

POPS STAR

With the release of a new expanded version of *Freedom Highway* and the completion of his final recordings, the life and legacy of **POPS STAPLES** is remembered by **STEVE CROPPER**, **MARTY STUART**, **JEFF TWEEDY**, and his daughter **MAVIS**.

BY MAC RANDALL

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The Mississippi Blues

TRAIL WINDS FROM THE STATE'S GULF

coast through its pine woods, up into the Delta, and along the northern hills. Along the way, a series of 171 plaques mark out places that were crucial in the evolution of the blues. There's one at the birthplace of B.B. King in Berclair, and another at the gravesite of Robert Johnson in Greenwood. You'll find one outside Muddy Waters' cabin in Clarksdale and near the entrance to the infamous Parchman Farm (a.k.a. the Mississippi State Penitentiary) immortalized in song by Bukka White.

And then there's the plaque outside the courthouse in the small city of Winona, near the junction of Highways 51 and 182. It commemorates the singer and guitarist Roebuck "Pops" Staples, who was born nearby. Staples would go on to lead the Staple Singers, one of America's most beloved and successful family gospel groups, whose string of hits stretched from "Uncloudy Day" and "Will the Circle Be

Unbroken" in the Fifties to "Respect Yourself" and "I'll Take You There" in the Seventies.

Why include a gospel musician on a blues trail? Because Pops was at heart a bluesman, and that was readily apparent every time he picked up a guitar—usually an electric one, plugged into a Fender Twin Reverb and adorned with the spooky, swampy tremolo that was his trademark. "What he plays comes from the roots of Missis-

sippi," says lauded country picker and friend Marty Stuart, "and it's bathed in the light of the blues. It's like listening to the Old Testament."

"The sound of that guitar goes down in the bottom, way back up in the bayou," says daughter Mavis Staples, who performed alongside her father in the Staple Singers for more than four decades, starting at age 10. "It takes you to a different place. My sisters and I didn't know for



(left) Staples with Fender U.S. Strat Ultra in 1991; (above) In this late-Fifties Staple Singers publicity photo, Pops (on right) wields an early Les Paul gold-top.

many, many years that while we were singing gospel, he was playing the blues on his guitar. Then I figured out why all the blues guys liked him so much. No one sounds like Pops."

Pops Staples would have been 100 this year, and perhaps not coincidentally, two recent releases are honoring his legacy. Sony has put out a 50th-anniversary expanded reissue of the Staple Singers' *Freedom Highway*, the complete documentation of an electrifying April 1965 Chicago church service that critic Greg Kot has called "one of the great concert recordings ever." Also, the final, deeply moving tracks that Pops recorded with his family just prior to his death in 2000 were remixed by Wilco's Jeff Tweedy and issued under the title *Don't Lose This*.

"What Pops does, both as a singer and as a guitarist, is very simple and yet very hard to imitate," Tweedy remarks. "He's so committed

to being himself, and that's something you don't hear in a lot of guitar players now. Listening to him is like stepping into a time machine. You can hear the Delta blues meeting the modern industrial age."

That distinctive blend of sounds mirrors the events of Pops' life. When he was about eight years old, the Staples family moved to the Dockery plantation near Drew, Mississippi, often labeled "the birthplace of the blues." There he met several leading blues figures, including Charlie Patton and Chester "Howlin' Wolf" Burnett, who inspired him to take up the guitar. Eventually, like so many southern black Americans of that era, he moved north to find work, settling in Chicago and raising a family of five (all of whom, except daughter Cynthia, would become members of the Staple Singers).

In Chicago, Pops continued to sing gospel with amateur groups, but for nearly 10 years he stopped playing guitar. "He got a guitar from a pawn shop," Mavis remembers, "but it was in the closet for a while because he was singing with an all-male group, the Trumpet Jubilees. Well, these guys—there were six of them—they wouldn't come to rehearsal. Pops would go to rehearsal, and there might be three there. Then

he'd go again, maybe there'd be two. He came home one night disgusted, went in the closet, got that little guitar, and told us children to come sit on the floor in the living room. So we sat in a circle, and he began giving us the notes to songs he and his sisters and brothers would sing when they were in Mississippi. That's what got the Staple Singers started."

From the early Fifties through the mid Sixties, the Staples recorded for four different labels and established a lofty reputation on the gospel circuit. At the same time, the impassioned message of freedom in many of their songs became inextricably connected to the growing civil rights movement in the South. Marty Stuart can still recall when he first heard the group: "It was the summer of 1964 in my home town, Philadelphia, Mississippi, the place where those three civil rights workers—(Michael) Schwerner, (James) Chaney, and (Andrew) Goodman—were murdered. Everything in my hometown went upside down [after that]; the world drew down on Philadelphia. But the first rays of light that even suggested healing and moving forward were the Staple Singers' versions of 'Uncloudy Day' and 'Will the Circle Be Unbroken.' They were played on the radio



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[top] Jeff Tweedy and Mavis Staples with the tapes used for *Don't Lose This*; [left] Pops with Fender Jazzmaster, Cleotha, Yvonne, and Mavis Staples at a 1970 television performance in New York City.

this stuff that was overdubbed later. It's this transmission from another time and place that makes you wish you could go back there."

