



Jan. 11, 2009-

President-elect Barack Obama paid homage to Chicago soul in his Grant Park acceptance speech. He riffed on Wendell Phillips High graduate Sam Cooke by saying, "It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, at this defining moment, change has come to America."

This clearly expands on Cooke's 1963 hit "A Change Is Gonna Come."

But connect the dots.

Sam Cooke led to the Staple Singers message songs. Cooke and his brothers hung out with Pervis Staples, Lou Rawls and a young Mavis and Yvonne Staples on 33rd Street. The strip was called "The Dirty Thirties," and most of the group attended Doolittle School on 35th Street.

The Staples were mentored in part by the late Curtis Mayfield -- who started the Impressions with current Cook County Commissioner Jerry Butler. Mayfield and Butler grew up in Cabrini-Green. One of Mayfield's house producers was the late Chicagoan Donny Hathaway, who had a 1970 hit with "The Ghetto, Pt. 1." And almost all of this talent was spiritually connected with Chicago's fertile gospel field that ranges from Thomas A. Dorsey to Mahalia Jackson.

Yes, we can say Chicago is more than a blues town.

The unbending spirit of the 1960s and '70s Chicago soul movement helped put Obama on that stage.

Chicago artists delivered countless songs of inspiration during the civil rights struggle: the Staple Singers hits "Respect Yourself," "I'll Take You There" and "Long Walk to D.C." Mayfield's "People Get Ready," "Keep on Pushing" and "Choice of Colors" (magnificently arranged by Hathaway).

"Keep on Pushing" gets a shoutout on the "Soul Music Lovers For Obama" section of the official campaign site my.barackobama.com, which states, "From the inner cities to the suburbs, Sen. Obama unites us like the music we love."

The daring fury in Chicago soul comes from the forthright nature of the city. "Our music was like a Band-Aid to make people feel better about what was going on," Mavis Staples once told me. "We were getting requests to sing 'We Shall Overcome.' I never liked to sing that song. I felt 'We Shall Overcome' implied that we weren't making it. Like we weren't going forward. So we started with our own. '(March Up) Freedom's Highway.' 'Touch a Hand, Make a Friend.'

"Positive stuff telling people that 'I challenge you to bridge the gap between us.' "

Amazingly, Staples has not been invited to the inauguration. She will speak and perform at Jan. 19 at a concert in celebration of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall at Northwestern University in Evanston.

But she was disappointed she'll miss the main event. "The Staple Singers went to the Kennedy, Clinton and Carter inaugurations. But I got over it," she said earlier this week. "The New York Times invited me to do their party on Jan. 18, but I have to be in Evanston on the 19th.

"I'll pop some popcorn and watch the inauguration from home," she said. "I'll be cool. Michelle [Obama] won't have to come after me."

The president-elect's mannerisms remind Staples of Cooke -- the way he walks, the way he wears dignity and grace.

"Obama has that same walk Sam did with [the gospel group] the Soul Stirrers," Staples

said. "If somebody was on the stage gettin' in the house and the ladies were about to shout, S.R. Crain [Soul Stirrers founder] would send Sam down the middle aisle with this cool walk. And all of the attention would go to Sam. Every time I see Obama I think of Sam Cooke. Sam used to make me swoon, and this guy does the same thing.

"But I can control myself now."

Cooke learned to tap out a declared beat with his feet during his years with the Soul Stirrers, a "walking rhythm" perfected by his business partner J.W. Alexander in the Pilgrim Travelers. "Like Obama, Sam had the walk of someone who is very sure of himself," his younger brother L.C. Cooke said from his home in south suburban Calumet City. "It's someone who definitely knows where they are going. There's even similarities in the way Obama moves his hands. Sam had those gestures, too."

The president-elect's acceptance speech struck a chord. "I loved that moment," said Cooke, 75. "It was history, and it showed you the foresight Sam had."

In October 1963, Sam Cooke was arrested after trying to integrate the Shreveport, La., Holiday Inn. After talking to sit-in demonstrators in North Carolina that same year, Cooke began to write "A Change Is Gonna Come." Soul legend Solomon Burke once told me that had Cooke not been killed in 1964, he would have become Sen. Sam Cooke.

"Everybody loved Sam," his brother said. "Not only the men loved him, but the women loved him."

While Cooke had a kaleidoscopic following, Jerry Butler's favorite message song is "Choice of Colors," released by Mayfield in 1969.

"In substance and in terms of the condition of the people, 'Choice of Colors' was head and shoulders above a lot of the songs," Butler said. " 'A Change Is Gonna Come' was so poignant and prophetic."

