

the Staple Singers

UNCLOUDY DAY

Roebuck Staples was born in the tiny rural Delta town of Winona, Mississippi, one hundred miles south of Memphis, on December 28, 1915. At the age of eight, he went to work on the Dockery plantation, nearly ten thousand acres in rural Mississippi, where a young Roebuck saw Charley Patton, Willie Lee Brown and other blues musicians perform, though his earliest exposure to music was through the a capella singing in church. A devoutly religious young man, Roebuck put the church before chitlin, and opted to join a gospel quartet formed out of members and friends of his local Methodist church. The sixteen-year-old Roebuck possessed a high tenor voice at this time. Roebuck learned much about vocal group dynamics. Always staying in the background, he rarely assumed lead.

The unrecorded Golden Trumpets of Mississippi toured churches on weekends in both Carroll and Montgomery Counties. Roebuck also sang in his local church choir and even became assistant choir director for a spell. His church would hold outdoor singing conventions on adjoining plantations whereat the joyous swell of choral voices inspired the impressionable lad. Although considered sinful by the church, he dabbled at playing the guitar but never took the instrument seriously enough to learn how to play it to any degree of proficiency. The Spartan Staples home lacked the luxury of a piano and radio set.

Before joining The Golden Trumpets, Roebuck sang alongside his brothers and sisters who had formed a gospel ensemble taken to rehearsing out in the back yard. Roebuck grew up surrounded by his thirteen siblings. At age eighteen, the resourceful Roebuck had improved his lot by earning five dollars a night singing and dancing for gamblers and farm folk at a local juke joint. "My peers," recounts Roebuck, "would only make three dollars a night and that's if they were able to find work." Planning for a better life some day, Roebuck saved whatever extra cash came his way. It was during his studies at grammar school in Drew that Roebuck met, fell in love with and eventually married Oceola Ware, an attractive gal from a family of seven youngsters. Cleotha, the couple's first daughter, was born April 11, 1935.

Soon thereafter, Roebuck turned his back on country life and headed north for Chicago, then considered the Promised Land. If luck enough to find a job, he would wire for his family whom he had left in the care of relatives. Finding stockyard employment, Roebuck made arrangements to bring his loved ones up to Chicago. His family had by now grown by one, with the addition of a son they called Pervis. "The stockyard job paid fifty cents an hour," states Roebuck, "which amounted to earning about five cents an hour if compared to pay back home." By the close of 1936, the Staples family was temporarily ensconced at the house of Roebuck's brother, The Rev. Chester A. Staples. Roebuck joined the Baptist church and began to sing with a quartet called The Trumpet Jubilees in the evenings while working a variety of day jobs in the stockyards, on construction sites, and finally in a steel mill.

Roebuck sang high tenor third lead in The Trumpet Jubilees. The Staples family multiplied with the addition of three daughters, Yvonne, born October 23, 1938, Mavis, June 10, 1939, and the late Cynthia Marie born 1941. Just to expand a little on family member history, we start with Oceola Ware Staples. Oceola never served as singing partner in The Staple Singers group. She likes to refer to herself as "The production partner." "I encouraged my family to go out on the highways and byways and spread the word of the gospel," said Oceola to Lacy J. Banks, author of the article "The Staple Singers—The Message is the Music" (*Black Stars magazine*, June 17, 1972.) "We're just taking gospel music to people wherever they are now, rather than telling them to come to us," she added.

1941 was a tough year for the Staples family. Roebuck was laid off work and had to turn to Social Security. He

tried a host of different jobs after this, including one at a fertilizer plant which he hated because the chemicals used to make him sick. In an August 1996 article written by Bill Carpenter in *Goldmine Magazine* ("Staple Singers—God's Greatest Hitmakers"), Mavis Staples tells of an early musical event. "I was about seven when I first saw my father play guitar," she said. "He had gone to a pawn shop and had paid \$30 to \$35 for it." In the original liner notes to the record you hold in your hands, the Staples' first LP Uncloudy Day, the writer (H.R.R.?) states that Roebuck's first guitar cost him \$60.