When asked about the recording today, Mavis doesn't dwell on its historical significance. Instead, she fondly recalls the enthusiastic backtalk of one audience member captured throughout the album. "His name was Willie," she laughs. "He used to come to every program we did in Chicago. We'd be up there singing serious songs and he'd keep going, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!' It makes me so glad to hear him say that again. Back then, I wasn't even thinking about them taping us, but the guys who did [the reissue] were nervous. They wanted to know if they should take out something Pops said, if it offended me. I said, 'What is it?' 'Well, Mavis, Pops said you were an ugly baby.' Oh, he would say that on stage all the time, and he would always get a big laugh off of that. I said, 'That don't bother me—and he was telling the truth!'"

Three years after the release of *Freedom Highway*, the Staples cut a deal with another record company, the storied Stax in Memphis. There

repeatedly, and you could hear them coming out of people's houses. They sounded like ghosts singing in a cotton field. I was captivated."

Less than a year later, the Staples performed for a service at Chicago's New Nazareth Baptist Church that was recorded by Epic Records and released as *Freedom Highway*. It had only been a few weeks since the momentous voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and Pops (a friend of Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders)

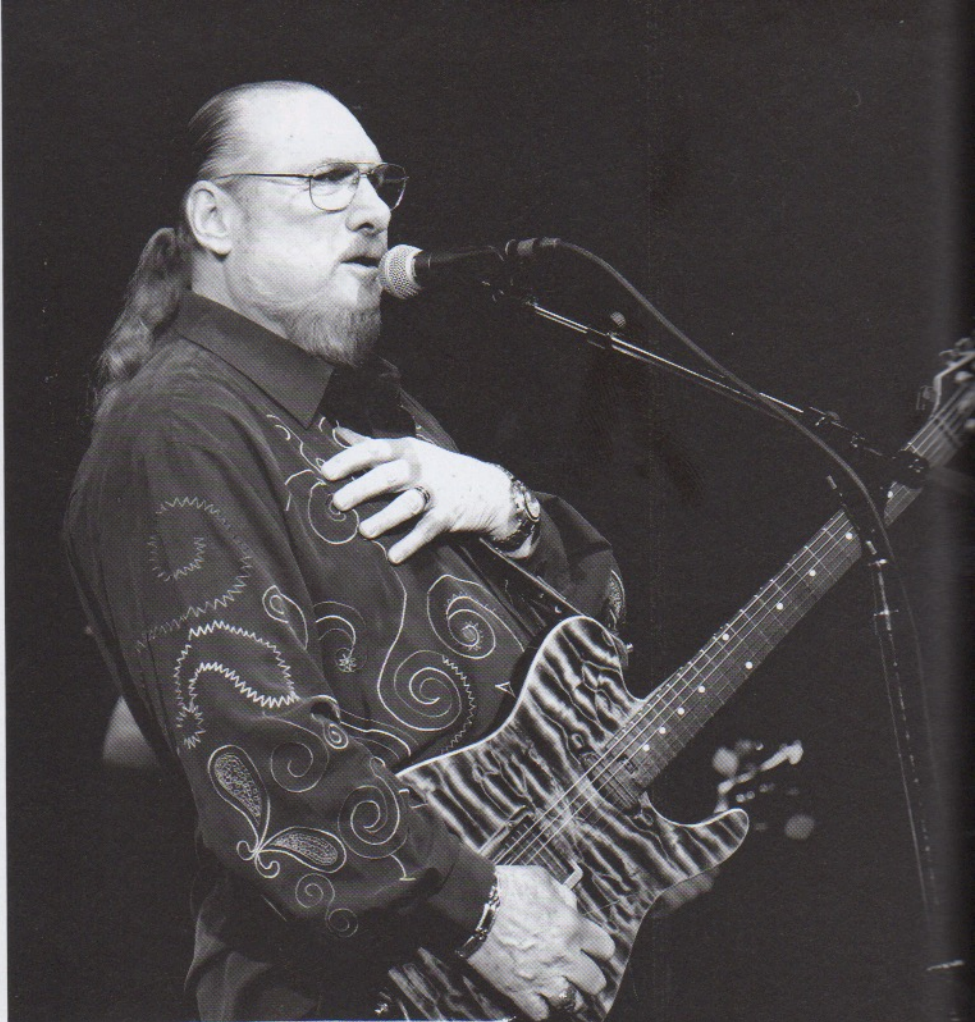
had just written a song, "Freedom Highway," celebrating the event. As he puts it in his introduction to the song's live debut, "From that march, word was revealed and a song was composed." The sense of jubilation in the crowd as the family sings its key line—"Made up my mind and I won't turn around"—is still nearly palpable five decades later.

