

# GOT TO BE SOME CHANGES



The Staple Singers, circa 1951-1952. Left to right: Pervis, Roebuck, Cleotha and Mavis. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

## Chris Smith considers a new chronicle of the Staple Singers, in four CDs and a little bit more...

**W**hen Roebuck 'Pops' Staples had 500 copies of a 78 pressed in 1953, he called the label Royal, and credited 'The Staple Singers M. Staples'. The label name suggests high ambitions; the credit indicates that Pops knew fourteen-year old Mavis was an exceptional talent. Reincarnated as a 45 rpm single, the disc is a valuable component in this survey of the (easier to pronounce) Staple Singers' recorded career, but it presents slightly unfocused performances, by a group that's not yet tight enough to be loose. 'These Are They', derived from Dorothy Love Coates, is the stronger side, and just as well; the review copy of 'Faith And Grace' has a pressing defect, which makes the needle stick.

Still, the Royal recordings show us why the great singer/pianist Evelyn Gay brought the Staples to Leonard Allen of United. It was natural for Allen to add Gay's piano on the session, and not surprising that

the combination doesn't really work; it's also no surprise that Allen wanted them to sing blues. 'Y'all sound country', Evelyn Gay said, according to 'I'll Take You There', Greg Kot's splendid biography of Mavis and the Staple Singers, but I don't think she meant hillbilly; very little in their music suggests much traffic along that highway, rather than the road north from the Delta. 'Will The Circle Be Unbroken' has sometimes provoked comparisons with the Carter Family, but the Carters' rhythmic and harmonic regularity are a long

way off; and the Staples' later cover of 'This Land Is Your Land', whose melody is based on the Carters' 'When The World's On Fire', is mediocre.

In truth, there was very little, in gospel music or anywhere else, like the Staples' sound, and that was down to Roebuck's reverb and tremolo ('Pops Staples and his nervous guitar', as the gospel circuit joked), and to Mavis's extraordinary tenor. That's not to downplay the contributions of Yvonne, Cleotha and Pervis; the Staples were a quartet, and they could sound like one when they wanted to: 'If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again' is a splendid arrangement that's both original and entirely in the quartet mainstream.

Nevertheless, Vee-Jay's achievement was to foreground Pops and Mavis; for proof, look no further than 'Uncloudy Day', where Roebuck's mournful, minimalist guitar pays due respect to the authority of Mavis, seventeen-going-on-seventy, and suffering with flu on the day of the session. James Miller's excellent notes (supplemented by Opal Louis Nations' equally excellent account of the group's early days) correctly sum up the Vee-Jay recordings as 'a nearly perfect and self-contained body of work', but I should single out the sixteen minute tape of the Staples live in Clarksdale, poorly recorded, blazingly powerful, and issued here in full for the first time. We should also note the importance of Vee-Jay's session drummers, and particularly Al Duncan, to the studio recordings; the up-tempo 'I'm So Glad', where the Staples' clapping lays down the beat, and Duncan plays the cross-rhythms, is especially remarkable.

When the Staples moved to Riverside (and later, Epic), the times they were a-changing, and Pervis got to sing lead on Bob Dylan numbers, which is probably what he meant when he told Tony Heilbut that 'We got the old man to turn around and do all this new stuff.' Still, as Heilbut also notes, Pops was 'the shrewdest manager since Gertrude Ward', and well aware that there was a new audience out there – and 'How many roads must a man walk down, before you call him a man?' resonated with a native of Mississippi. Nevertheless, the Dylan and Buffalo Springfield covers have dated badly, and it's the likes of 'As An Eagle Stirreth Her Nest', and Roebuck's plaintive lead on 'Dying Man's Plea' (aka 'Blind Lemon Doesn't Need The Money'), which stand the test.



Some time in 1964, it's thought, the Staples recorded a couple of singles for the Detroit-based D-Town. 'Tell Him What You Want' ('Jesus On The Mainline', that is), and a rampaging 'I'll Fly Away' are included here; tremendous recordings, as downhome as can be, and a world away from 'Hammer And Nails', whose bland harmonies and sentiments had been a hit on Riverside; it's better, at least, than 'Gloryland', where gospel music meets 'Man of La Mancha', and Riverside ask Mavis to boom like Mahalia.

Going back to Chicago and adding Phil Upchurch's bass were the answer. (Maceo Woods's organ work just has to be lived with.) Upchurch and Al Duncan were there when Epic recorded the group in church, singing 'Freedom Highway', newly composed in honour of the Selma-to-Montgomery marchers, and one of several distinguished contributions to the soundtrack of the Civil Rights movement: 'Why (Am I Treated So Bad)', 'Long Walk To D.C.' and 'When Will We Be Paid' are all here, as they had to be.