Mavis goes on to say, "It had only three strings on it and he had to save enough money to buy three more. He played the three string instrument as best he could, then called us kids into the room, sat us down on the floor and gave us parts to sing along with him as he played." This must have been difficult to do, as the instrument was unable to make chords to fix harmonies. Roebuck must have hummed the parts to his kids.

The earliest publicity shot shows Roebuck with a Kay guitar, and it is quite likely that this might have been the instrument purchased at the pawn shop. As time progressed and the Staples had a little more cash, the Kay was set aside in favor of an Orpheum. In all likelihood, the Orpheum, not a familiar manufacturer's model, was a generic signature for a guitar made by a reputable company and sold by a department store chain, such as Sears Roebuck (no pun intended.) Later on, Roebuck sprang for an expensive Gibson Les Paul, an instrument he played throughout most of his Vee Jay contract. The Kay came on the market in the late 1940s and survived into the early fifties. The Orpheum was probably offered to the public around 1953 or 1954. The Gibson was of mid fifties vintage.

The Staples family joined The Mt. Eagle Baptist Church in 1946. A local minister by the name of Lathrop heard the performance and was impressed enough to invite the family to sing at his church the following Sunday. Soon invitations multiplied as word spread throughout the churchgoing community. Roebuck decided to increase their fortunes by teaching the kids a program of songs. The Staples toured the local church circuit pushing into Gary and Milwaukee on some weekends. Soon the Staples were given regular Sunday radio spots on the A.M. frequency. From WTAQ at the Wedgewood Tower, the Staples enjoyed two fifteen minute spots, one at three, the other at eight p.m. the program usually featured two songs sandwiched with public announcements. Rudy Roach was program director.

The Staple Singers began singing on gospel caravans alongside other aspiring aggregations. Lacy J. Banks asserts that the Staples' straight forward, down-home, simple melodic approach coupled with their technique of bending notes in hand with Mavis's swinging, sensuously rasping and always built-in rhythmic voice which often

seemed to play against Roebuck's bluesy vibrato chords, became a source of ridicule. To some singers out on the gospel highway, The Staples sounded too "country." Others called them the laughing stock of the gospel circuit. Some gospel artists refused to have them on their program and would remark, "Why don't that old man take those kids home?" But many of the reproofs proved to be little more than jealousy.

In the spring of 1953, Roebuck, Pervis, Cleotha and Mavis gathered around a small mike and two-track Ampex tape machine to record "These Are They," and "Faith and Grace." The songs were self-released back to back on a 78 as Royal 105. The idea was to promote The Staple Singers at programs as well as garner air-play on gospel programs within a few hours driving distance. Only 500 copies were pressed. Somewhere around this time, Evelyn Gay, the singer, pianist and arranger with the Gay Sisters befriended the Staples after hearing them at a



Mavis Staples

local Chicago church engagement. Evelyn was notorious for doing good deeds for the church community—she would pay her fans carfare to get home if they lacked the money—took the group under her wing. “Best of all,” says her sister Mildred, “Evelyn encouraged the Staples to bring out their country and western habit of coloring a song.” The Staples had a white hillbilly way of stretching a phrase, a style of singing adopted by spiritual singing bluegrass groups like The Blue Ridge Mountain Boys. Evelyn thought the group ready to record and took them down to United Records.

In a basement on “Record Row” on September 7, 1953, The Staple Singers attended their first significant Chicago recording session for an independent label. Roebuck (lead tenor/guitar), Mavis (contralto and bass), Cleotha (alto) and Purvis (tenor) cut five songs. United head Allen, being unaware of Roebuck’s emerging Delta guitar picking talent, relegated his accompaniment to the background placing instead Evelyn Gay’s piano to the fore. This, of course, was a big mistake and probably explains why the group’s initial United release was not as successful as it should have been. Allen chose “Won’t You Sit Down” backed with “It Rained Children” for the group’s first single release. It went nowhere. Allen wanted the group to cross over and record R & B, but of course Roebuck refused to go along.

The Staples continued to give stunning live performances. Lacy J. Banks states that Roebuck always leads his family in prayer before launching into the music program. By the Fall of 1955, The Staple Singers were fast becoming celebrities among Chicago church folk. After glowing recommendations by singer/arranger/organist Maceo Woods, the group was courted by Ewart Abner at Vee Jay Records. Both Vivian and Jimmy Bracken (owners of Vee Jay) took to the Staples’ release of “Won’t You sit down” and consequently a contract was offered to the group.

