

The Record

Mavis Staples

by John Radanovich

Imagine a young Bob Dylan and an equally young Mavis Staples—married. It could have happened, according to Staples. She recently told the story via telephone from her Chicago condo that faces cold Lake Michigan.

“He told Daddy, ‘Pops, some day I’m going to marry that Mavis girl.’ And Pops said, ‘What are you telling me for? Go tell Mavis.’

At the time, Dylan hadn’t yet gone electric, and the Staples Singers were years away from message song hits like “I’ll Take You There,” “Respect Yourself,” and “Heavy Makes You Happy (Sha-Na-Boom Boom)” for Stax Records.

Dylan’s teenage crush on Mavis didn’t make it to an engagement ring. “But we courted for a little while there,” she admits shyly.

Since Pops Staples passed away in 2000, Mavis is the only remaining performer from the original family group. Staples likes to date her beginning in music to the time when she and her sister Yvonne were sent south to stay with their grandmother in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. The family was struggling in those days, and so for a few years the two sisters went to grade school down south, and returned to Chicago in the summers.

“I had a chance to go to that little white church up on the hill that they talk about. I was about eight. There wasn’t a choir or piano or organ, just the voices of the congregation. You talk about a good sound! That’s where I learned about church songs.”

Little Mavis first learned something about blues in her grandmother’s house, too.

Hearing “Since I Fell For You” on neighborhood jukeboxes, Staples tried to imitate the song one day at school. “When I opened my mouth,” she says, “out came ‘you...made me leave my happy home.’” Her uncle happened to be there that day, too. He snatched her off the stage and dragged her home to her grandmother.

Imitating the whipping with a switch she got, Staples remembers, laughing: “you—don’t—sing—blues—in—THIS—family! You—don’t—sing—blues—in—THIS—house! I had no idea what blues was. I wasn’t even a singer then.”

Since the 1960s, Mavis Staples has recorded solo for Stax, Warner Brothers, and Paisley Park labels. But she feels that her 1996 record of gospel legend Mahalia Jackson songs (Verve) is among her most satisfying. Jackson was a close family friend and neighbor to the Staples, and Mavis’ idol. Staples fondly remembers stops at Dillard University and the Jazz Fest, when she toured to support the record.

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since the early days of the Staples Singers, but Staples is still dear friends with Bob Dylan. She just recorded a duet with him of “Gonna Change My Way Of Thinking” for “Gotta Serve Somebody: Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan.”

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Dylan and Staples perform on different weekends of the Jazz Fest this year, so a stage reunion is, alas, unlikely.

However, she will admit to a new, little crush on a New Orleans native—Harry Connick, Jr. “I knew his wife before they got married. Whoo, I like him, though.”