

# Mavis Staples and the Blind Boys of Alabama ride the ‘Freedom Highway’ at the Tobin Center

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SAN ANTONIO – Mavis Staples and the Blind Boys of Alabama not only delivered the spirit of the season Tuesday at the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts but served as guideposts to how to live in these troubled times.

In many ways, it was back to the future. More than 1,300 joined in the rapturous freedom road, including a cousin of Staples and a nephew, Roebuck II, named for her father.

Backed by her small combo and two backup singers, Staples growled and grunted and moaned her way through songs she made famous with the legendary Staples Singers and as a solo artist.

She opened her show with the familiar “If You’re Ready (Come Go With Me)” and the Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth,” the latter with a funkiness the original never achieved.

Staples promised joy, happiness, inspiration and “some positive vibrations.”

She lived up to that contract with “Can You Get to That” and “Respect Yourself.” But the concert reached an emotional and spiritual zenith with “Freedom Highway” with its testifying vocal and buildup at the end.

“I won’t turn around,” Staples sang. “I’ve come too far. No, no, no, not me . . . in the name of Father Pop.”

She talked about her father, Roebuck “Pop” Staples writing the song in 1962. “He wanted it for the big march, from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama,” she said. “I was there. And I’m still here.”

She is indeed a living witness to history. She shared a story about how Dr. Martin Luther King “liked all of my dad’s songs.”

King’s pet name for him was “Stape.” But “Freedom Highway” was not his favorite, she confided. King’s favorite Staples Singer song was the haunting “Why Am I Treated So Bad.”

“My grandma used to moan all the time,” said Staples, recounting how when she was a little girl she asked her grandmother why she did that. The answer: “When you moan, the devil don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Staples unleashed sweet soul music, too, on “We’re Gonna Make It.” But she was at her best at the point of rapture on “Eyes on the Prize” and “I’ll Take You There.”

“The Staples Family have been taking you there for 64 years and we ain’t tired yet,” she said.



The Blind Boys of Alabama (seen here in 2013 at Austin City Limits Music Festival) rocked Part 2 of Tuesday’s concert. (File photo)

The Blind Boys of Alabama took the stage for Part 2 in a line led by their stage manager and with a hand on each man’s shoulder.

Musically, the gospel vocal quartet support and depend on each other, too. They sit on folding chairs to sing, rising for spotlight numbers. The connection to Staples was evident; it’s a link of shared gospel roots.

Founding member and leader Jimmy Carter served as narrator all night. “Well, well, well, here we are. We’re in the land of the defending basketball champions,” he said. “I love me Ginobili and Tim Duncan. Are they playing tonight? They knew we were coming and cancelled out.”

The Blind Boys opened with “People get Ready” and “Spirit in the Sky.” Backed by a combo that included a musician on Hammond B-3 church organ, the sound was steeped in true gospel flavor and plenty of grit.

They also showed off songs from the new album with Taj Mahal, “Talkin’ Christmas”

Newest member Paul Beasley showed off his high Philly voice and falsetto on “Merry Christmas to You.” Singers Ricky McKinnie and Benjamin Moore shared vocals on “White Christmas.”

But it was the take-you-to-church moments that grooved with the most intensity on songs like “God Put a Rainbow in the Clouds,” “What Can I Do,” “Go Tell It On the Mountain,” “There Will Never Be Any Peace (Until God is Seated at the Conference Table),” “I Shall Not Be Moved” and a spectacular “Amazing Grace” sung over the chord sequence of the Animals’ “House of the Rising Sun.”

Not all was brimstone and rock ‘n’ soul spirituals.

During “Look Where He Brought Me From,” the seated singers began rising to dance during the number as shtick, only to be pushed back down by the guitarist. Finally, they refused to sit down anymore and shoved the guitarist away.

Carter added to the excitement by coming out into the Tobin Center as the band vamped and the rest of the Blind Boys sang. It was a righteously good night. Can I get a witness?