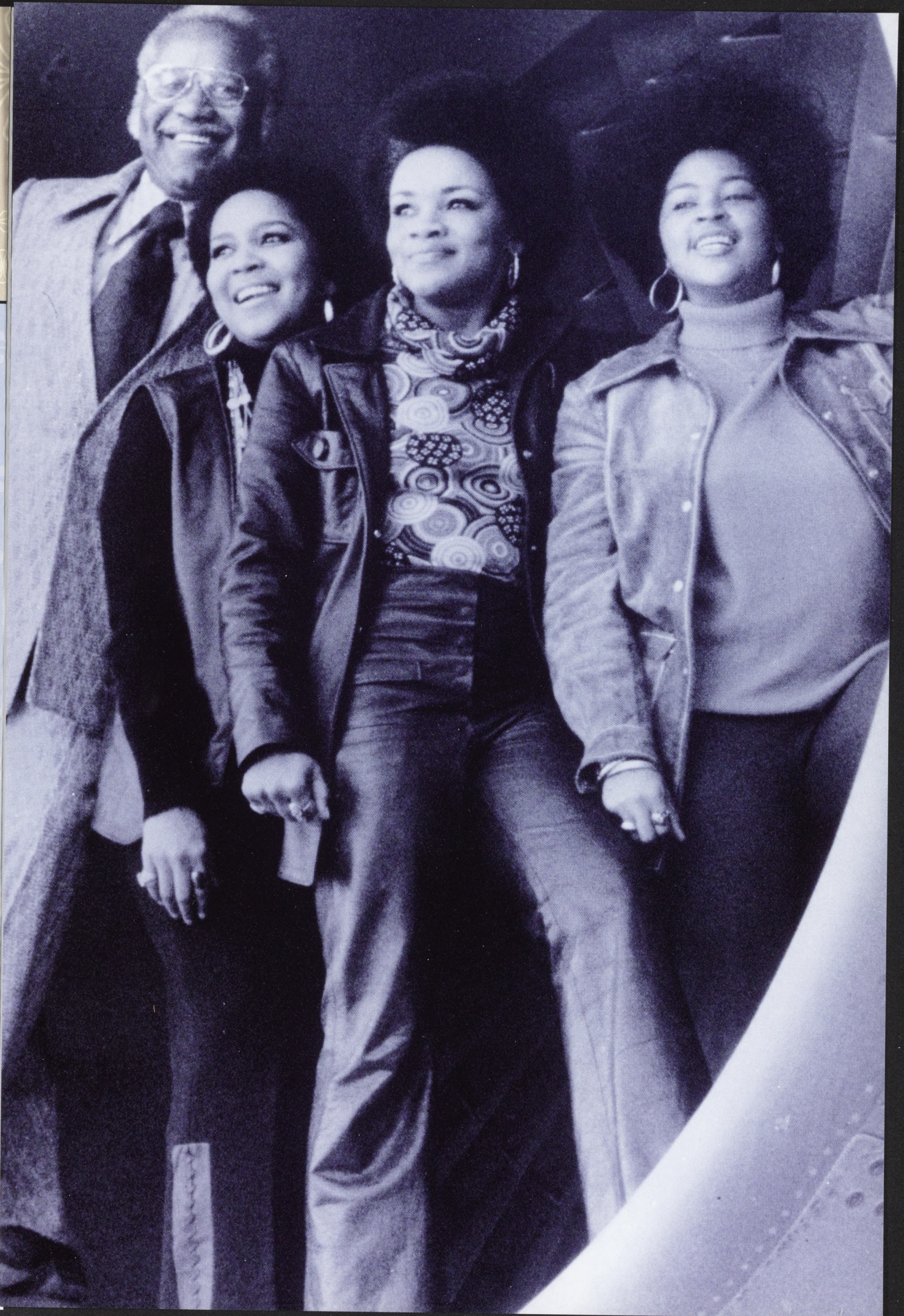
P E R F O R M E R S

THE STAPLE SINGERS

For most artists, it is enough to achieve mastery of a single genre. A select few are able to reinvent themselves at some point in their career and conquer a second style. Incredibly, the Staple Singers, known far and wide as the First Family of Song, managed to achieve greatness in three separate and distinct genres during the first three decades of their storied career. ◀ In the 1950s, recording first for United and then Vee-Jay, the group was among the greatest of the postwar gospel warriors. In the 1960s, releasing albums on Riverside and Epic, the Staples linked up with the folk revival and single-handedly invented the genre known as soul folk, becoming integrally involved with the civil rights movement as led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and singing secular protest music. Then in the first half of the 1970s, during their tenure with the almighty Stax Records, Mavis, Pops, Yvonne and Cleotha embarked on making what Mavis Staples has termed “message music.” The resulting recordings, such as “Respect Yourself,” “I’ll Take You There,” “Touch a Hand, Make a Friend” and “If You’re Ready (Come Go With Me),” have come to define the very essence of what it meant to be soulful in that era. Their achievements in any one of these decades would have merited induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The fact that they created such wondrous art in three separate genres places the Staple Singers among exceedingly rarefied company indeed. ◀ The Staples’ story begins in 1915 in Winona, Mississippi, with the birth of family patriarch Roebuck “Pops” Staples. Growing up in rural Mississippi a mere half century after the Civil War and the cessation of slavery, Pops came of age in the second half of the 1920s when the very first blues

Pops, Mavis, Cleotha and Yvonne Staples (from left), shortly after Pervis left the group for other endeavors

