

## The Staple Singers



The Staple Singers were an American gospel, Soul and R&B singing group. Roebuck "Pops" Staples, the patriarch of the family, formed the group with his children Cleotha, Pervis, and Mavis. In 1968, the Staple Singers signed to the Memphis-based STAX Records and released two albums with Steve Cropper—*Soul*

*Folk in Action* and *We'll Get Over*. The first STAX hit was "Heavy Makes You Happy (Sha-Na-Boom-Boom)" in early 1971. Their late 1971 recording of "Respect Yourself", written by Luther Ingram and Mack Rice, peaked at No. 2 on the Billboard R&B chart and No. 12 on the Billboard Hot 100. Both sold over one million copies, and were each awarded a gold disc by the RIAA. The song's theme of self-empowerment had universal appeal, released in the period immediately following the intense American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In 1972 "I'll Take You There" topped both Billboard charts. In 1973 "If You're Ready (Come Go With Me)" reached No. 9 on the Hot 100 and No. 1 on the R&B chart.

In 1963, with their celebrity rising thanks to a nationwide folk and blues revival, the Staple Singers delivered a concert in Montgomery, Alabama, that was attended by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., and they had the opportunity to speak with the civil rights leader after the show. The meeting had a profound effect on the group's direction, and for the next several years they wrote songs exclusively in support of the American civil rights movement.

"I really like this man's message," Pops Staples said of King. "And I think if he can preach it, we can sing it." The Staple Singers' civil rights songs included "March Up Freedom's Highway," about the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery marches, "Washington We're Watching You," "It's a Long Walk to D.C." and "Why Am I Treated So Bad," in honor of the Little Rock Nine. "We sing about what's happening in the world today, and whatever's wrong we try to fix it through a song," Staples recalled her father explaining. "We're living in dark times, troubled times; we wanted to spread a ray of light on the world." (Biography.com Editors)

Biography.com Editors. "Mavis Staples Biography." *The Biography.com website*. A&E Television Networks, n.d. Wed. 5 Dec. 2016.

## The Home of the Blues, Birthplace of Rock and Roll, and the Heart of American Soul Music



There are certain places that bring up unmistakable images and sounds upon first consideration. Memphis has long been associated with important aspects of commerce, culture, and social issues. While many may have initial thoughts of Memphis centering on slow-cooked barbeque, others will immediately recognize the city's

contributions to American popular music ranging from the origins of the Delta Blues to the development of Rock and Roll.

In the mid-twentieth century, Beale Street was the place for aspiring musicians to be. The talents of artists such as W.C. Handy, B.B. King, and Muddy Waters were nurtured there. Later, Memphis helped shape rock n roll with the emergence of Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash, who recorded at Sun Studio. In 1957, a man named Jim Stewart begins recording country music in a garage and Satellite Records is launched. Soon after, Stewart's sister Estelle Axton mortgaged her home to pay for recording equipment, and by 1959 Stewart and Axton moved to a new location an old theatre in south Memphis, later to be an area known as "Soulsville". After some commercial success, Stewart takes the first two letters from his last name (ST) and adds the first two letters of his sister's last name (AX) to form the new label name - STAX RECORDS. STAX records would go on to launch the careers of such legendary artists as Otis Redding, Isaac Hayes, Johnny Taylor, Sam and Dave, Rufus and Carla Thomas, Booker T, and the MGs, and numerous others. In 1967, its biggest star, Otis Redding, as well as most of the R&B group, the Bar-Kays, were tragically killed in a plane crash. Soon after this, while in Memphis to support striking African American sanitation workers, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel just a few miles away from Stax Records. During the mid-1970's, the record label suffered a number of financial issues and closed.

The story of Stax Records however, is more that just that of an innovative record company in the United States. Stax was one of the most successfully integrated companies in the country - from top management and administration to its artists. With more than 200 employees, it was the fifth-largest African-American owned business in the United States during its time. Being a racially integrated company of musicians, producers, writers, and engineers, Stax represented a glimpse of what society could be if collaboration and respect were the norm. Now a functioning museum and student music academy, the legacy and ideals that generated an unmistakable sound still resonates for all to experience.