

Mavis Staples celebrates 75 years with friends and fans - Chicago Tribune

For a while, it looked like a bunch of artists from parts far removed from the South Side churches where Mavis Staples built her legacy were going to keep things bland for the singer's 75th birthday party.

But then Staples herself took the stage and essentially hijacked her own tribute concert from an all-star lineup of guests Wednesday at the Auditorium Theatre.

Staples looked feisty in black and moved like a woman with a new pair of knees (she had replacements on both last year). Every time she took the stage to join some of her guests, the room temperature went from lukewarm to steamy as she waved fists, strutted with the microphone and tilted backward to cry to the heavens. Out of breath after one performance, Staples let adrenaline get the best of her and commandeered the microphone to address the audience. Finally, she asked, "Am I supposed to be gone?," smiled and walked off for another interminable set change. Whenever she was gone, the concert went into cruise control, with a professional backing band and a cross-section of singers from a variety of genres and generations, some with extremely tenuous ties to Staples' music.

Though the legacy of the Staple Singers is vast, in that it tied together blues and gospel, and seeped into folk, protest and message songs, funk, rock, and even dance music, it always took everything back to the fervor of church singing. Several performers – longtime friends and peers of the Staples – channeled that instantly. Otis Clay delivered the hard soul of "I Ain't Raisin' No Sand" after singing the praises of the "funky grandfather," family patriarch Roebuck "Pops" Staples. A swaggering Taj Mahal paid tribute to Pops' fusion of spidery blues guitar and gospel harmonizing on "Wade in the Water." Joan Osborne opened strongly with a bold selection, the domestic drama of "You're Driving Me (to the Arms of a Stranger)" from Mavis Staples' long-overlooked solo debut album, from 1969.

But Glen Hansard and Ryan Bingham appeared out of their depth, as the harmonies of the McCrary Sisters carried their tunes. Gregg Allman could muster little more than a perfunctory "Have a Little Faith." And it was an odd choice to have Michael McDonald sing one of the Staple Singers' civil-rights-era classics, "Freedom Highway," which came off as overblown, a slick remake of a song written in the wake of the bloody Selma-to-Montgomery protest march. It demanded a lean and gritty presentation. But instead of reviving Pops Staples' barbed-wire guitar riff, the arrangement lathered on the keyboards and horns. Too much Los Angeles, not enough Chicago.

The first two-thirds of the four-hour concert served primarily as a mini-history of Mavis Staples' groundbreaking family, touching on each of its eras, and also investigating songs the group covered. Grace

Potter conjured an eerie take on Bill Withers' "Grandma's Hands," and the Arcade Fire's Win Butler and Regine Chassagne joined Staples for a spirited take on the Talking Heads' "Slippery People," a song that David Byrne has said he wrote with the Staples' sanctified gospel in mind.

Bonnie Raitt, another Staples acolyte, had the right idea. She entered arm-in-arm with Staples for a fierce take on "Turn Me Around," pierced by a couple of wicked Raitt slide solos. A campfire version of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" with Staples, Raitt, Mahal, Allman and Aaron Neville evoked the way the singer's family first learned the song in Pop Staples' living room during the 1940s. And Jeff Tweedy and son Spencer on drums brought Staples' longing on "You're Not Alone" to a simmer.

As the night wrapped up with a verse-swapping all-aboard version of The Band's "The Weight," the concert affirmed that it was as much about star power as it was Mavis Staples and her extraordinary legacy. Since it was being filmed for future release on DVD, the show required set changes between each song and the pacing dragged. No one could doubt the good intentions of all the participants, no matter how out of their musical depth some of them might have been. But a smaller, more tight-knit combination of Staples and Raitt, the Tweedys, Mahal, Clay and one or two others backed by Staples' excellent band might've made this night something truly special. A great singer still at the top of her game at age 75 deserves as much.

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Mavis Staples "I'll Take You There" set list Wednesday at the Auditorium Theatre

- 1 You're Driving Me (to the Arms of a Stranger) – Joan Osborne
- 2 Heavy Makes you Happy – Keb Mo
- 3 I Ain't Raisin' No Sand – Otis Clay
- 4 Woke Up this Morning (With My Mind on Jesus) – Buddy Miller
- 5 Waiting for My Child To Come Home – Patty Griffin
- 6 Far Celestial Shore – Emmylou Harris
- 7 Freedom Highway – Michael McDonald
- 8 People Get Ready – Glen Hansard
- 9 Respect Yourself – Aaron Neville with Mavis Staples

Second set

- 10 Hope in a Hopeless World – Widespread Panic
- 11 For What It's Worth – Widespread Panic
- 12 If You're Ready (Come Go With Me) – Ryan Bingham
- 13 Grandma's Hands – Grace Potter

14 A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall – Bingham, Potter, Griffin, Harris

15 Eyes on the Prize – Eric Church

16 Wade in the Water – Taj Mahal

17 Have a Little Faith – Gregg Allman

18 Turn Me Around – Bonnie Raitt with Mavis Staples

19 Will the Circle Be Unbroken – Raitt, Staples, Mahal, Allman, Neville

20 Slippery People – Win Butler & Regine Chassagne (Arcade Fire) with Staples

21 You're Not Alone – Jeff and Spencer Tweedy with Staples

22 I'll Take You There – Mavis Staples

Encore 23 The Weight – Mavis Staples and the entire cast

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