



# What is African-American Music? Making Music History

BY DAVID SUISMAN

Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (3d ed. New York: Norton, 1997).

Samuel A. Floyd, Jr.'s *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Krin Gabbard's (ed.) *Jazz Among the Discourses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

Krin Gabbard's (ed.) *Representing Jazz* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

REVIEW OF:

## I.

"A quiet revolutionary" is how musicologist Samuel Floyd characterized Eileen Southern for challenging, expanding, and redefining the popular idea of African Americans' achievements in American musical history.<sup>1</sup> In 1971 Southern published the first edition of *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, in which she attempted to correct years of thinking that the only music African Americans have ever known or participated in has been music that grew out of African-American experiences and communities—spirituals, blues, and jazz. Her book covered the fullest range of African-American musical activities, from performing for white masters in the slave South to concert singing on the American and European stage. It was written both for students and a general readership, an inspiring volume that offered little narrative cohesion but which told of myriad, long-overlooked side roads in African Americans' musical past. The range of subjects she covered seemed limitless: 'Lecture Day slave festivals in pre-Revolutionary New England; the career of idiot savant concert pianist Blind Tom; the songs of stevedores and boatmen; the experimental symphonic compositions of Olly Wilson. For sources she meticulously culled information, musical and otherwise, from nonmusic history books and dusty eighteenth- and nineteenth-century primary sources.

Since then, Southern's wide-ranging published work, including two revised editions of the book (the first in 1983; the second, under review here, in 1997), has established

her as the dean of African-American music scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Southern's trademark has been to emphasize the breadth of African-American musical activity, especially in detailing areas such as classical music and opera, long considered beyond the province of African-American culture. Although she did not invent this more catholic approach to African-American music, she did revive a line of thought that had rested dormant since the Harlem Renaissance.

The year 1971 was an unlikely time for a book that celebrated African-American contributions to European art music. The integrationist promise of the 1960s seemed to have crashed and burned—quite literally, for some—and the loudest African-American voices were calling for self-separation and a renewed commitment to black nationalism. Crowds teemed at "Free Huey" rallies, Nixon railed against forced busing, and prisoners rioted at Attica (erupting out of protests against racist biases in sentencing and parole). The lawless Shaft and the more lawless Sweet Sweetback drew people to movie theaters, while Marvin Gaye's forlorn "What's Going On?" was answered by Sly & the Family Stone's dark and dystopic "There's a Riot Goin' On."

Amid this turbulence, Southern's *The Music of Black Americans* appeared. Although many failed to understand the book's fundamental radicalism, on a symbolic level it both merged with and diverged from the radical politics of the moment, particularly New York's Black Arts Movement. On the surface Southern had little in common with the group. Southern was a former concert pianist and an acad-

emic musicologist (then at York College in the Bronx, later at Harvard), and they were Lower East Side artists who wanted to integrate art and Marxist politics. Her primary background was in classical music; they considered jazz their essential aesthetic. But Southern and the Black Arts Movement overlapped in recognizing the need for African Americans to place themselves at the center of writing about African-American music, and they shared the goal of disabusing both African Americans and mainstream Americans of deeply ingrained racial stereotypes. For the de facto leader of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), this included supplanting the white monopoly on jazz criticism with writing by and for African Americans. For Southern this meant showing that African Americans' musical history was richer and more complex than spirituals and jazz. If the Black Arts Movement envisioned writing that would link blues and jazz to African Americans' socioeconomic conditions, Southern's ambitious goal was to challenge racialized categories of music altogether and, in so doing, suggest the speciousness of racial distinction.

Leading up to the convergence of these different visions, the history of writing on African-American music developed out of two founding nineteenth-century texts. The first and more influential, *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), a collection edited by three white abolitionists, spawned a tradition of studying music as an outgrowth of African Americans' history and sociopolitical condition.<sup>3</sup> Directly or indirectly, *Slave Songs* led to works by both white and African-American writers grounded in the assumptions and strategies of folklore and sociology. The second work, *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (1878), by James Monroe Trotter (an African-American journalist, activist, and Civil War veteran), had little relation to *Slave Songs*. Deliberately written to emphasize African Americans' most urbane musical accomplishments, Trotter chose not to dwell on the "retrogressive" music from slave times. His book inspired a second, less prominent writing tradition, which had a generally more musicological slant, oriented toward performers and texts rather than sociocultural analysis. These writers, most of them African Americans, stressed black accomplishment in European-based musical traditions, thereby impugning the idea of racially defined cultural limits. And because they questioned the legitimacy of an exclusive, racialized cultural hierarchy, this work had potentially radical political implications.<sup>4</sup>

