the Staple Singers

FAITH & GRACE

A FAMILY JOURNEY 1953 – 1976

The Staple Singers' Early Days

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 in 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, 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 someday, 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 lucky enough to find a job, he would wire for his family whom he had left in the care of his 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 stockyard, 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 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 liked 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."

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."

The Staple Singers began singing on gospel caravans alongside other aspiring aggregations. Lacy J. Banks asserts that the Staples' straightforward, down-home, simple melodic approach coupled with their technique of bending notes in hand with Mavis' 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 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 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 and took the ground 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 was 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. 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' aching melismas and soaring throat-scorching phrases, 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.

"Uncloudy Day" enjoyed major airplay, particularly in Southern states. The song remained popular throughout the traditional gospel community and has been covered by folks like Willie Nelson, Candi Staton, Myrna Summers and B.J. Thomas. In 1957, Mavis finished high school, Roebuck quit the steel mill, and the group hit the road full-time. They spread their brand of joyful music all over the world.

— Opal Louis Nations

Opal Louis Nations, author of *The Sensational Nightingales: The Story of Joseph "Jo Jo" Wallace and the Early Days of the Sensational Nightingales,* produced the "Legendary Gospel Series" for Fantasy Records and the "There Is No Sweeter Sound" gospel collection for Sony Music. His music articles appear regularly in U.K.-based *Blues and Rhythm Magazine.*