

Remembering Cleotha Staples and the Staple Singers

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Cleotha Staples, a member of the popular gospel, folk and R&B group the Staple Singers, died recently at the age of 78. Staples passed away at her home on the South Side of Chicago on February 21. She had been struggling with Alzheimer's disease for some 12 years.

Perhaps best known today for their hits of the 1970s, including "I'll Take You There" and "Respect Yourself," the group's career spanned almost half a century. Their most successful artistic period, lasting from the late 1950s through the 1960s, was bound up with the struggles of the civil rights movement and the fight to end the Vietnam war.

Roebuck "Pops" Staples formed the Staple Singers with daughters Mavis and Cleotha and son Pervis in 1948. Daughter Yvonne would also join the group in the late 1950s. Cleotha, a soprano, would play a vital role in providing the richly textured harmony vocals that gave support to the lead lines of Mavis and Pops.

The Staples were a working class family who knew something of real life. Prior to her career in music, Cleotha had trained as a dressmaker at the Dunbar Trade School, eventually getting a job sewing shoulder pads into coats for the Hart, Schafner and Marx clothing company. Family patriarch Pops Staples (1914-2000) grew up on a cotton plantation in Mississippi, before finding work in the steel mills and stockyards of Chicago in the 1930s. These experiences counted for something. There was a sense in which the Staples' gospel music had its feet planted on the ground as much as in the heavens.

The family made their first appearances as a music group in Chicago churches and would make their first recordings by 1953. Listening to their early recordings, one is struck by the shimmering, blues-influenced guitar of Pops (he had studied with blues pioneer Charley Patton as a younger man), the warm harmonies

of Pervis and Cleotha. Mavis's sensibilities as a lead vocalist seemed to reach beyond her young age.

The 1959 album *Uncloudy Day* is certainly worth hearing. The single of the same name was enormously popular, selling a million copies. The hypnotic "This May Be The Last Time," later adapted by the Rolling Stones for their 1965 hit "The Last Time," is another standout.

Galvanized by the struggle against official segregation then underway in the South, the Staples' music began to change. The fight for equality became the central concern of their work. Songs like "Freedom Highway" or "Why Am I Treated So Bad" movingly expressed the anger and hopes of masses of black workers and all those outraged by inequality in the southern US.

The latter song was among the Staples' best. Easy-going, "cool" even when angry, the song slinks its way forward with a kind of unshakeable determination. "This old world is in a bad condition," says Pops, recalling the mistreatment of black youth breaking through the segregated schools system. The song urges the students forward. Reportedly a favorite of Martin Luther King Jr., the Staples would perform the song at several civil rights rallies at which King spoke.

Departing from the gospel music world, the Staples associated themselves with more politicized folk music circles and would give memorable performances at the Newport Folk Festival. They came to know Bob Dylan when he was making his most compelling and oppositional work, and recorded his startling "Masters of War" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." "Even Jesus would never forgive what you do," sang the top-selling gospel group to the "masters of war."

Following their increasing shift to "secular music," the Staples in 1968 began recording for the Memphis-

based Stax Records label, home to such remarkable Soul and R&B artists as Otis Redding, Carla Thomas and Sam & Dave. In addition to the recordings made with her family, Cleotha would at this time also share lead vocal duties with the talented Eddie Floyd on the song “It’s Too Late.”

The Staples’ recordings for Stax are among their most popular today. The hit singles “I’ll Take You There” and “Respect Yourself” continue to find an appreciative audience decades after they were recorded.

These and other later Staples recordings, however, seem slight compared with much of their earlier work. An inability to go beyond the limited, reformist perspective of the civil rights movement had its consequences for the Staples’ music. They had reached a kind of artistic impasse.

The end of Jim Crow was a victory, but one which did not guarantee social rights and an end to oppression for the masses of black workers, or any other section of the working class, in the US. That would have meant a break with official political channels and a fight against capitalism. Instead, a black middle class layer was cultivated and permitted entry into official life, while the living standards of black and white workers alike continued to come under attack.

The Staples—and not just they—were unable to dig further down into the more fundamental questions of class and social life. In this context, the moral appeals for “respect” and the songs of self-empowerment the group continued to turn out, however well-intentioned, felt increasingly weak.

In spite of these difficulties, the Staples continued to be a popular group throughout the 1970s and would continue to have hits in the decades that followed. They disbanded following Pops Staples’ death in 2000, just one year after their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

At their strongest, the Staple Singers, gifted with a powerful and moving stage presence, communicated the democratic aspirations felt by millions. They placed those concerns at the very heart of their work. Their contribution deserves to be remembered and revisited.



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