"It's such an intimate album, and there's a powerful connection with the audience," Jeff Tweedy notes. "It's not like *Kiss Alive!* with all

they would reach the heights of their fame. "When [Stax executive vice president] Al Bell told me we'd signed the Staple Singers, I felt like I'd lifted off the ground," says Steve Cropper, then the label's house guitarist. "Everyone in that group was a superstar in my mind. I'd been idolizing Pops for a while, like every young guitar player. I first heard the Staple Singers' records when I worked at the Satellite Records shop and was knocked out by his playing. It was like, here's a tremolo being used properly!"

Cropper would go on to produce several tracks for the Staples, including "Long Walk to D.C.," another civil rights-related classic. He also appeared with Pops and Albert King on the joint album, *Jammed Together*. "Pops wasn't really a soloist," he says, "but his attack on the chords and the way he'd throw in little fills and trills—Allen Toussaint used to call it 'using colors'—he pulled it all together. He was the glue. And even more important, he was an amazing guy. I was just a skinny white kid, but he completely accepted me with no prejudices. He was the kind of guy you'd want to be your dad or your granddad, someone you know you can go talk to, who makes everybody feel comfortable."

Although many of the Staple Singers' best-known songs like "I'll Take You There," "Respect Yourself," and "Let's Do It Again" date from the Seventies, both during and just after



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their Stax period, some purists prefer their earlier material. Count Jeff Tweedy among them. "I love those Seventies records, but the songs that they came through the clearest on are the ones that were more stripped down," he says. "They didn't need string sections. The simplest elements of their music never lost their appeal or their freshness to me."

Tweedy brought this aesthetic to the tracks that make up *Don't Lose This*, which Mavis (who'd worked with Tweedy on her two most recent solo albums) presented to him and asked him to, in his words, "resurrect." Recorded in 1998, when Pops was 83, they were originally

supposed to be the core of the final Staple Singers album; the voices of Mavis and her sisters Yvonne and Cleotha (who passed away in 2013) are all prominently featured. But before long, Mavis recalls, all concerned had decided, "Let's let Pops have this one." The recordings were never completed, but Pops took one last listen to them shortly before his death and told Mavis, "Don't lose this," giving the album its title.

Paring the tracks down to their essential elements—Pops' seemingly effortless singing, his bluesy guitar playing, and the strong, sure voices of his daughters—Tweedy also added new instrumental overdubs in some places.

Steve Cropper with custom Peavey at Nashville's City Winery, January 2015

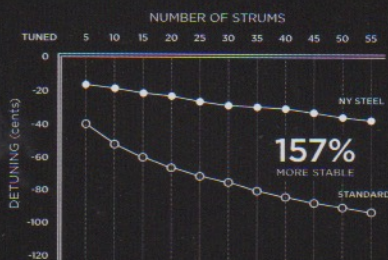
The results are raw but right. "To me, I'm just doing what I was supposed to do," Mavis says of the album's long-delayed arrival. "I'm doing what Pops asked me to do. And it's really a time to rejoice, because it sounds so good."

One of Pops' final public appearances was in 1999, for a ceremony at the Mississippi state capitol in Jackson. He, with fellow Mississippian Marty Stuart, was being presented with a Governor's Arts Award. "In the morning we

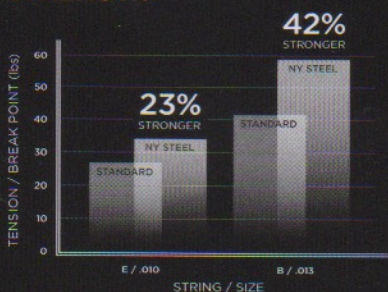


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Pops with his rosewood Telecaster at the 1986 Chicago Blues Festival.

were called to stand on the floor of the Senate," Stuart remembers. "Pops just took over and started preaching. He said, 'I never dreamed when I was a little boy I'd stand here, much less see people of color here.' Then he had all the state senators and everybody in the gallery stand up, hold hands, and sing 'Will the Circle Be Unbroken.' Later that day, when he received his award, he asked me to play guitar while he sang that same song. What an honor. I'll take that moment to heaven with me. That was the last time I saw him."

Not long after Pops' death, Mavis and the family gave Stuart the rosewood Telecaster Pops played on "The Weight" during the Band's 1976 final concert, seen in Martin Scorsese's

The Last Waltz. "I thought they were just letting me see the guitar," he says, "but they handed it over to me. It was like being handed Excalibur, so that's what I've always called it."

A core track on *Don't Lose This* is Charles A. Tindley's 1901 hymn "Better Home," which the Staples originally recorded in 1962. "That was Pops' favorite song," Mavis says. "It had to be on the record." In a high, relaxed voice that eerily seems not to have aged a second since the making of *Freedom Highway*, Pops sings: "I have started out to find a better home/Where no trials of this life shall ever come/There with relatives and friends/I shall be so happy then/In the presence of the Lord all the time."

"He's walkin' round his better home now, with his guitar," Mavis says, "but I still feel his presence. Pops is right there with me." **TM**