THE STAPLE SINGERS

Will the circle be Unbroken?

During his studies at grammar school in Drew, Mississippi, a young Roebuck Staples 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, when Roebuck was nineteen years old. Soon thereafter, Roebuck turned his back on country life and headed north for Chicago, then considered the Promised Land for ambitious African-Americans. If lucky 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," Roebuck said, "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 (not to be confused with the recorded group by the same name out of Nashville) 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 often referred 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," Oceola said 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.

Mavis Staples

First daughter Cleotha Staples managed over the years to intertwine two careers. Cleotha had just been graduated from Doolittle Grammar School in Chicago when the family decided to organize itself into a singing group. After completing studies at Dunbar Trade School where she specialized in dressmaking, Cleotha went to work at Hart Schaffner & Marx clothiers, where she ended up sewing shoulder pads into coats. She supplemented her income with occasional work for the Post office. Cleotha later enrolled at Wilson Junior College where she graduated with secretarial skills. With the phenomenal success of "Uncloudy Day" in 1956, she took on a second career. In July 1959, Cleotha married Edgar M. Harris.

First and only son Pervis had had quite a bit of singing experience behind him before joining the family group. He had sung on various school programs and music festivals, performing both folk ballads and spirituals, even continued outside vocal engagements all through grammar school and Dunbar High (all the Staples kids attended Dunbar High.) Purvis's army enlistment came about in 1958; he served first at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri and

later Fort Lee in Virginia. Pervis's commanding officer had heard the young recruit sing and encouraged him to join the Army Choral Group, where he continued to flex his pipes until his honorable discharge in September 1960.

The Staples' second daughter Yvonne took Purvis's place in the family group while he was away. Yvonne pursued a secretarial track in preparation for a career in the business world. Ending up with a major Chicago company, Yvonne found satisfying and promising rewards. Her full-time commitment to the Staple Singers during the early 1960s brought a strong and vibrant "high-end" to the group.

Mavis Staples, one of the strongest and ablest gospel leads in post-war gospel, was born at Cook County Hospital in Chicago. A near death experience touched Mavis twice during childhood. At eight, Mavis swallowed a tack which lodged in her throat. The danger was acute, and hope for survival seemed bleak. After two days of anxious observation, doctors successfully removed the tack, and Mavis recovered. At age eleven, Mavis complained of a pain in her side. Her complaint did not seem serious enough to warrant further investigation, until a sudden spasm of pain led to a hasty examination. Her appendix had burst. Immediate surgery saved her life. Happily, all went smoothly after this; Mavis came back stronger than ever.

Cynthia Marie, the youngest daughter, could also sing but, choosing to avoid the limelight, served as quartet secretary for as long as she could. Oceola worked nights in downtown Chicago at the Morrison Hotel. She had a weakness for gambling. Whenever Rev. C.L. Franklin (Aretha's father) came to town, the two would get together and sit around playing cards. Roebuck must have whispered many a sad sinner's prayer on those long, cold winter evenings.

Roebuck kept his kids occupied every night with family singalongs. "We'd sit on the floor in a circle," Mavis recalls. "After six or seven at night, we had to come in the house and to make the hours pass quickly sing songs 'til it was time to go to bed. he taught us in the style that his brothers and sisters would sing. We never thought then that it would lead to a career." Mavis insists that if homework had to be done, they would always start singing right after.

Cleotha Staples

At the beginning, Mavis sang background tenor and Purvis bass. The overall effect sounded awkward, so Roebuck switched the two. After Mavis's near-fatal accident, her voice seemed to have deepened. Roebuck listened to the new arrangement and thought it perfect. Trouble arose when Roebuck insisted after the switch that Mavis assume second lead after himself, as Purvis had done. Mavis cried and threw tantrums, but threats of whippings soon brought Mavis around.

The Staple Singers didn't appear in public until at least five years later. Roebuck had little idea then of how well his children could sing or how far he could develop his music, with or without the help of his family. Mavis often listened to her friend's radio, and developing an affection for rhythm and blues, she mimicked all the singers of the day. Even as a young kindergartner, Mavis was reprimanded for singing "The Turkey Is A Funny Bird" around the house, a song her teacher had taught her. While at school in late 1945, Mavis, staying in Mississippi at her grandmother's with her sister Yvonne, caught the spell of Ella Johnson's voice wailing "Since I Fell For You." The tune's refrain came wafting through windows from neighborhood radios as Mavis walked to school, accompanied by her sister.

Mavis liked the song so well she sang it at a school variety show. "My uncle, my mother's brother, who was sixteen, was there. All of a sudden, I see him coming around the side of the auditorium, up towards the stage." Mavis thought her uncle was rushing forward to praise her for her singing, but instead she was snatched off the stage into the shadows. Not a word was spoken until the pair reached home. Mavis was ordered outside

to cut switches for a whipping to be administered by her grandmother. "You don't sing blues in this family, you sing church songs," Granny hollered between strokes. Mavis reported the event to her mother up in Chicago, and begged to come home. Mom acquiesced.

