

## KENNEDY CENTER HONORS



CRISTIANO SIQUEIRA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

# She's still taking us there

With her family, gospel and soul icon **Mavis Staples** provided the soundtrack for the civil rights era. At 77, she hasn't stopped honing her art.

BY NEELY TUCKER  
IN CHICAGO

In a nondescript condominium on the south shore of this hard-nosed city, the elevator opens onto a bland hallway. Dark carpet, pale walls, closed doors, the vague scent of someone cooking the midday meal.

At the far end of the hall — the apartment with the view of Lake Michigan — a diminutive woman opens her door, smiles and enthusiastically waves.

It's Mavis Staples!

It really is! It's sort of amazing. Staples is one of the iconic figures of American popular music, and she's beckoning you inside, no publicist or agent or anything, ready to give you a hug. If she's 5 feet tall, she's not 5-foot-1. Childhood nickname was "Bubbles," for her bubbly disposition. Hasn't changed a lick.

"Come on in," she says, guiding you through the narrow kitchen, directing you to sit at the four-seat glass dining table. "You want some water, something to drink, anything like that?"

It's warm and cozy inside on this brilliant late-fall morning, the sunlight bouncing off the lake. Staples's condo, her home for the past 46 years, is surprisingly modest.

"People all the time are expecting me to be

living in some big, fancy place," she says, settling into a chair at the dining table. "Nah. This has always been fine for me. Cleo [her sister] used to live in the other building of the complex. Yvonne [her other sister] lives just up the street."

Pictures of infant and toddler relatives dot the fridge. A Tweety Bird cookie jar brightens the kitchen counter. It's just a few steps to the living room, which is filled with a television, a treadmill, a coffee table and a couch. Pictures of her with famous people decorate the walls and tables — the small framed photo on the dining table is of her and Stephen Colbert, mugging at the camera.

Staples was married briefly during the 1960s but never had children. This is her place alone in the world, and it's lived-in rather than elaborate. There's no diva to her.

"When I first moved in, white people started moving out," she says, because she was the first black person in the complex. "Then, when I got famous, I found out they were using me to sell the place: 'We got a celebrity living here!'"

She's 77 now, this youngest member of the gospel-infused Staple Singers, the Chicago-based siblings-and-their-dad group that be-

came the unofficial voice of the civil rights movement and then, in the 1970s, a strikingly original fusion of rhythm, blues and soul. "Freedom Highway." "I'll Take You There." "Respect Yourself." It has been six decades since Mavis first claimed national attention, her deep-beyond-her-years contralto elevating the family's recording of "Uncloudy Day" into another realm.

Now she's its last performing member.

Staples's younger sister, Cynthia, committed suicide in 1973. Her dad, Roebuck "Pops" Staples, died in 2000, a year after the group was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Cleotha died in 2013, after a long descent into Alzheimer's. Pervis, her older brother, is 80, long retired and living across town. Yvonne, who has been in ill health for years, is nearby.

Mavis is in a late-career renaissance, coming back from a spell of depression and career malaise after Pops's death. She has won two Grammys in the past five years, been the subject of a documentary and a biography, and toured this past summer with Nobel laureate Bob Dylan, who happened to propose marriage to her in the early 1960s.

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Half a century later, he came slouching into Staples's hotel room at the start of their tour, wearing a hoodie and mirrored sunglasses.

"Hey, Bobby! I've been wanting to see you so bad!" she recalls saying. And then, doing her best Dylan impression, she twists in her chair to give his gravelly response: "Well, if you'd married me, you could have seen me every day."

She gives a big, deep-throated laugh.

"I said, 'Don't do me like that! Let's get married now.'" Again, she turns in the chair, giving his response: "Oh, yeah yeah yeah, you come here — *now* you want to get married. It's a wonder he didn't say, 'Both of us are over the hill.'"

They would cross paths at folk festivals and concerts back in the day, and Dylan became infatuated. He wrote her love letters. (Long lost, she says, ruefully.) When her family was staying at a motel at the Newport Folk Festival in the early 1960s, he'd come by the girls' room and they'd stand on the sidewalk to talk in private. Pervis and Bob would horse around in the motel swimming pool.

On tour together this summer for the first time since, they talked almost every day.

"It was a bittersweet breakup" at the end of the tour, Staples says. "We had a really good time. We'd talk in his dressing room . . . during sound checks. He called me off the bus one day and we just walked and reminisced . . . he wanted to know about Yvonne, he was crazy about Yvonne. She would do most of the talking when we were all together."

This is about the time in the conversation it settles in, the level of royalty sitting next to you.

Her dad learned guitar as a child from blues legend Charley Patton on one of Mississippi's most infamous plantations. She went to elementary school with Lou Rawls and Sam Cooke. She opened for Mahalia Jackson while still a child. Before she was out of high school, she toured with Aretha Franklin and chatted backstage with a young Elvis Presley before he became a sensation.

