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'MISSISSIPPI, LORD!': MAVIS STAPLES SINGS THE STATE INTO A NEW POLITICAL ERA

On the ground at the 83rd National Folk Festival, where the soul legend joined blues, gospel, and roots musicians to celebrate the state's musical heritage — and a historic moment of change

By JIM BEAUGEZ

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The crowd at the 83rd National Folk Festival in Jackson, Mississippi, celebrated political change in the state.

TATE NATIONS*

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Under the glow of stage lights on the second day of the 83rd National Folk Festival, **Mavis Staples**, whose stature and seniority make her the de facto headliner of the three-day music and culture gathering, is finally addressing her jubilant audience.

"**Mississippi**, Lord!" she shouts to a roar of approval from a crowd of 2,000 spectators in Jackson, Mississippi, that has spilled over from the seats to a standing-room-only stage front.

Three days after **voters here selected Scott Colom** as the state's first Black U.S. Senator since Reconstruction, the crowd seems to anticipate what she's going to say next. It's a sentiment that has been on the lips of festivalgoers throughout the weekend.

"I have always been proud to say I'm from Mississippi, but now I'm more proud than ever!" Staples continues, her rousing banter sounding more like a Sunday-morning sermon than the stage vamps of a soul superstar. "I didn't think I was gonna cry no more after Obama, but I'm telling you, I said, 'Let me get my bucket!'"

Staples, 87, has a history and pedigree that connects Mississippi's current historic moment back to the Civil Rights Movement, and indeed to the roots of American music. (On Monday morning, she received three 2027 **Grammy nominations** on the strength of her latest album, ***Sad and Beautiful World***.)

As the frontwoman of **the Staple Singers**, the family band started by her father, **Roebuck "Pops" Staples**, her husky contralto is synonymous with resistance songs like "Freedom Highway" and funk soul hits like "I'll Take

You There." Her musical lineage traces all the way to Dockery Farm, the Delta sharecropping plantation where Pops lived and worked alongside blues originators Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf, and Son House.

At her final scheduled performance of 2026, Staples, fronting a five-piece band, performed an hour-plus set stacked with songs reflecting the symbolism of Colom's win. Early in the show, the audience applauded declarations like "No political domination!" from the 1973 song "If You're Ready (Come Go With Me)." Another round of cheers arrived after she delivered the line "Take the sheet off your face, boy, it's a brand-new day" from 1971's "Respect Yourself."

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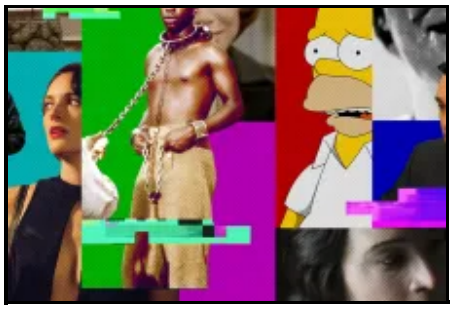

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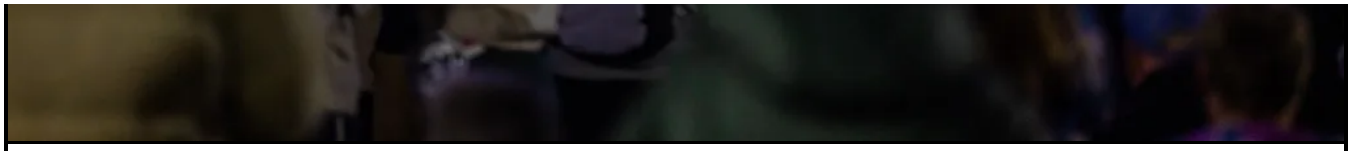
"I think every message within her songs is just uplifting," says Gabrielle Jackson, 19, after the performance. A college student who grew up in Cleveland, Mississippi, barely five miles east of Dockery, Jackson often heard the Staple Singers' songs at home. "Being a music major and somebody who just loves music, seeing things like this is very inspiring."

Stages across downtown Jackson hosted artists from Mississippi as well as other regions, expressing the cultural diversity found across the nation. The National Council for the Traditional Arts produces the annual event in partnership with local organizers.





Mavis Staples, 87, performs at the National Folk Festival in Jackson, Mississippi.