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records were being made in the Southern states by traveling field units. Proficient early on as a solo blues guitarist, Roebuck, as he matured, found himself increasingly drawn to the church. By 1931, he had started singing and playing guitar with a gospel group based in Drew, Mississippi, known as the Golden Trumpets. After the birth of Cleotha in 1934 and son Pervis in 1935, the Staples family relocated to Chicago, and Pops continued his work playing spirituals with the Windy City's Trumpet Jubilees.

A second daughter, Yvonne, was born in 1939, and the youngest child, Mavis, came forth one year later. In 1951 the Staples family (Pops, Cleo, Pervis and eleven-year-old Mavis) gave their debut performance in front of a church audience. Two years later, they cut their first gospel record. Over the course of the 1950s, the Staples established a reputation as purveyors of an older, slightly archaic, deeply Southern spiritual style underpinned by Pops's heavily reverbed Delta guitar playing. On their recordings, Pops and Mavis shared lead-singing chores, with Pervis and Cleotha moaning in the background. In 1957 the Staples struck pay dirt when their Vee-Jay



recording of "Uncloudy Day" exploded, establishing the group as a gospel force on a national level.

Shifting gears in the 1960s, the Staple Singers managed to reach the lower rungs of the pop charts twice with Pops's plaintive "Why? (Am I Treated So Bad)" and an evocative cover of Stephen Stills's "For What It's Worth." Side by side with these protest songs, such church-steeped material as "I've Been Scorned" and "As an Eagle Stirreth Her Nest" remained part of the Staples' recording repertoire. When their contract with Epic expired in 1968, the group was signed to Stax by Al Bell, whom they had known since the mid-Fifties, when he had played their records and booked them for concerts in his role as gospel disc jockey at KOKY in Little Rock.

"Ever since I'd been in the record business," recalls Bell, "one of my hidden desires had been to record the Staple Singers. I was just so in love with their singing style!" For their first two albums on Stax, Bell assigned the group to work with Booker T. and the MG's guitarist Steve Cropper, who continued to produce them in the soul-folk mode they had established at Riverside and Epic.

