



HER VOICE BLACK WOMEN FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TO THE SCREEN

Mavis!

‘Mavis gets a little *rough* sometimes,’ Bob Dylan once said of the young Mavis Staples, according to the woman herself. He was referring to the unexpected grittiness in Staples’s singing voice, one of the factors that distinguished her band, The Staple Singers, from the common run of gospel acts. (Dylan also, according to Staples, made frequent appeals for her hand in marriage, but to no avail: ‘I didn’t really have flirtin’ on my mind back then.’) The Staple Singers were set apart too by the particular tremolo guitar sound favoured by bandleader and patriarch Roebuck ‘Pops’ Staples, and by their friendship with the Reverend Martin Luther King. The latter affiliation led to a politicisation of their lyrics and an open commitment to the civil rights movement that was then a rarity among gospel performers.

Jessica Edwards’s efficient documentary draws on the testimony of friends and associates – including Dylan, who notes that, after hearing the Staples’ version of the spiritual ‘Sit Down Servant’, he ‘stayed up for a week’ – to put the life of Mavis Staples in its musical and political context. Personal content is dealt with less fully, giving the film a somewhat arm’s-length feeling; but Staples herself is an irresistibly charming interviewee, and the footage of her singing, both archive and recent, is spine-tingling in its force, grandeur and sheer sense of joy. The degree of love and respect depicted between Staples and the late Pops, meanwhile, challenges the assumption that showbiz families are by necessity riven by dysfunction.

The film details the group’s successful merging of a traditional gospel sound with blues, funk and soul influences over the course of the 1970s, and Mavis’s subsequent solo career. Sexier content challenged their gospel crowd: ‘I was waiting for the church folks to come and get me!’ says Staples of singing the suggestive ‘Let’s Do It Again’, written by Curtis Mayfield. The band’s cross-platform appeal, however, enabled not only a broad fan base but also friendships and musical collaborations across generic boundaries, including an appearance alongside The Band in Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Waltz* (1978).

Though revered by those who worked with her – ‘I respected and loved Aretha Franklin, but she wasn’t no Mavis Staples,’ says Al Bell, who brought The Staple Singers their most fruitful period of mainstream success during his tenure as boss of Stax Records – Mavis struggled to establish a consistent solo identity and faced unfortunate setbacks, as when a brace of albums produced by Prince in the late 1980s and early 1990s were largely overlooked as a result of his dispute with his then record label Warner Brothers. A later career revival with the help of ANTI-Records – an offshoot of Epitaph and a habitual rediscoverer of undervalued older artists – proved more successful, sourcing her a fashionable and devoted new producer in the form of Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy, and netting her a 2010 Grammy Award.

Mavis! takes a respectfully non-intrusive approach to its subject, allowing the singer and her songs to speak for themselves. If the results can feel a touch workmanlike, few would deny that respect is the bare minimum due to the talent depicted. Not that she takes herself overly seriously. ‘That’s the best time I’ve had in years,’ we hear her enthuse to a bandmate after a recent show. ‘Since I got my new knees!’

Hannah McGill, *Sight & Sound*, March 2016

MAVIS!

Directed by: Jessica Edwards
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A Film First production
Executive Producer: Gary Hustwit
Executive Producer for HBO: Sheila Nevins
Producers: Rachel Mills, Jessica Edwards
Senior Producer for HBO: Sara Bernstein
Archival Researcher: Rosemary Rotondi
Director of Photography: Keith Walker
Additional Photography: Alex Allaux, Fred Burns, Daniel Crocetti, Autumn Eakin, Jessica Edwards, Luke Geissbühler, Josh Goleman, Brian Hamm, Jacob Hatley, Colleen Hennesy, Gary Hustwit, Paul Kelly, Gideon C. Kennedy, Greg Keras, Christopher Knott, Mark Schlicher, Pete Sillen, Michael Swanson, Maya Tippet, Ben Wolf
Animation: Trollbäck+Company
Edited by: Amy Foote
Graphic Design and Film Identity: Small Stuff, Joe Marianek, Dinah Fried
Title Design: Trollbäck+Company
Digital Intermediate Colourist: Charlie Rokosny
Additional Music Composed by: Rick Holmstrom
Music Recording: Timothy Powell, Joachim Kearns, Paul Kelly
Interview Sound Recording: Andy Black, Richard Buonagurio, Ron DiCanni, Sharon Frye, Gary Hustwit, Hayden Jackson, Trokon Nagbe, Marshall Potter
Sound Mixer: Lou Teti
Sound Editor: Brian Bracken

With:

Mavis Staples
Jeff Tweedy
Adam ‘Speedy’ Ayres
Greg Kot
Anthony Heilbut
Bonnie Raitt
Chuck D
Bob Dylan
Marty Stuart
Julian Bond
Al Bell
Sharon Jones
Levon Helm
Steve Cropper
Prince

USA 2015©
80 mins

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HER VOICE
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Amazing Grace
Mon 17 May 18:10; Sat 29 May 15:15;
Tue 8 Jun 18:10
Whitney: Can I Be Me
Tue 18 May 20:50; Sat 26 Jun 18:10
Siren of the Tropics (La sirène des tropiques)
Wed 19 May 18:10; Sat 5 Jun 12:20
Stormy Weather
Wed 19 May 20:40; Sat 5 Jun 16:00
Dreamgirls
Sat 22 May 17:50; Wed 23 Jun 20:30
Ella Fitzgerald: Just One of Those Things
Mon 24 May 18:10; Sat 19 Jun 15:20
...But Then, She’s Betty Carter
Sat 29 May 12:10; Mon 7 Jun 18:00
Sparkle
Sun 30 May 18:40; Thu 10 Jun 20:35
Mavis!
Mon 31 May 16:10; Thu 17 Jun 20:40
Billie
Wed 2 Jun 18:00; Tue 15 Jun 20:40
What’s Love Got to Do with It
Fri 4 Jun 18:00; Sat 26 Jun 20:45
Twenty Feet from Stardom
Fri 4 Jun 20:45; Thu 10 Jun 18:20
The Wiz
Sun 6 Jun 12:20; Fri 18 Jun 17:45

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