

Gospel-pop great Mavis Staples comes to Wingate

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Mavis Staples turned 75 in July. The party started at the Newport Folk Festival, rolled over to Chicago's Auditorium Theatre in November with a four-hour tribute concert and won't stop until March, when the feature documentary "Mavis!" debuts at the SXSW Film Festival in Austin, Tex.

Along the way, she oversaw the 50th-anniversary reissue of the Staple Singers' landmark "Freedom Highway" album, supervised the upcoming release of the last songs performed by her father and embarked on a concert tour that brings her to the Charlotte area Friday at [Batte Center](#) in Wingate.

"I don't want to say I'm a late bloomer, because I've been around," she says. "But this old girl has paid her dues, and it's all right for me to have a good time now."

Staples deserves that exclamation point in the movie's title. She won a Grammy for best Americana album in 2011 for "You Are Not Alone," produced by Wilco's Jeff Tweedy. She has a lifetime achievement Grammy, a National Heritage Fellowship Award and the distinction of being named one of the 100 greatest women of rock 'n' roll by VH1 and one of the 100 greatest singers ever by Rolling Stone.

Is she relevant? Listen to the 1960s hit "[Why Am I Treated So Bad,](#)" which talks about life before the Civil Rights Act, and reflect on our current racial divide.

"All these things happening now remind me of the '60s," she says. "Young people who come to our shows have their eyes wide when they hear the freedom songs. I keep several church numbers in there, too. I don't call them 'gospel,' because gospel means 'truth' to me, and all our songs have truth in them."

She's been singing more than 60 years, first with Roebuck "Pops" Staples and her siblings, Cleotha, Pervis and Yvonne. The Staple Singers (who dropped the "s" on records) had No. 1 pop hits in the 1970s with "I'll Take You There" and "Let's Do It Again." By then, Mavis had been with them for almost a quarter-century and abandoned her youthful dream.

"I used to love to see nurses in their little white caps and shoes. That had a classy feel, and I always wanted to wear those," she recalls. "We had a hit record when I was in high school, and I was missing every Monday, because we were driving to Memphis or New Orleans or Durham.

"When I graduated, Pops said, 'We can go on the road full-time now.' I said, 'Pops, I want to go to college and become a nurse.' But Pops could always say something to make me see it in a different way. He said, 'Mavis, baby, you're already a nurse. Don't you know your songs heal people and make them feel good?'

“Another time, I told him, ‘I don’t want to go into clubs. Sister Mahalia Jackson won’t sing in a club.’ He said, ‘Mavis, I love her for the way she’s thinking, but people in the clubs won’t come to church, so we have to take our music to them.’ Pops always had something to say that made me feel better about going on.”

She’ll honor him next month with the release of “Don’t Lose This,” the last tracks he laid down before dying in 2000.

“It was supposed to be the Staple Singers’ last record. As sick as he was, my sisters and I said, ‘We’d like this to be your record,’ but all three of us are singing background for Daddy. A lot of times he didn’t feel like going to a session, or he’d get vertigo and have to lie down on the studio couch. This went on for a year.”

The release got delayed because her own career slowed down until 2010. (She has made just 14 solo albums in 45 years.) Then she cut “You Are Not Alone” and followed it three years later with “One True Vine.”

Tweedy, a fellow Chicagoan – “he’s North Side, I’m South Side, and he’s like family” – produced that, too.

The attention flattered her, but writer-director Jessica Edwards’ suggestion of a documentary left her ambivalent.

“I was tired of telling our story; I had told it so many times, including [my book with Greg Kot](#). But I fell in love with Jessica and (executive producer) Gary (Hustwit) and their cute little baby. I asked, ‘Do you really think people want to hear about this? I’m a gospel singer.’ They said, ‘You have such a history!’ And it’s true.

“I came through the Civil Rights Movement. I’ve appeared at folk and jazz and blues festivals. I’m in my last days, so why not do a documentary? It’ll be like leaving some pieces of Pops and the Staple Singers for generations to come.”

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