Southern's *The Music of Black Americans* was heir to

both of these traditions, and it appeared at a time when the latter had been long neglected. From the 1930s through the 1960s the folkloric/sociological tradition went unrivaled, with almost all of the writing on African-American music focusing on jazz and blues and ignoring African-American contributions to "art music." In itself, however, the blues and jazz writing represented a major expansion of the study of African-American music, for many earlier writers had considered these subjects too vulgar to merit critical attention.

Yet Southern's work went even further in reconfiguring the field of study and, by extension, challenging basic assumptions about what constituted African-American music. By tracing African-American contributions in all styles of music (especially those usually associated with white European musical culture) and by focusing on "black musicians" rather than on "black music," Southern's work detonated an explosion under prevailing definitions of black music. In effect—and this is where Southern's "revolution" lay—the book implied a deracialized interpretation of musical culture, in which music and sometimes musicians could transcend externally imposed racial boundaries. Indeed, this work might be seen as a response to LeRoi Jones's racially charged polemic *Blues People* (1963) and his suggestively titled collection of articles, *Black Music* (1967).<sup>5</sup> But while Jones pointed to black participation in the Western classical-popular idiom as a form of moral capitulation and corruption, Southern highlighted such contributions as evidence of a more diverse and eclectic musical and social heritage. She did not deny the social origins of ring shouts and spirituals; she merely showed that the inveterate focus on the South and the twentieth-century emergence of blues and jazz did not tell a complete story.

Paradoxically, despite the radicalism of undermining racialized categories, Southern's approach also suggested a more traditional, integrationist perspective. On the one hand, by implying that the designation "black" in no way prescribed musical interests or the musical styles in which a performer might excel, Southern's work challenged musical analysis based on externally imposed racial categories. On the other hand, however, by constructing her study as "the music of black Americans," she also relied on and preserved race as a meaningful analytical category. In this sense her rejection of racial and cultural categorization was incomplete. It was, rather, more in line with W. E. B. Du Bois's 1926 vision of art as a necessary component in the fight for social equality: "I do not doubt," he said,



that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be just as beautiful, and beautiful largely in the same ways, as the art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red; but the point today is that until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be regarded as human.<sup>6</sup>

While Southern and Du Bois shared a belief in culture as a weapon against the oppression of African Americans, Southern's sophisticated, scholarly attention to all forms of African-American music undermined notions of cultural hierarchy that Du Bois did not thoroughly question. *The Music of Black Americans* not only connected African-American musicians to European "high art" but it also treated African and African-American musical forms with the same degree of complexity and respect as their European and Euro-American counterparts.

## II.

The appearance of the third edition of *The Music of Black Americans* brings to the fore many of the strengths and limits of Southern's musicological approach. Among its most important benefits, Southern's descriptions imbued African Americans' musical languages and history with a richness formerly reserved for the so-called "highbrow" European canon. (Indeed, highbrow, a term borrowed in the 1880s from the skull-measuring "science" of phrenology, enshrined the exalted status of Europeans and systematized the degraded status of people of African descent.<sup>7</sup>) At the same time, Southern showed the capacity of musicians to disregard hierarchical distinctions of musical culture and demonstrated how problematic the accepted notion of those boundaries was.

Yet there are many aspects of African-American musical culture that Southern's text- and performer-based musicological approach either obscures or simply cannot address. In the past quarter century Southern's work has inspired and propelled a whole generation of scholars whose work has revealed the limits of her approach and expanded our sense of what we can learn from and through African-American music. Indeed, the vast majority of the important work on African-American music in recent years has come from scholars outside of musicology—mostly in the fields of cultural history, Gender Studies, literature, religion, and critical theory. While the new edition of *The Music of Black Americans* has grown by about 10 percent from the last edition, it fails to incorporate these new developments in a substantive way. As a result, it now

seems somewhat out of step, with the best work being done in the field that Southern herself helped to shape.

