

Q&A



Chris Strong

MAVIS STAPLES

An R&B legend finds a new sound, with help from Wilco's Jeff Tweedy

MAVIS STAPLES' NEW ALBUM, *You Are Not Alone*, finds the 71-year-old soul icon in peak form. It was produced by Wilco frontman Jeff Tweedy and recorded at the Wilco Loft, the group's rehearsal and recording space in Chicago. On the album, Staples takes on songs written by her late father, Roebuck "Pops" Staples—who founded their legendary family band, the Staple Singers, when Mavis was 11—as well as Randy Newman, John Fogerty, Tweedy and others.

How did Jeff come to the project?

Tweedy and I decided that our managers were in cahoots. My manager started talking long before this happened: "Mavis, what do you think about Jeff Tweedy producing your next album?" I said, "That would be great!" But this guy is a giant, he's got to be busy, and I didn't think he'd have time to produce me.

How did he present his songs?

He wrote his songs last. We finished everything else, and then he began to write. But he told me that first meeting at the Wilco Loft, "I have this title, 'You Are Not Alone,'

and I want to write this song for you." I said, "Write it, Tweedy!" He did, and he gave me a CD with the music to take home so I could get familiar with it, and said he'd have lyrics for me the next day. The feeling that came over me from just reading those lyrics, I said, "Tweedy, this is the most beautiful song I have ever sung."

Did you enjoy recording at the Loft?

The session was beautiful. I even told him, "Tweedy, I've developed a new passion for recording." He had a caterer there—every day this man would come in with food. The other thing he brought for me was a Teleprompter. Normally I have my songs written out and put them on the music stand and have to turn pages. I said, "My goodness, you are really spoiling me."

How did you decide on the direction of the album?

I left that up to Jeff. People asked after my last album, "Mavis, what are you going to do next?" I felt that album was some of my best work, so I didn't really know where I was going. I hadn't come to a conclusion of what I would do. Jeff Tweedy had the answer.

Didn't you sing one in the stairwell?

On "Wonderful Savior," he wanted me to sing in the stairwell. I said, "I'm not going out there! It's cold! It's Chicago!" And this was our coldest winter in years. The Wilco Loft is on the third floor, and he wanted me out in the stairwell. You could actually see the vapor coming from our mouths as we sang. But I'll tell you, the sound was so good when we went back inside to listen to it, I said, "If you ever want to go back out in the stairwell, you just let me know." It was the first time I had sung a *cappella* on a record.

How have you endured for so long?

I must be the luckiest old girl in the world right now, next to Betty White. Because she is the bomb! But for me to still be here, and for people to still want to hear me, I just think I'm blessed. For me to come back after my father's passing [in 2000], that was so hard for me. Then to have Ry Cooder produce my last record, and now Jeff Tweedy—I'm just on top of the world. I feel like a teenager again. I'm getting a whole new audience. I talk to Pops. I tell him, "Pops, I'm doing all right. You would probably be really proud of me."

—Eric R. Danton

'I'm just on top of the world. I feel like a teenager again.'

