Eileen Southern

David Horn

Eileen Southern, who died in Florida in October 2002, was widely recognised as a pre-eminent figure in the study of African-American music. Her seminal history, *The Music of Black Americans*, first published in New York in 1971, was the first academic study to give serious scholarly attention to the totality of African-American music – from the congregational singing of slaves to all-black Broadway musicals, from blues and jazz to experimental composers – and was hugely influential. Resolutely unpolemical and meticulously balanced, it did more to establish the validity of the subject in the academy than any other single book. It had its genesis in a course which Dr Southern (who had a Ph.D. in Renaissance music from Harvard) developed in the late 1960s at Brooklyn College. She herself later described how she was put under pressure to devise the course by a college administration somewhat desperate to find ways to meet the demands of black students for the inclusion of Black Studies in the curriculum. The idea met with disbelief among colleagues in the music department, and the particular scorn of an unnamed Englishman, holder of a Ph.D. in musicology from Oxford, who opined that a course in black music presented 'nothing of substance to deal with'. Declaring 'I'll show them', a furious Eileen Southern was determined to design a course that demonstrated the range of black music. The result turned out to be so rich that a more sympathetic colleague suggested one day to Dr Southern that she turn the course into a book – and *The Music of Black Americans* was the result (Standifer, n.d.).

An enormously useful companion volume, *Readings in Black American Music*, compiled and edited by Dr Southern, was published shortly afterwards, and in 1973, together with her husband Joseph, she launched the first academic black music journal, *The Black Perspective in Music*, which continued until 1990 and became a vitally important outlet for the slowly growing body of scholarly work.

In addition to numerous articles, much energy was channelled into reference books, notably the *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* (1981) and (with Josephine Wright) *African-American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale, and Dance, 1600s–1920: An Annotated Bibliography of Literature, Collections, and Artworks* (1990). *The Music of Black Americans* went to a 3rd edition in 1997. Despite the fact that by this time the book was often thought conservative, one recent commentator has remarked how he was 'extremely impressed – better, blown away' by the book's treatment of rap (Ramsey 2002, p. 8).

In 1974, Dr Southern took up a post at Harvard, where she remained until her retirement, and where she became chair of Afro-American Studies and the first black woman to become a tenured professor. A festschrift volume, *New Perspectives in Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern*, was published in 1992. In an essay for the book, Samuel Floyd, Director of the Center for Black Music Research in Chicago, designated her as a scholar whose 'revolution is one of quiet, scholarly insurgency – the overturning of faulty assumptions and ideas about black music and black

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musicians and their place and role in the evolution of American culture' (Floyd 1992, p. 8).

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