Butler then sang the opening verse of "Choice of Colors":

If you had a choice of color, which one would you choose, my brothers?

If there was no day or night/Which would you prefer to be right?

How long have you hated your white teacher/Who told you to love your Black preacher?

Butler stopped. And then exclaimed, "Oooh, boy! The little guy [Mayfield] was a genius."

Butler left the Impressions in 1959, although Mayfield continued to write most of his hits. Butler's biggest solo hit was 1969's "Only the Strong Survive." He explained, "That said different things to different people. Kenny [Gamble, who co-wrote the song with Butler and Leon Huff] coined the phrase, 'The message is in the music.' And a group of kids out of Prairie View [A&M] in Texas took that song as a black anthem. I went out there to perform not knowing this was the big song on campus."

Butler, 69, has been a Cook County Commissioner since 1985. Obama consulted with Butler twice on his ascent through Chicago politics. "Once he told me he was going to run against Bobby Rush [in the 2000 Democratic primary for the U.S. representative]," Butler said. "I told him not to do it. Bobby is a street fighter, he has a strong organization and he would get beat up. And he did. Next time he asked what I thought about him running for U.S. Senate. I said after what happened to Carol [Moseley Braun, who lost to Republican Peter Fitzgerald in her 1998 re-election bid], he would probably walk over [any opponent] to the Senate seat. But at the time nobody could convince me that all this would come from that."

Chicago disc jockey Herb Kent was in the trenches. His radio station WVON (Voice of the Negro) raised money for the Rev. Jesse Jackson's Operation Breadbasket, which became Operation PUSH. Kent and Stevie Wonder were emcees at Soldier Field for King's last Chicago appearance in the summer of 1967.

In recent years Obama appeared twice on Kent's Saturday afternoon "Battle of the Best," where celebrity guests take on Kent in playing songs and soliciting votes for an R&B artist. "About four years ago I get this call that Sen. Obama wants to be on my show," Kent said. "I had never heard of him. I think it was a way of getting him known to the public.

"The second time he was on he had Sam Cooke and I had Lou Rawls. He said, 'How can I win with this old stuff?' Then he went on the air and started appealing [Cooke] to all the ladies going to church. He played Sam Cooke songs and whupped my butt. I don't get beat too often. He was just that smart. He wasn't like he didn't know Sam, it was, 'Why do you want to go that far back?'

"He quotes soul music a lot. He's not a hip-hop person."

Although Obama was just 3 years old when "Keep on Pushing" was released in 1964,

Kent sees Chicago soul music as a fire beneath the inaugural flame. " 'Keep on Pushing' was a black power thing," said Kent, who attended Hyde Park High School. "We were all trying to gain equality. Outside of Chicago, James Brown was singing, 'I don't want anybody getting anything I'm getting myself.' I don't remember Jackie Wilson doing anything of that nature. Motown? Maybe later with Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder. We don't have message songs now. Especially like the Staple Singers songs that were spiritual and R&B."

Al Bell shaped the Staple Singers hits at Stax Records. He produced most of their material and wrote their smash hit "I'll Take You There" (see related story). He has a new Web site and online soul music radio station albellpresents.com.

"Chicago was 360 degrees of African-American music and culture," Bell declared from his office in Little Rock, Ark. "Gospel. Blues. Rock 'n' roll like Chuck Berry [at Chess Records]. Vee-Jay Records had Jimmy Reed and the Staple Singers.

"Chicago was the catalyst for what Stax became -- make no mistake about it. The Chicago Defender, Ebony and Jet wrote about us when we couldn't get one line in the Memphis Commercial Appeal or maybe one line in our black newspaper."

Bell knew from the jump that the Staple Singers were the most powerful conduit in his Stax stable to sing political material.

"They were natural," said Bell, 68. "They had a sound unlike any other in America. No one sang harmony like the Staple Singers. And they had Pops' [tremolo] guitar." In 1958 Bell was working for a Little Rock radio station and booking gospel artists. He brought the Staple Singers in from Chicago to play a six-city Arkansas tour with headliner C.L. Franklin, Aretha's father.

"We wound up at a high school in Pine Bluff, Ark.," he said. "It was the first time I had seen Mavis sing as a solo artist. She sang 'I'm on My Way to Heaven Anyhow.' At that moment Mavis penetrated me like I had never been penetrated before. She started crying as she sang. Before I knew it I was crying with her."

After Bell was named Stax executive vice president in 1968, bringing the Staple Singers to the label became a priority. "They spoke to people in a way that motivated and inspired.

"Soul music was a reflection of what was going on in our lives and our lifestyles."