The Staples family joined The Mt. Eagle Baptist Church in 1946. A conflict of information surrounds the occurrence of the Staples family's singing debut. One source indicates that the event came about in 1946 at the Mount Zion Church in Chicago pastored by Roebuck's brother, Rev. Chester A. Staples. 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. Bill Carpenter asserts in his Goldmine article that Katie, Roebuck's sister, had rented a room at the family house, and that when she caught them rehearsing in the living room, she invited them to sing at her church. "We caught the streetcar," says Mavis, "and Pops had his guitar. Aunt Katie bought us our first little suits, for Cleotha and I. Yvonne was not a part of the group at this time." (Yvonne and Purvis started switching places beginning in 1959.)

"We went to Aunt Katie's church and sang "If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again," Mavis adds. The song is traditional, but Roebuck's arrangement gave it an earthier feeling. It was one of the few songs rehearsed by the kids from start to finish. The church called for three encores. An offering was taken, and the group received the grand sum of seven dollars (or possibly $17.50, according to a statement made by Roebuck to Bill Ellis of the Commercial Appeal.) The family was desperately in need of income, so every little bit helped. All this took place in 1948, according to Mavis.

"Every now and then I'd have to borrow ten dollars from one of my eldest sisters just to keep going, to see that my kids got plenty to eat," Roebuck recalled. "After singing at Katie's church, I said I'd borrow no more, and we haven't since."

Pervis Staples

In Lacy J. Banks' interview with the Staple Singers, Roebuck recalls yet another beginning engagement. "One rainy winter's night in 1951, we were called to substitute in a local gospel program. The group's entire repertoire at this point amounted to the handsome sum of two songs—"I Know I Got Religion" and "Sit Down Servant." We headed for the Holy Trinity Baptist Church to sing. The church was packed with two hundred people," Roebuck remembered, "and we were really nervous. We said a prayer and ventured out and sang our two numbers. The congregation gave us a thunderous ovation and asked us to sing each of our "A" and "B" selections, three times. An attending minister asked us to sing at his church the following Sunday. We sang there and got our first pay, a free-will offering of $34 split 50/50 with the church." In all likelihood, Roebuck confuses the Holy Trinity memory with the event Mavis recalls in conjunction with Aunt Katie's church.

The Staples' first real break came with the heavy-selling *Uncloudy Day* album, released in the fall of 1959. This record you hold in your hands here is the family's follow-up LP, *Will The Circle Be Unbroken*.

The popularity of the Staple Singers' first recordings for Vee Jay resulted in a ten-month, almost endless, schedule of gigs up and down the country—sometimes far away from Chicago's Universal Studios on Ontario Street. Their second album drew from the Staples' second and fourth through seventh sessions, taking us up through May 1960, starting with "Come On Up In (Bright) Glory"—a steady, rolling song recorded by Rich Amerson on Folkways six years earlier which indicates a firmly rooted history. "Let's Go Home," a Roebuck song, is delivered justly in the inimitable Staple style. "So Soon" is most definitely a fine Staple-made composition,

with its moaning calls and anguished responses.

"Downward Road" in its "Stapleized" arrangement is quite different from the Selah Jubilees' treatment or the Golden Gate Quartet's 1949 rendition. Again Roebuck gets writer's credit. The upbeat "Pray On" is a Roebuck composition that takes its lyrics from a traditional convict song, but "Don't Knock," with its lyrical call to glory, is most certainly a 'Pops' piece.

"Don't Drive Me Away," or "Don't Drive Your Children Away," as the Fairfield Four sang it in 1950, has a long pedigree. The Selah Jubilees even recorded it a year prior. The Heavenly Gospel Singers enjoyed some success with it back in 1949. The title song, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" goes way, way back. The first black artist to record it was the Rev. M.L. Gipson in 1927 while leading his sanctified congregation in song. A.P. Carter, patriarch of the Carter Family, was responsible for finding and placing the song in the white country canon.

"Somebody Save Me" has been recorded in varying arrangements by at least twenty-five significant black artists since World War II. Prof. James Earle Hines recorded it in the late Forties, and the Colemanaires did a nice job in 1954. The Staple Singers' version is, of course, unique to them. Finally, "Too Close" is the Roebuck arrangement of the hit-selling song written and recorded by Prof. Alex Bradford on Specialty in 1953. Again, Roebuck and Mavis bring their own personal stamp. The song was recorded a second time in 1960 with only Roebuck on vocals (that take is available on Vee Jay single 893 and later reissues on other labels).

Will The Circle Be Unbroken sold well over the years, having seen vinyl reissue on Hob, Up Front, Trip, Everest, and a number of other labels since.

Yvonne Staples

As Anthony Heilbut points out in *The Gospel Sound* (Limelight Editions, 1992), the Staples were the novelty sensation of the late 1950s. Roebuck, the shrewdest manager since Gertrude Ward, had them booked with the most professional groups. Roebuck was clearly out to produce another Aretha. In an interview with Mavis, she spoke to me of her mother, Oceola, who had five siblings – two sisters and three brothers, but none showed any interest in music. She added that Oceola's part in the family group was to bribe radio deejays.

Oceola would offer her excellent and somewhat renowned potato pies in exchange for family airtime. Mavis said that this did not always work. When the group auditioned with two songs for program director Rudy Roach at Chicago's WTAQ in the Wedgewood Tower, they were turned down, so "Pops" paid for a regular Sunday morning fifteen-minute program and had Cleotha make the announcements. "When we were still living on 33rd Street," she added, "Pervis sat in with the Highway Q.C.'s and took part in 'quartet battles.' Sam Cooke and Pervis became close childhood friends. They'd skip through the streets yelling for the watermelon man."

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