The latter two were recorded after the Staples had made the crossover, long expected in gospel circles, to soul music, signing for Stax and recording songs with either vaguely spiritual or more pointedly social and political messages. As at Riverside, Stax struggled to find the right sound for the Staples at first; additional musicians and overdubs weren't the answer, and the conflict between Pops' tempo shifting and the MGs' rock-steady grooves was a more general problem. 'Less and less like the Staple Singers of yore, and more and more generic', says James Miller of these Steve Cropper-produced recordings.

The breakthrough came when Al Bell took the group to Muscle Shoals, and they and the studio's white session musicians cranked out, among other gems, 'Heavy Makes You Happy' (gourmet bubble-gum), 'Respect Yourself' (Pops and Mavis gently but firmly telling the kids what's what) and 'I'll Take You There', one of the greatest soul records ever made, and surely the sexiest political song ever. Mavis was at her vocal peak, and although Pops' appealing singing (to which this review hasn't given sufficient attention) and guitar mastery were too often consigned to oblivion, there's some fabulous stuff on disc four. There's also 'The Weight', from 'The Last Waltz'. I quite see the commercial and documentary reasons for its inclusion, and I can even see its merits, but the omission of 'Oh La De Da' is inexplicable.

This is an honest and almost comprehensive (see previous sentence) survey, which doesn't shy away from admitting and illustrating some of the less successful moments in the story, and which does an admirable job of explaining why and how much the Staple Singers mattered. A pity, then, that getting the discs out of their sleeves requires a grip of iron and a strenuous heave, with some risk of damage. To avoid the recurrent question, 'Will the CD be unbroken?' I advise transferring them to standard jewel cases. To do that, you'll need to buy this collection – and rest assured, you will need to buy it.

**Chris Smith was reviewing 'Faith & Grace: A Family Journey 1953-1976' 4CD Box Set on Stax STX 36969-02**



*The Staple Singers, circa 1968, Pops, Purvis, Cleotha and Mavis - Stax promo photo from the B&R Archive*

### THE STAPLE SINGERS

**Faith & Grace: A Family Journey 1953-1976**

**Stax STX 36969-02 (four CDs 52:49; 68:25; 65:03; 79:14; one 45 rpm single)**

**CD One: It Rained Children/ I Just Can't Keep It To Myself/ Each Day/ God's Wonderful Love/ If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again/ I've Got A New Home/ Uncloudy Day/ Come On Up In Glory/ I Know I Got Religion/ Swing Down Chariot (Let Me Ride)/ I Had A Dream/ Help Me Jesus/ Low Is The Way/ This May Be The Last Time (alt. take)/ So Soon/ I'm So Glad/ Pray On/ Good News/ Downward Road/ Don't Drive Me Away**

**CD Two: Will The Circle Be Unbroken/ Don't Knock/ Medley: Too Close-I'm On My Way Home-I'm Coming Home/He's Alright (live)/ Swing Low/ Calling Me/ Stand By Me/ Hammer And Nails/ Gloryland/ Hear My Call, Here/ Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen/ New-Born Soul/ Dying Man's Plea/ Great Day/ There Was A Star/ Use What You Got/ Let That Liar Alone/ I Can't Help From Cryin' Sometime/ Blowin' In The Wind/ This Land Is Your Land/ I Know I've Been Changed**

**CD Three: A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall/ Masters Of War/ What Are They Doing (In Heaven Today)/ Wish I Had Answered (live At Newport)/ I'll Fly Away/ Tell Him What You Want (Stapleton Singers)/ Be Careful Of The Stones You Throw/ Samson & Delilah/ As An Eagle Stirreth Her Nest/ Freedom Highway/ Why (Am I Treated So Bad)/ John Brown/ Waiting For My Child/ It's Been A Change/ For What It's Worth/ Let's Get Together/ Crying In The Chapel (Mavis Staples With The Staple Singers)/ Long Walk To D.C./ Got To Be Some Changes/ Slow Train**

**CD Four: I See It/ The Ghetto/ When Will We Be Paid/ God Bless The Children/ The Challenge/ Brand New Day (theme From The Motion Picture 'The Landlord')/ Heavy Makes You Happy (Shana-Boom Boom)/ I Like The Things About You/ You're Gonna Make Me Cry/ Respect Yourself/ I'll Take You There/ This World/ I'm Just Another Soldier/ Are You Sure/ If You're Ready (Come Go With Me)/ Touch A Hand, Make A Friend/ Back Road Into Town/ Let's Do It Again/ The Weight (The Band feat. Staple Singers)/ Respect Yourself (demo)**

**Single: Faith and Grace / These Are They (Royal 204)**



*The label shot on the opposite page is 45rpm facsimile of the Staple Singers original Royal 204 78rpm disc.*

*From the B&R Archives*