**MAVIS STAPLES & LEVON HELM – *CARRY ME HOME***

The rain was coming down in thick, heavy sheets when Mavis Staples arrived in Woodstock. Still recovering from a recent knee surgery, Staples wasn’t her usual spry self that day, but any lingering aches and pains seemed to melt away the moment she spotted the familiar figure waiting to greet her on the porch. Lean and wiry, with a gentle warmth that radiated southern charm and hospitality, there was no mistaking Levon Helm. For his part, Helm had spent much of the day anticipating this very moment, pacing back and forth through the house with an uncharacteristic mix of nervous energy and giddy excitement. Sure, he’d hosted scores of legendary artists at his Barn over the years—Hell, he was a legend himself—but Mavis was different; Mavis was family. Quick as a flash, she was out of the car, through the rain, and up the steps, and there on the porch, as the pair embraced in the deep, spiritual way only two kindred souls can, Mavis Staples and Levon Helm did what came most naturally: they sang.

“Didn’t it rain, children / Talk ’bout rain, oh, my Lord,” Staples began, channeling Mahalia Jackson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe as Helm gleefully joined in. “Didn’t it, didn’t it, didn’t it oh my Lord / Didn’t it rain?”

“We both cried,” recalls Staples. “We hadn’t seen each other in years, and it was just such an emotional moment. How could we help but sing?”

While that duet alone would have been worth the trip from Chicago, Staples had in fact come to Woodstock to perform as part of Helm’s renowned Midnight Ramble series, and the ensuing concert—available now for the first time on the rousing new ANTI- Records release ‘Carry Me Home’—would mark a personal high watermark for both artists. Captured live in the summer of 2011, ‘Carry Me Home’ showcases two of the past century’s most iconic voices coming together in love and joy, tracing their shared roots and celebrating the enduring power of faith and music. The setlist was righteous that night, mixing vintage gospel and soul with timeless folk and blues, and the performances were loose and playful, fueled by an ecstatic atmosphere that was equal parts family reunion and tent revival. Read between the lines, though, and there’s an even more poignant story at play here. Neither Staples nor Helm knew that this would be their last performance together—the collection marks one of Helm’s final recordings before his death—and listening back now, a little more than a decade later, tunes like “This May Be The Last Time” and “Farther Along” take on new, bittersweet meaning. The result is an album that’s at once a time capsule and a memorial, a blissful homecoming and a fond farewell, a once-in-a-lifetime concert—and friendship—preserved for the ages.

“It never crossed my mind that it might be the last time we’d see each other,” says Staples. “He was so full of life and so happy that week. He was the same old Levon I’d always known, just a beautiful spirit inside and out.”

Though Staples and Helm got on like childhood pals, the two were already both stars in their own right by the time they first met at the 1976 filming of ‘The Last Waltz’*.* Critics would go on to cite The Staple Singers’ collaboration with The Band on “The Weight” as a high point of the film, and Mavis and Levon would remain close friends in the decades to come, but it was unclear if the pair would ever get to sing together again after Helm was diagnosed with throat cancer in 1998. More than two dozen radiation treatments robbed him of his voice, and, as Helm told *Fresh Air*’s Terry Gross in a 2007 interview, “I had a period of time there for about two-and-a-half years or so where I had to whisper or write you a note to tell you what I wanted you to know.” But when Staples arrived in Woodstock for the Ramble, the ever-resilient Helm was in the midst of a genuine renaissance. The cancer was in remission, his voice had returned, and he’d won a pair of GRAMMY Awards for his two most recent solo albums (he’d take home his third less than a year later). On top of all that, Helm, much like Staples, was now more in demand than ever, sought out by a younger generation of artists who rightfully revered him not only as one of the greatest drummers of all time, but as a patron saint of the American musical canon.

“My dad built The Midnight Rambles to restore his spirit, his voice, and his livelihood,” says Helm’s daughter, Amy, who sang backup vocals with her father and Staples at their performance. “He’d risen back up from all that had laid him down, and to have Mavis come sing and sanctify that stage was the ultimate triumph for him.”