Roebuck was smart and had negotiated a financial advance for the family. When Roebuck moved to Chicago in the mid thirties, he had only an eighth grade education. Determined to complete high school, he attended classes at night. At school, he learned how to manage his family’s musical interests. In short, he learned how to take care of business.

The first Vee Jay session took place in Chicago on November 1, 1955. It yielded six songs, four of which saw subsequent release. The melancholic “If I Could Hear My Mother Pray” and the soul-drenched “God’s Wonderful Love,” filled with Mavis’s aching mellismas and soaring throat-scorching phrasings, were chosen as the group’s first Vee Jay outing. The single failed to gain notice in *Billboard*, and as Roebuck was adamant about not having his family tour to promote the platter until after Mavis had finished high school, the release passed unnoticed.

Roebuck put the kids’ education first, which explains why the family did not record again until September 11, 1956. Roebuck had written a beautiful, touching gospel hymn entitled “Uncloudy Day.” This is how Mavis explained the recording of it: “I had been real sick and had to sit down to sing. I was kinda weak that day and as it turned out, we recorded four songs. On the session, everyone worked in one studio. The next session followed after the last. Maceo Woods first, then the Spaniels did their recording after him. I guess Vee Jay were saving money by not having everybody do albums, just singles,” she explained.

“Uncloudy Day” became one of the best-selling gospel singles of 1956. *Billboard* magazine for December that year declared “Uncloudy Day” the hottest spiritual the (Vee Jay) diskery had had to date. “Orders are coming in for the wax like it was a blues number” Ab (Ewart Abner) gushed. This mournfully slow, movingly beautiful song has been described as a choral crescendo of rising harmonies which surely lift the spirit into realms of infinite rapture.

When it came time to collect material for the first Staple Singers LP, it was a no-brainer to title it after their big hit. “Uncloudy Day” had enjoyed major airplay, particularly in Southern state. The songs from that first single appear here, “Mother” and “God’s Wonderful Love,” a song supposedly written by Jimmy Bracken, co-owner of Vee Jay Records. As so often happened during these times, label owners saw fit, for a number of reasons, to assume the rights to a song they had chosen to put out.

On the group’s second session, Woods used his drummer Paul Gussman to add pace to the recordings. This

is the session that gave us the “Uncloudy Day.” The song, a.k.a. “Unclouded Day,” was first recorded in the black tradition back in 1927 by Rev. Edward W. Clayborn, “the Guitar Evangelist,” for the Vocalion label, and probably dates back to an earlier time. Here it is ascribed to Roebuck, who, we must suppose, rearranged the song enough to gain the rights.

The underside of the single, “I Know I Got Religion,” written by Roebuck, also deserves merit. One other song from the second session, the mid-tempoed “Swing Down Chariot,” made it onto the album. The lead honchos at Vee Jay saw fit to ascribe authorship to Roebuck knowing full well that it dates back to slavery. Changing the title to “Let Me Ride” supposedly gives them license to do so.

The third session of March 22, 1957 gave us five other songs included here: Mavis’ marvelous “On My Way to Heaven” (Part 2), “I’m Coming Home,” the remarkable “I Had a Dream,” “Help Me Jesus” and the gorgeous “Low Is the Way (To The Upper Room)” written by Rev. Alex Bradford.

Pervis left the group to serve in the military, so the Staple Singers were reduced to a quartet—Roebuck, Mavis, Cleotha and Yvonne—when the time came for their fourth session on January 6, 1959. Four songs were completed. Two, “I’m leaning” and “Going away,” an ensemble piece, were chosen to complete Uncloudy Day. But first, the aforementioned two songs were released on a single in March 1959. Both were top-rated at 4 stars in Billboard.

In September, Vee Jay announced a 17-album “special fall album” deal which included the “Uncloudy Day” collection. They boldly asserted that they would set up a world-wide distribution web with the Rank Organization in England. *Uncloudy Day* was subsequently issued on Disques Vogue in France and Fontana in England during the early 1960s.

-Opal Louis Nations



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All photos courtesy of Opal Louis Nations

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