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Music: Mavis Staples Shines, Fitz & Tantrums Party

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Two soul-inflected concerts this week to catch you up on.

MAVIS STAPLES *** out of ****
Bell House in Brooklyn

Mavis Staples has been testifying to the power of music (and the Lord) for about six decades now. Like many legends, seeing her in concert is as much a ritual as a performance. She opens with a gospel number, tosses in one or two new tunes, chats amiably with the audience by telling the same jokes but making them sound fresh, brings in The Band's classic "The Weight" to turn things up and does an extended version of "I'll Take You

There." She even tells the classic anecdote about the very first song that Pop Staples taught to his children after being disgusted with the no-shows at rehearsal for his gospel group. That first song? "Will The Circle Be Unbroken." Will she sing it? Yes, of course she will.

The crowd at the sold-out show in Brooklyn ate it up, perhaps since many of them were seeing Staples in concert for the first time. Her every reference to Jeff Tweedy (who oversaw her latest album, one of the most acclaimed of the year and gave Staples a lovely new standard wit the title track "You Are Not Alone") was greeted with applause. Calling him a funny little thing pleased them even more.

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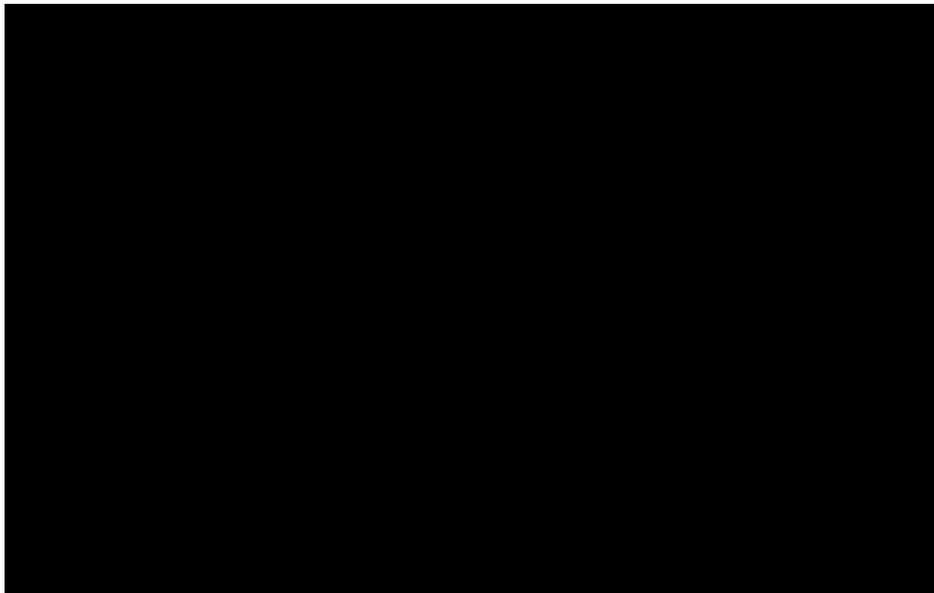


It was an enthusiastic crowd but they didn't quite feel the gospel numbers in their bones; yes, they hooted and made some embarrassing (if sincere) stabs at some "amens" and "uh-huhs." So the show never transcended, the way Staples can. But she certainly is a pro and her band was so tight that when they gave her a rest by performing not one but two instrumental numbers (including "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child") it wasn't just filler and the crowd would have happily listened to more. It helped that Staples was sitting in a chair onstage next to her sister, smiling and raising her hands when the spirit moved her. Even on a routine night in the middle of the week, Staples might not have won any souls over (this was a tough, secular New York crowd after all) but she certainly won a few new fans who haven't even seen her at her best yet.

FITZ & THE TANTRUMS *** out of ****
Bowery Ballroom

It's the early 60s in the music scene and I don't just mean the classic soul leaning and natty clothes of **Fitz & The Tantrums**. I mean that album sales are sliding but bands are bursting with talent and live music matters as much as it has in years. Look at the steadily growing success of this group, which in about a year has gone from a showcase at Joe's Pub to a sold out show at Mercury Lounge to a sold out show at Bowery Ballroom, with fans growing increasingly fanatic at every turn. They shimmied, they shook, they got down on the floor when commanded to (and heck, I'd do just about anything backup singer Noelle Scaggs told me to do). Their handclapping could use a little improvement but that'll come with practice. What's next for the band? A sold out show at Irving Plaza and then the Beacon, I assume.

They definitely put on a tight, satisfying show that outshines their fine full-length debut, which boasts tunes like the title track "Pickin' Up The Pieces" and "Breakin' The Chains Of Love." It's not quite a retro sound -- the conspicuous lack of guitar (which bores frontman Fitz) is one sign, as is their repeated nods to Eighties pop like Hall & Oates and Eurythmics.



So while the band is much stronger in person, the same can't be said of Fitz and his songs. His voice is ok, but not a patch on, say, Daryl Hall (which he can vaguely resemble at times) or Sharon Jones. And the tunes show their lack of versatility heard back to back. One song is called "6 A.M." and the next tune they performed began "Woke up at 6 am". And another song is called "Wake Up." You get the idea. The

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vaguely socially conscious numbers were especially thin. The highlight? Their workout on "Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)."

So a few conflicting emotions here. The band was a lot of fun and Fitz is definitely a showman. (He even gave a shout out to his dad and mom sitting in the balcony, who spent much of the concert using their cell phone to take pictures, just like the other fans.) Definitely check them out in concert for a good time.

And while new numbers sounded very much in the same vein, it will be interesting to see where Fitz goes from here in an album or two. I have the vague impression he could go in a number of different musical directions and isn't wedded to a classic soul vibe. Joe Jackson, Paul Weller, even Kevin Rowland of Dexys Midnight Runners could be a better hint of where he's at musically than say, James Hunter who is blue eyed soul through and through. Fitz might go in a pop or rock or some other thoroughly unexpected direction; I just get the impression his musical tastes will wander far. With great musicians by his side and a growing fanbase, people are gonna talk no matter where he heads.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit [Michael Giltz at his website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on [Netflix](#) and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to the concerts with the understanding that he would write a review.

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