Opened to the public in 2004, The Barn—which still hosts regular concerts and recording sessions to this day—is a magnificent, rustic space with broad wooden beams and a soaring, vaulted ceiling. Helm and fellow Band-mate Garth Hudson designed the room to be both sonically and socially perfect, an intimate gathering place where musicians and their fans could join in a shared night of musical transcendence. It’s not a particularly large venue—there’s only room for 200 or so listeners, with those in the front row close enough to reach out and touch the band—but step inside and you’ll immediately understand why everyone from Emmylou Harris and Elvis Costello to Phil Lesh and Jackson Browne has made the pilgrimage to perform there.

“There’s just an aura,” says Staples. “A good feeling comes over you the moment you walk in. It feels like home.”

Staples spent five or six days in Woodstock before her performance, laughing and trading stories and going for walks around the property with Helm. As she recalls, there was very little rehearsing going on—save for a memorable moment when Helm sat down at his grandson’s tiny drum set to run a tune with her—but Amy remembers her father practicing for hours on end before the concert, determined to make sure everything was just right.

“Everybody in the Ramble band was laughing because it was the first and last time we’d ever seen my dad show up for rehearsals like that,” says Amy. “He would have done anything for Mavis.”

Hailed by *NPR* as “one of America’s defining voices of freedom and peace,” Staples is the kind of once-in-a-generation artist whose impact on music and culture would be difficult to overstate. She’s both a Blues and a Rock and Roll Hall of Famer; a civil rights icon; a three-time GRAMMY Award winner (and a GRAMMY lifetime achievement award); a chart-topping soul, gospel, and R&B pioneer; a National Arts Awards Lifetime Achievement recipient; named to *Rolling Stone*’s Top 200 Singers of All Time at #46; and a Kennedy Center honoree. She marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., performed at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration, and sang in Barack Obama’s White House. Over the past few decades alone, she’s collaborated with everyone from Prince and Bob Dylan to Arcade Fire and Bon Iver, blown away countless festivalgoers from Newport Folk and Glastonbury to Lollapalooza and Bonnaroo, and graced the airwaves on *Fallon*, *Colbert*, *Ellen*, *Austin City Limits*, *Jools Holland*, and the GRAMMYs. But to Helm, Mavis was more than all that. She was *the truth*.

“My dad was very spiritual, and the music that Mavis and her family made was sacred to him,” says Amy. “He absolutely revered and respected the Staple Singers.”

The pair’s mutual love and admiration is on full display on ‘Carry Me Home’, which features a mix of Staples’ and Helm’s bands operating at the peak of their powers as they work their way through an eclectic setlist of tunes made famous by the likes of Nina Simone, The Impressions, Bob Dylan, and The Rolling Stones. Gospel classics like “Hand Writing On The Wall” and “Farther Along” (arranged here as a stunning a capella performance) take the audience to church with Sunday morning fervor; Civil Rights anthems like “This Is My Country” and “I Wish I knew How It Would Feel To Be Free” highlight the struggle for justice and equality that still rages today; and aching renditions of Buddy Miller’s “Wide River To Cross” and Helm’s “When I Go Away” meditate on aging and mortality. Staples and the night’s soulful crew of backup singers handle the vast majority of the vocal work here, but it’s perhaps album closer “The Weight,” which features Helm chiming in with lead vocals for the first time, that stands as the concert’s most emotional moment.

“The place just went wild when Levon sang,” says Staples. “It was a real full-circle moment to be performing that song together again.”

When it was all over, Staples could hardly believe how quickly the time had flown. She dreaded the thought of leaving Woodstock, of leaving Levon, but duty called her back on the road, and so she ended her week the way it began: with a long embrace.

“We hugged and hugged and hugged,” Staples recalls. “I just held on to him. I didn’t know it’d be the last time, but in my heart and in my mind, Levon will always be with me because I take him everywhere I go. Yes, indeed. I can see him right now. And some sweet day, we’ll be together again."