The Staple Singers came to Stax Records at a pivotal time in history—for the nation, the music industry, the group and the record company—and wasted no time to create an outstanding album that is as timeless as its message remains timely. “Soul Folk in Action,” recorded over four days in September 1968, was not a major chart success. But it established a forward momentum for the Staples family on Stax, culminating four years later in the highly successful “Be Altitude: Respect Yourself.”

The Staple Singers of 1968 were Roebuck “Pops” Staples and his children Mavis, Cleotha and Pervis. Pops played guitar and sang high tenor. Mavis, with a deep and soulful, self-assured voice that sounded beyond her young age, sang most lead vocals. Her sister Cleotha and brother Pervis sang background harmonies. The family band had been a working unit since the mid-1950s, scoring a gospel hit on Vee-Jay Records with “Uncloudy Day” in 1956. They had evolved into a folk-gospel style on Epic Records, but failed to break into the top tiers of African-American entertainers.

Pops Staples grew up on Dockery Farms plantation in Mississippi, spending his formative years crossing paths with blues legends Charley Patton and Son House. He was a working blues musician by age 16, but he embraced and led a more spiritual and church-centric life than many of his peers. He married at age 18 and became a father the next year, upon Cleotha's birth. Pervis was born the next year, then Yvonne two years later and finally Mavis, six years into the marriage. Between the births of Pervis and Yvonne, the family relocated to Chicago, part of the mass migration of Black people from the segregated South to northern industrial centers offering better paying work and more freedom. The family musical group began with Pops playing guitar and teaching his children to sing. Their first performances were at church services, with Mavis' distinctive deep voice and Pops expert bluesy guitar playing distinguishing them from other gospel groups. In 1953, Pops gathered his children around a microphone connected to an Ampex monophonic tape recorder and made a self-released 78 RPM single, with “Those Are They,” a song previously recorded by Dorothy Love Coates and the Gospel Harmonettes, on side A and a Pops original, “Faith and Grace,” on the flip side. This led
to brief recording stints with Chicago-based United Records and then Vee-Jay. The success of “Uncloudy Day” gave the group enough regional momentum to land at Epic Records.

By the mid-60s, the Staples family was close to Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement, and had recorded numerous “message” songs during their time at Epic, including Pops' original “Why? (Am I Treated So Bad),” which made it to the lower rungs of the folk and gospel charts. Mavis told author Rob Bowman: “We visited Dr. King's church in Montgomery [Dexter Avenue Baptist Church] before the movement actually got started. When we heard Dr. King preach, we went back to the motel and had a meeting. Pops said, ‘Now if he can preach this, we can sing it. That could be our way of helping towards this movement.’”

Since their Vee-Jay days, the group had been on the radar of Al Bell, whose roots were in radio and record promotions. In 1968, Bell had risen to the role of executive VP at Stax Records, the Memphis-based label that was home to numerous soul/R&B hit-makers. At that time, Stax was at a crossroads. Its biggest star, Otis Redding, died in a plane crash the prior December. Its distributor, Atlantic Records, cut ties and, in a disputed series of events, ended up owning the master tapes and rights to all Stax recordings that Atlantic had distributed. The little label in Soulsville was without its brightest star and most of its prior corporate assets. Then, on April 4, 1968, Dr. King was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. Stax was connected to King through Bell’s friendship with the civil rights crusader, and various artists’ participation in the movement. In fact, the Lorraine Motel often served as a meeting place for Stax, a place where out-of-town artists working at the company recording studio stayed, and a place where the Stax in-house musicians would hang out and swim on hot summer days.

The company and its future were clouded when Bell signed the Staple Singers in July, 1968, weeks after Epic dropped their contract due to disappointing sales. The group was assigned to guitarist/producer Steve Cropper, himself famous as a member of Booker T. & the MG’s and songwriter and session player on numerous Stax hits. In sessions held September 5, 6, 10 and 12, the 11 songs of “Soul Folk in Action” were waxed. Cropper and Pops Staples played guitar, MGs Donald “Duck” Dunn and Al Jackson Jr. manned the bass and drums, Marvell Thomas handled keyboards and the Memphis Horns (Wayne Jackson, Andrew Love and Joe Arnold) added some spice. Unnamed string players were overdubbed on a couple of tunes. Stax company engineer Ron Capone recorded the album and Cropper mixed it. A single with “Long Walk to D.C.” on the A side and “Stay With Us” (not included on the album) was immediately released. It failed to chart. A follow-up single of two album tracks, “The Ghetto” and “Got To Be Some Changes Made” was released in December, also failing to gain traction.

Despite middling commercial success, “Soul Folk in Action” stands out today for its confident musicianship and production, its well-paced sequencing and the variety of chosen tunes. Here for the first time the Staple Singers performed The Band’s “The Weight,” which became a live performance stalwart for them, and still is for Mavis Staples. The group performed the song with The Band on a Hollywood soundstage in the
movie “The Last Waltz.” Their cover of the Redding/Cropper tune “(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay” is notable for its original take on what was an established hit at the time. The “message” songs on the album—“Long Walk To D.C.”, “The Ghetto” and “I See It”—hold up well today, including the futuristic strings refrain and electronic sound effects at the end of “I See It.” Songwriters for the album included Homer Banks, Bonnie Bramlett, Redding, Cropper and Pervis Staples.

In a 2019 interview with the Library of Congress, Mavis Staples remembered:

[I]t was big fun in the studio. We were excited to make a full album and we felt like we were open to some new ideas ... the content of each song was so strong ... and [the group] captured it all in such a short span of time that you can feel something special in it. The album title tells the listener exactly what they’re about to hear: gospel, folk, and soul...and we delivered.

At the time of “Soul Folk in Action,” Stax Records was beginning an all-hands-on-deck rebirth that would consume the company through 1969, the year of its self-devised “Soul Explosion” of new LPs and singles. The Staple Singers would have to wait for their shining moment on the label, but they were a key part of the mosaic that allowed the label to survive and then thrive. By the time the Staple Singers left Stax in 1974 after a heated exchange between Pops and Al Bell, they were bona fide soul music stars. They found sporadic success after Stax. Pops Staples died in 2000. Pervis Staples left the group in 1970 to pursue work as a musician, music promoter and Chicago nightclub owner; he died in 2021. Yvonne Staples joined the group in 1970 and was part of their most successful times in the studio and on-stage; she died in 2018. Cleo Staples died in 2013. Mavis Staples continues to perform and record to this day. In recent times, she has won three Grammy Awards and a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.