The problem of defining and understanding the unity and continuity of African-American music, a central issue raised by Southern's work, forms the backbone of Samuel Floyd, Jr.'s *The Power of Black Music*. Pulling together Sterling Stuckey's arguments about the centrality of the ring shout in African-American culture and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s formulation of the critical metalanguage of Signifyin(g), Floyd urges us to recognize that communication, not abstract aesthetic pleasure, is the primary function of African-American music. With the "master trope" of call-and-response underlying all forms of African-American musical communication (although manifesting itself in different ways), musicians and audiences use music to "signify" off each other—that is, to critique each other, other musicians and musical styles, their collective surroundings, and even other media, in past and present. By focusing on how and what African-American music communicates, Floyd is able to account for a long-standing division between African-American emphasis on performance and European emphasis on composition. What is required, he argues, "is a perceptual and conceptual shift from music as an object to music as an event."<sup>8</sup> While texts may be important in African-American music, they are not fixed as they are in European-based music. The original and unique work of art, then, lies not in the text (i.e., the composition) but in the event of the performance, deriving its meanings from what is to be communicated and the complex of relationships between past and present, audience and musicians, musicians with one another, and the whole event with the outside world. It is in this way that we may understand why the most celebrated artists of African-American music—take Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker as examples—were primarily performers, not composers, while the most famous artists in European classical music, including even those who were acclaimed performers, were hailed, above all, for their compositions.

While Floyd's theory is attractive and conceptually useful, it bears apparent weaknesses as well. Floyd invests so much power in the language of Signifyin(g) that everything from a saxophone player's swagger to an audience's call for an encore may be embraced by it. This veiled, nonverbal language is so malleable in Floyd's hands that one wonders if every action could not be construed as a Signifyin(g) gesture in the right light. Nonetheless, Floyd's reformulation of Gates's Signifyin(g) discourse seems more in need of a tune-up than a complete overhaul. More problematic is

Floyd's reliance on the unstable concept of "cultural memory" to connect different epochs of African/African-American cultural history. By placing considerable weight on a concept as fuzzy and ahistorical as cultural memory—which he defines as the "nonfactual and nonreferential motivations, actions, and beliefs that members of a culture seem, without direct knowledge or deliberate training, to 'know,'"<sup>9</sup>—Floyd constructs a theory that defies materialist analysis and takes on, at least in places, an essentialist (i.e., race-based) tint that he specifically denies in the book's conclusion.<sup>10</sup> This is much more than Floyd's problem, however; the question of the persistence of cultural ideas and forms is a problem for everyone interested in the historical development of cultural expression.

Weaknesses aside, Floyd's theory has much to offer. It helps us understand why traditional musicology has been limited in its effectiveness in analyzing African-American music, and it makes great strides both in linking vernacular and classical musical traditions and laying to rest resistant notions of cultural hierarchy. Moreover, Floyd's articulation of an implicit critical language and a network of social and cultural interconnections also prompts many new ideas for qualitative analysis of African-American music. These include a deeper understanding of music history and of the social dynamics of performance situations, as well as strategies for revitalizing musicological methodologies in the study of African-American culture.

Moving further away from musicology, two recent collections edited by Krin Gabbard use tools, questions, and methodologies from critical theory to analyze jazz.<sup>11</sup> The best work in these essays, such as Gabbard's analysis of canon formation or Jed Rasula's rethinking of the function of records in jazz history, will help scholars ask more difficult, more probing questions of their subjects. Yet there is something troubling about the scholarly impulse to group these works, as Gabbard makes a point of doing, under the rubric of Jazz Studies. The promise of such ambitious, provocative work would best be served by recognizing that the questions and methodologies these works utilize have no (or little) inherent connection to jazz and may be used to enrich the study of other forms of musical culture as well.

If jazz has a self-consciousness that many scholars are attracted to, one could argue that country music raises many of the same analytical issues (race, class, and gender; impact of technology; changing demography) as blues and jazz. Perhaps the rationale for Jazz Studies is that such a designation avoids the racial undertones of "African-

American music." This avoidance is a useful reminder that scholars and polemicists have made much of the ways in which music is socially constructed. Yet from collaborations between Louis Armstrong and Jimmie Rodgers in 1930 and Ornette Coleman and Jerry Garcia in the 1990s, to the borderless repertoire of artists like Leadbelly and Paul Robeson, musicians have always been much less mindful of racial, cultural, and musical borders than audiences, analysts, and the public at large. Regardless of the frequency or infrequency of such border crossing, the existence of such work highlights the indefinite nature of cultural hierarchies and reinforces the subtle but stinging challenge posed by Eileen Southern's work. As Duke Ellington used to say, "Good music is music that sounds good." ❁

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., "Eileen Jackson Southern: Quiet Revolutionary," in Josephine Wright and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (eds.), *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern* (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 1992): 6.

