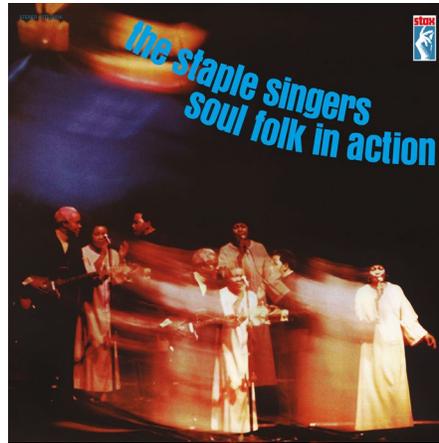


## “Soul Folk in Action”—The Staple Singers (1968)

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Essay by Charles Hughes (guest post)\*



*Original album cover*

Nineteen sixty-eight was a critical year for both soul music and the Civil Rights Movement. The music and the Movement responded to the connected struggles and successes of earlier years while also reckoning with new moments of possibility and setback. Into this moment, the Staple Singers released “Soul Folk in Action,” their debut for Stax Records. The Chicago-based gospel group--composed of Mississippi-born Roebuck “Pops” Staples and his children Cleotha, Mavis, and Pervis--was newly signed to Stax and ready to begin a new phase of music that stayed rooted in Black traditions while responding to new sounds and energies. “Soul Folk In Action” offers this moment in vibrant microcosm, as past, present, and future collide on record.

The Staple Singers came to Stax as the label recovered from a connected series of catastrophes. Its biggest star Otis Redding died in 1967, the same year the label lost its deal with national powerhouse Atlantic Records. Additionally, the Memphis assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968 amplified local tension and created new apprehension among outsiders about working in Memphis. Needing to relaunch Stax to address these hard realities, new president Al Bell developed an ambitious plan. Bell came from Black radio and the Civil Rights Movement, so he saw an opportunity for the label to connect to the freedom struggle. He signed the Staple Singers--who he knew from previous releases and their work with Dr. King and other Movement figures--as the perfect ambassadors. Bringing them to Memphis, Bell paired them with legendary house band Booker T. and the MGs and the musicians got to work.

“Soul Folk in Action” established the template for the Staples’ soul stardom, but it wasn’t a departure. Their roots were in 1950s gospel, but the group began recording secular message-based material in the 1960s, responding both to the folk revival and the Civil Rights Movement. These records paired Pops Staples’ bluesy guitar and the close harmonies he sang with his children (youngest daughter Mavis increasingly sang lead) with songs that called out to contemporary politics and included covers of artists like

Buffalo Springfield, Dionne Warwick, and Bob Dylan. Even before Stax, the Staples were presented as “soul folk,” a handy term that both denoted their genre synthesis and their connection to Black political and cultural traditions.

“Soul Folk In Action” affirms the double meaning by making music in movement (or perhaps in Movement) towards a shared purpose. They open with an invocation of “We’ve Got To Get Ourselves Together,” announcing the need to stay in community in the face of catastrophe. But they follow the insistent call with a recognition of what’s been lost. They cover Otis Redding’s last and biggest hit, “Dock of the Bay” and follow it with “Top of the Mountain,” the imagery of which recalls one of Dr. King’s last speeches, delivered in Memphis the night before his assassination.

They engage King’s legacy even more directly with “Long Walk To D.C.,” a propulsive anthem for the Poor People’s Campaign, a nationwide anti-poverty march to the National Mall that took on additional resonance after King’s murder. Driven by drummer Al Jackson, Jr.’s steadfast groove, lead singer Mavis Staples promises to make the “long walk” through the South to the “national ground,” noting that it’s time for the country to do right by its poorest citizens. With the other group members offering insistent responses, and the MGs humming in the background, the song keeps marching on both the gospel highway of their earlier career and what the group earlier termed the “freedom highway” of Movement struggle.

The calls to action continue. “Got To Be Some Changes Made” offers a horn-driven meditation on what King called the “fierce urgency of now.” On “The Ghetto,” Mavis Staples describes lives within Black urban neighborhoods, as political leaders turned away and demonized these communities as the unfixable source of the country’s problems. “People, My People” looks inward, calling on the community to “think about” what they’re doing while also noting that no changes of the late 1960s are unprecedented. And “I See It” rocks with a gospelvision of a better world, presaging their hit “I’ll Take You There” in both its hopeful message and insistent pulse.

Gospel remains the core of the group’s mix, often in conversation with the pop and rock of the late ’60s’s. The simmering “Slow Train” pairs one of gospel’s central metaphors with an arrangement drawing equally from church-influenced Stax ballads and Pops Staples’ blues origins. Their version of The Band’s “The Weight” nodded to the late-1960s rock group whose Staples influence is particularly audible in this song’s parable verses and cascading vocals. And the album closes with the cautionary “This Year,” with a sitar offering surprising punctuation to Pops’ and Mavis’ exchange of generational wisdom.

The album wasn’t a breakthrough hit, but the Staples would soon have greater success. Hits like the turbulent “Respect Yourself” and the chart-topping “I’ll Take You There,” and acclaimed albums like “Beatitude: Respect Yourself” and “City In The Sky,” made them crucial in the early 1970s. (Sister Yvonne replaced Pervis in this period.) They appeared at Wattstax, the Los Angeles concert in 1972 that brought 100,000 Black people together in celebration and represented perhaps the pinnacle of Al Bell’s vision. They

kept recording, even scoring a later hit with the warm embrace of “Let’s Do It Again,” written and produced for the group by fellow gospel-soul traveler Curtis Mayfield. And they were elected to the Rock & Roll of Fame in 1999.

A year later, as a new century dawned, Roebuck Staples died. Three of his children followed him in the first decades of the 2000s, leaving Mavis Staples as the group’s only surviving member. She remains in action, with albums that extend the music and message of her family. “Soul Folk In Action” didn’t begin the Staple Singers’ journey, but it is a crucial moment in a storied legacy. The long walk continues, and the Staple Singers are still here to join us.

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