Later, Mavis and her family were the gospel soundtrack to the civil rights movement. They often opened for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. when he was speaking at rallies. She knew Al Green before he was tired of being alone. Stevie Wonder ate dinner at their house all the time. Johnny Cash once hopped in a car with her and Dylan to ride to a festival. Curtis Mayfield produced her. Prince brought her out of the post-disco doldrums. Ry Cooder helped resurrect her career 20 years later. Jeff Tweedy of Wilco has produced her most recent albums.

Nearing 80, she does nearly 100 shows a year.

Greg Kot, the Chicago Tribune music critic for the past 26 years, is a friend of long standing and the author of "I'll Take You There: Mavis Staples, the Staple Singers and the March up Freedom's Highway."

"Mavis has never gotten her props, really, because she was never viewed as a queen, like Aretha or Mahalia," Kot says. "Mavis never did that. She folded herself into the family group and just never got her accolades as a singer in her own right. I'll go to my grave saying she's one of the best singers of the last half century and a member of one of the most important and pioneering groups of the past half century."

#### The group that Pops built

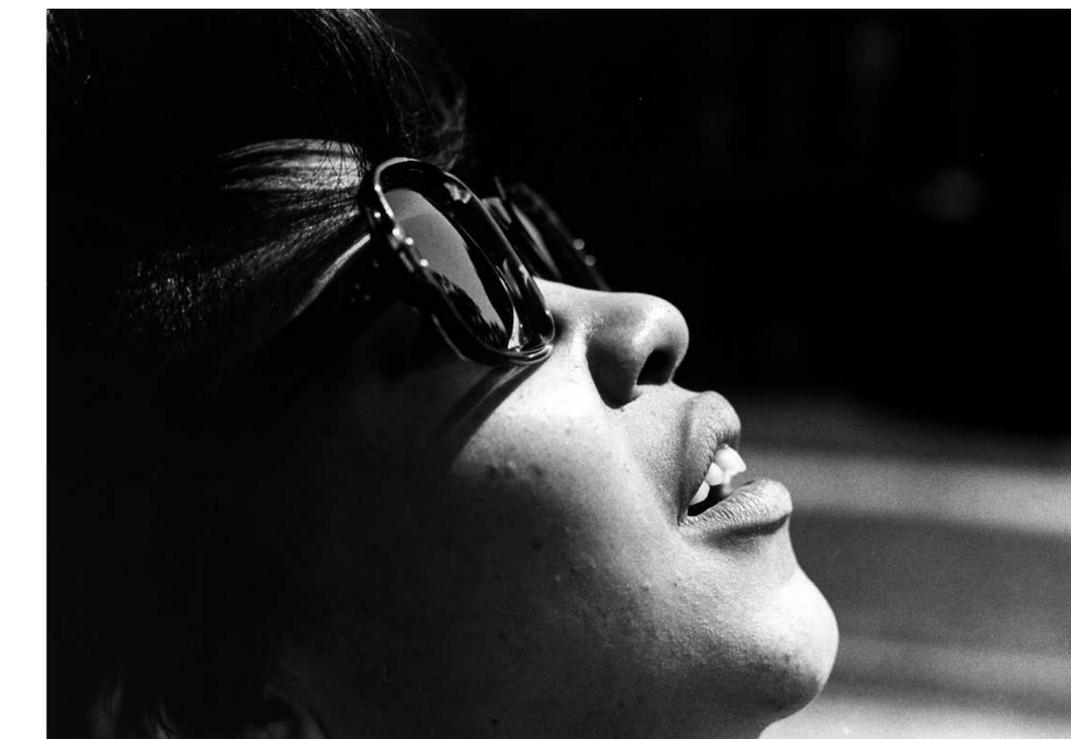
There's a school of thought about excellence, expounded upon by author Geoff Colvin, that "Talent Is Overrated." The idea is that what we call "talent" is mostly the product of years upon years of unseen work by the "talented" person, until they emerge onto a public stage, where we marvel at their "innate" ability.

It's a helpful way of looking at Mavis Staples, for magic like hers wasn't found in a bucket. It was made.

Pops was one of 14 children. He grew up in miserable poverty on the Dockery Plantation, deep in the heart of the Delta. He learned hard work during the week, blues on Saturday evenings and gospel on Sunday mornings. He learned guitar by watching Patton's handwork on the frets. One of his fellow sharecroppers was Chester Burnett, a.k.a. Howlin' Wolf.

Still a young man, he moved with his wife, Oceola, to Chicago. He worked on the floor of the Chicago stockyards. He pursued his music, a mixture of blues and gospel of the sort that Ray Charles would perfect, as if it were salvation itself.

Mavis was born in 1939. In their South Side neighborhood, Pervis recalled to Kot, "the broads



MAVIS STAPLES'S PERSONAL PHOTO COLLECTION

were tougher than the dudes." Their Aunt Billie would tell the stoop-sitting hard cases, "This is my nephew, and your ass don't need to talk to him."