In the summer of 1970, the decisive moment of the Staples' career unfolded when Bell elected to follow the advice of Reverend Jesse Jackson by producing the group himself. Never comfortable working with the house musicians at Stax, Bell took the Staple Singers to Muscle Shoals, Alabama, to record with the fabled Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section - rhythm guitarist Jimmy Johnson, keyboard



player Barry Beckett, bassist David Hood, drummer Roger Hawkins and lead guitarist Eddie Hinton. Concomitant with these changes in producer, recording studio and session musicians, sister Yvonne Staples was drafted to replace Pervis, who had decided to give up the stage and studio to set up his own management company. In every way, shape and form, the Staples had been transformed. The records they cut with Cropper had been superb, but the Muscle Shoals recordings under the guidance of Bell are nothing short of ecstatic.

"The Muscle Shoals guys were a rhythm section that a singer would just die for," enthuses Mavis. "They were *bad* back then! [At Stax] Booker T. and the MG's would mostly put the tracks down before we'd be in there. [At Muscle Shoals] we would all be in the studio together. We were feeding off of each other. That made a difference."

At the same time that the Al Bell/Muscle Shoals combination was energizing the group, Mavis was growing as a singer: "I was trying more things. I was getting looser, getting more within myself and knowing myself and what I could do. I think I was getting bolder."

The results were immediately palpable, manifest both aesthetically and commercially. The very first single recorded under this new arrangement, "Heavy Makes You Happy (Sha-Na-Boom-Boom)" backed with "Love Is Plentiful," proved to be a double-sided hit. After that, every Staples single on Stax through early 1975, except one, stormed the charts, the heaviest hitters being 1971's "Respect Yourself" and 1972's "I'll Take You There." The former deftly combined the nascent sound of funk with hard-rock fuzz guitar and what might be Mavis's finest vocal performance on record. The latter topped *Billboard's* R&B and Pop charts and introduced many Americans to the then little-known reggae sound. Both recordings have been inordinately sampled in the rap era.

Left: Mavis Staples, 1977; Top: Roebuck "Pops" Staples, 1992; Below and opposite: The original Staple Singers, ca. 1968: Pops, Cleotha, Pervis and Mavis (from left)

Immediately following their halcyon days at Stax, the Staples continued their heady chart success. Under the tutelage of Curtis Mayfield, they placed two records in the R&B Top Five, the infectious "Let's Do It Again" and the rock-





ing "New Orleans." The former also topped the pop chart and served as the theme song for the film of the same name. For their next album, the Staples moved to Warner Bros. but retained Mayfield's writing and production acumen to create the underrated *Pass It On*. Parting ways with Mayfield in 1977, the Staples managed to place four more singles on the R&B charts before the decade's end. During the first half of the 1980s, the family recorded the largely ignored *Hold On to Your Dream* for 20th Century-Fox, before signing with Private I and enjoying a comeback of sorts, chalking up five singles that charted R&B in 1984-85.

Over the last fifteen years, while the Staple Singers have continued to gig on a fairly regular basis, both Pops and Mavis have devoted much of their time to actively developing their solo careers. Mavis has leaned toward funk, cutting two superb albums for Paisley Park, while Pops has gone back to his roots, recording in a

bluesy style. As fine as their solo efforts have been, though, Mavis and Pops will be remembered primarily for being the linchpins of Chicago's First Family of Song - the almighty Staple Singers.

When I think about the Staples, what comes to mind is Mavis's soul-enrapturing, rhythmic, timbral and melodic vocal gymnastics; Pops's way-back-in-the-woods, heavily reverbed, old-time blues guitar playing and calm, dignified vocal style; and the richly textured harmonies of Cleotha, initially with Pervis, and then in partnership with Yvonne. Collectively, that is the sound of a group that, over the course of a near half-century career, has embodied the hopes, aspirations, worldview and musical aesthetics of two generations of African-Americans in a way that has crossed racial, generational, class, gender and genre lines. Ultimately, what comes to mind when I think of the Staple Singers is some of the richest, soul-affirming music America has ever produced. *