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Hill Country blues singer **Cedric Burnside**, a grandson of the late R.L. Burnside from the Holly Springs area who learned how to keep a juke jumping by playing drums behind his "Big Daddy" R.L. as a child, performed with his band and in collaboration with another North Mississippi standout, the Rising Star Fife and Drum Band. Led by fife player Shardé Thomas, Rising Star perform in the West African-meets-rural-blues tradition popularized in the region by her grandfather, Otha Turner.

"This festival gives you a chance to be who you are," Burnside says while tuning his guitar before taking the stage. "I come from a background where my Big Daddy, R.L. Burnside, he was a sharecropper, and he played Hill Country blues stripped down. Some people would look at the rawness as being like, 'That's not really great music, because it don't have this, and it don't have that.' It's the rawness that makes it so special."

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The lineup also featured Mississippi soul-blues musicians Eddie Cotton Jr. and Dexter Allen, as well as Dobro master Jerry Douglas and the Savoy

Family Cajun Band. **Jackson-based hip-hop** producer Hollywood Luck mixed a set that included "Cadillac on 22s," a 2003 hit from another local, David Banner.
Acts like Rebolú, Rahim AlHaj Trio, and Capoeira Luanda expressed a broader musical diaspora through Colombian dance, Iraqi oud, and Brazilian capoeira, respectively.

Meanwhile, gospel quartet Annie and the Caldwells — a family group out of West Point, Mississippi, signed to David Byrne's Luaka Bop label — put on a trio of high-energy, improvisational gospel performances that reverberated throughout the downtown streets.

"They had strong voices that carried — you could hear them all throughout the whole festival," says 32-year-old Kristina Oxendine from Clinton, Mississippi. Oxendine caught the group's Friday night performance with his sister, Katrina, 29, and the pair decided to come back to see them again. "They put a twist on songs that we already knew and remixed it themselves and made it their own," Katrina says, citing the 1990 cut "Feels Good" by Tony! Toni! Toné!.

Annie Caldwell, 69, started singing when she was 10, and in the mid-1970s performed with siblings as the Staples Jr. in tribute to her favorite group. Annie and the Caldwells carry on the family tradition but with a different name and faces. Daughter Deborah Caldwell Moore, wearing chunky black spectacles and a mane of bright silver curls, is likely responsible for the pipes that brought the Oxendines to the stage — she takes the lead throughout most of the gig, sing-shouting her lines with an intensity that recalls James Brown, David Lee Roth, and, of course, Mavis Staples.

Festivalgoers had opportunities to experience Mississippi culture in other ways, too. Cooking demonstrations showed the century-long influence of

Chinese culture in the Delta, while Geno Lee of the Big Apple Inn on Jackson's Farish Street, a historic Black thoroughfare, served up famed local bites like pig-ear sliders. While she was introducing her band onstage, Staples took a moment to applaud bassist Greg Boaz for having the courage to try one.

By 8 p.m., all the attention was on the main stage and Staples. As the crowd grew, Reena Evers-Everette — who was 8 years old when she heard the gunfire that killed her father, Civil Rights hero Medgar Evers, in their Jackson driveway — was vibrant backstage, reminiscing on seeing Staples as a child in Mound Bayou, where they both spent time as kids. Her uncle, Charles Evers, also produced a series of annual Medgar Evers Homecoming concerts, which the Staple Singers played several times.

"This [festival] just brings back the good feelings, and the understanding of what is really important — and that's togetherness," she says. "When Mavis belts it out, you just melt. It's a unifying sound, and it's a sound that's really unique to the South."





Eddie Cotton Jr. performs in Jackson, celebrating both the 83rd National Folk Festival and Mississippi's new era.

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Like others in attendance, she's also aglow at the results of the recent election that will send Colom to the Senate. "All of Mississippi showed out," she says. "It shows that there's time for a change. Sam Cooke is not here, but he could go ahead and see that change is gonna come, because it is, in the best way."

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Balancing the hope in her voice is the specter of the Old Capitol building rising just behind the stage where Staples will perform. Built in 1839, the Greek Revival structure bore witness to many of the wrongs Evers-Everette and others believe are one step closer to being righted. On its floor, legislators drafted Mississippi's articles of secession in 1861. Then, in 1890, they drafted and signed a new state constitution that enshrined Jim Crow laws consigning its Black citizens to second-class status for the better part of a century.

"At first, I said I'm on cloud nine," Evers-Everette says of Colom's victory. "Then I said, no, I'm on cloud 2026, and I'm staying there until 2027. And

then 2028. And I'm gonna rise higher and higher, because this nation and this world is getting ready to soar."

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