It was the days of the Great Migration north. At any Chicago church or club, you could see Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Buddy Guy, Mahalia Jackson, Sarah Vaughan, John Lee Hooker.

After school, the church across the street would let the kids hang out. Cooke would sing and the girls would go crazy. Mavis remembers sitting with a group of other girls, all eating "potato chips, french fries and peppermint sticks" and swooning.

In the summers, their parents would send them back down to Mississippi, where they stayed at their grandmother's house in Mound Bayou, an all-black community that had been founded by freed slaves. Mary Ware's house sat right on Highway 61. She picked cotton, toted a Bible and took no mess. Her pick-your-switch discipline didn't appeal to upstart Mavis.

"I called my mom and asked if I could come home."

Meanwhile, Pops was frustrated with his fellow after-hours musicians who weren't taking their jam sessions seriously. So he sat his kids down in the living room in the evenings to teach them gospel. They learned four-part harmonies, hand-claps and syncopated foot stomps. Pops added the modern touch of an electric guitar with lots of reverb.

They first performed at Holy Trinity Baptist Church, just up the street. Mavis, 8, was so short she had to stand on a chair to reach the microphone. They sang two songs. The first was "If I Could

**TOP:** Mavis Staples went to elementary school with Lou Rawls and Sam Cooke, opened for Mahalia Jackson while still a child, toured with Aretha Franklin while in high school and chatted backstage with a young, still-unknown Elvis Presley — all before dating Bob Dylan in the 1960s. **RIGHT:** The Staple Singers, with Cleotha at left, Pervis at top, Mavis at right and Roebuck "Pops" Staples at bottom, in an early promotional portrait. **POPS** Staples learned guitar from blues legend Charley Patton on a Mississippi plantation. **BOTTOM:** Mavis Staples performs at the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles last month. **AT 77, she is doing upward of 100 shows a year.**



MAVIS STAPLES'S PERSONAL PHOTO COLLECTION

Hear My Mother Pray Again."

The crowd was floored, particularly by Mavis's low, powerful voice.

"South Side Chicago was home to a lot of first-generation immigrants who'd come up from the Deep South," Kot says, "and these songs they did were redolent of songs their mothers and grandmothers used to sing. So there was a great wave of nostalgia because of these young kids singing in the way they did."

Pops bought Sunday morning airtime in 15-minute segments at a local radio station. They'd do

two songs, then announce where they'd be performing. Churches shared their tithes as payment.

By the time Mavis sang her part on "Uncloudy Day" in 1956, drawing national acclaim as a teenage sensation, she had already been performing professionally for nearly a decade.

#### Singing for a movement

This was also the dawn of the civil rights era.

Emmett Till was murdered in Money, Miss., just a stone's throw from Pops's home town. Till's

mother brought the 14-year-old's disfigured corpse home to Chicago, where it lay in an open casket.

On a tour through Alabama, Pops heard Martin Luther King preach over the radio. Impressed, he took the girls to one of King's services and introduced himself.

The men bonded. Pops began to write songs that expressed what King was preaching. "Why (Am I Treated So Bad)?" about the abuse hurled at the nine black children integrating a school in Little Rock, became King's favorite. "Freedom Highway" was about the march to Selma.

On "Respect Yourself," the lyrics show their support of King, and the looming violence of the Ku Klux Klan:

*If you don't give a heck 'bout the man with the bible in his hand, y'all*

*Just get out the way, and let the gentleman do his thing*

*You the kind of gentleman that want everything your way, yeah*

*Take the sheet off your face, boy, it's a brand new day*

The last time they saw King, he had come to Chicago to tell Pops about a new project, a food drive called "Operation Breadbasket," and that he'd like them to perform to help draw crowds. They did so every Saturday for more than a year.

"I feel so bad that he didn't get to finish what he started," Staples says now. "He had such presence."

As the 1960s came to an end, the Stapleses moved to Stax Records. Producer Al Bell added a hefty dose of funk to their gospel sound, and Pervis left to manage other groups (including the Emotions) just before the Staples's first mega hit, "I'll Take You There." Another No. 1 followed, "Let's Do It Again."

Mavis began recording solo, often with Curtis Mayfield at the helm. Later, it was Prince. Later, Cooder. Later, Tweedy.

And always, always, always: She honed her sound, her voice, her message.

#### 'She's not sitting back'

This will not be Mavis Staples's first trip to the Kennedy Center Honors. In 2014, she helped induct her longtime friend Al Green, performing a show-closing duet of "Take Me to the River" with soul legend Sam Moore.

It will be the rare night off. She had both knees replaced two years ago, but still does her own grocery shopping, cooking and laundry, and picks up the dry cleaning.

"I'm grateful," Staples says, nodding to the treadmill in the living room, "but I will not be running again."

She is a near full-time caretaker to Yvonne, just as she was for other members of her family in their final years.

"She's not sitting back and eating bonbons and counting royalties," says Kot. "She's working every day of the year."

It turns out, once you take the full measure of Mavis Staples's career, that talent takes a lifetime of work.

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