<sup>2</sup>Her other works include *Readings in Black American Music* (1971, revised ed. 1983), *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* (1982), and, coedited with Josephine Wright, *African-American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale, and Dance, 1600s–1920: An Annotated Bibliography* (1990). She also founded the important scholarly journal *The Black Perspective in Music* (1973–1990).

<sup>3</sup>William Francis Allen, Charles Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A. Simpson, 1867).

<sup>4</sup>Exemplary works in the first tradition include John Wesley Work, *Folk Song of the American Negro* (1915); Howard Odum and Guy Johnson, *The Negro and His Songs* (1925); and LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (1963). Works in the second include J. B. T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (various editions, 1878–1903); Maud Cuney-Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (1936); and perhaps Alaine Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (1936).

<sup>5</sup>Southern was not alone in questioning the practice of over-reading music. In Ralph Ellison's review of *Blues People* in *New York Review of Books* (and reprinted in his 1964 collection *Shadow and Act*), he quipped: "The tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon his body of music is enough to give even the blues the blues."

<sup>6</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," quoted in Arthur P. Davis and Michael W. Peplow (eds.), *The New Negro Renaissance: An Anthology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975): 496.



<sup>7</sup>Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988): 221–223.

<sup>8</sup>Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 232.

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<sup>10</sup>*ibid.*: 282.

<sup>11</sup>Krin Gabbard (ed.), *Jazz Among the Discourses and Representing Jazz* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

## Reclaiming the Experiences of African-American Women

BY TRACY FISHER

REVIEW OF: Leith Mullings's *On Our Own Terms: Race, Class, and Gender in the Lives of African-American Women* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Contemporary scholarship theorizing race, class, and gender has been wide in its range and scope. In the early 1970s theoretical frameworks on gender, such as those drawing from structural and symbolic anthropology, suggested that early societies were characterized by universal asymmetry (see Rosaldo 1974; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974); those drawing from Marxist anthropology suggested that there were egalitarian gender relations (see Leacock 1992 [1978]). However, many of these early approaches were Eurocentric and did not address racial and ethnic differences. Thus, the dominant conceptual frameworks for analyzing women's experiences have been trapped historically within a patriarchal paradigm, as well as within the limited context of the experiences of white women.

Today scholarship on gender and feminist theory distinguishes itself from older paradigms in several ways: (1) gender is perceived as a social relationship and a cultural, social, and political construction; (2) race, ethnicity, class, and gender are not additive categories but interlocking systems that produce inequality for some and privilege for others; and (3) the interlocking system analysis illustrates the relationship between transnational economies and cultural constructions. Leith Mullings's new book, *On Our Own Terms: Race, Class, and Gender in the Lives of African-American Women* (New York: Routledge, 1997) fits within this contemporary genre of scholarship. Written over a period of fifteen years, this collection brings together ten essays, each highlighting various issues central to ethnography. Some, especially chapters 3 and 5, are informed specifically by Mullings's groundbreaking urban

ethnographic fieldwork in Harlem. In addition to these chapters, the author's preface provides the reader with a window into the life of an African-American woman scholar. As a point of departure, the preface provides the reader with memories of Mullings's lived experience, a theme that is found in other chapters as well. Mullings writes about her mother and grandmother, two African-American women who influenced her life; her years as an activist graduate student at the University of Chicago; as well as the gender issues she confronted during her years at Columbia University. It is in the preface, for example, where she reveals her own struggles while at the same time communicates ethnographic concerns and critical issues regarding women, work, and child care.

In this book Mullings employs an anthropological political-economic approach to the study of race, class, and gender. This analysis contributes to many of the above-mentioned theoretical shifts and underscores the significance of culture, power, and history. Mullings rejects a deterministic winner-take-all approach, often emphasized in discussions of race and class, which have the effect of giving primacy either to racial oppression or to class exploitation. As stated in the initial pages of the book, Mullings argues that "class fundamentally prefigures the meaning and experience of both race and gender" (7). Furthermore, she asserts that for African-American women "race, class, and gender are the analytic constructs that have the greatest explanatory power in predicting and interpreting their conditions of existence" (6).

These clearly written essays are divided into three sec-