

Obituary

Eric M. George
MBE

13 March 1936 - 8 November 2001



Eric George was born on 13 March 1936 to Dorothy and Cecil George. At the age of nine years old he became a victim of polio. The affliction was to form the basis of the very

core of his future life and of his contribution to the Island that he loved so much. Deprived of the ability to take part in the physical activities enjoyed by his peers Eric ploughed his energies into learning to play the piano, a skill and a talent developed in the young Eric and he became a consummate artist on this instrument. Eric became attached to Ivy when she was still a teenager and they married when she was twenty-one.

He joined the St Helena Band at an early age and was a founder member of the Gettogethers Orchestra when it was formed in 1974 and remained active and committed to both bands to the end. He also supported the Island Choir as their pianist until it fell away. Apart from music for which Eric will be mainly remembered, he focused his attention on education and was deeply involved in the development of musical education and indeed the Education Department and government on a number of levels over the years. On leaving school at the age of 15 Eric applied for a job in teaching and began his career as a teacher at Jamestown Junior School under the guidance of Mr Keith Yon attending training sessions at Wellington House. He also taught at the Secondary Selec-



tive School and at Country School as well as Levelwood School under the headship of his wife Ivy. Eric went on to take some time away from education and donned the mantle of Information Officer during which time he was responsible for developing the Island's broadcast service including schools broadcasts, the *St Helena News Review* and other external information activities. However, Eric could not stay away from the Education Department for too long; after a ten-year hiatus he returned to teaching and as an educator reinforced his influence on education in general and on the development of music in particular. In 1996 he produced in print for the first time a history of music on St Helena. This accurate account of the development of music on the Island over the last 50 years is an important document, which is supported by audiotapes and a musically notated record that would otherwise have been lost to the Island as a record

of its musical history. Eric was also instrumental in establishing the St Helena Teacher's Association, which sought to promote and protect the interests of those within the profession. Eric went on and on ploughing his vital efforts, his life's blood into the development and the teaching of music, which was at the heart of his life's work. Eric was a selfless person dedicated to a love of music, which he did everything possible to instil in generations of St Helenians; Eric forged on and hundreds of our young people have benefited



Eric Benjamin congratulates Eric on his award



Eric with the Young Musicians

from his intelligent and patient teaching, his encouragement and guidance. After retirement Eric took up private tutoring and was the driving force, along with Sue Bagley helped by Cynthia and Dougie Bennett in the creation and support of the Young Musicians Orchestra and then Ladies Orchestra. The accolade, which Eric was least expecting, was the award by Her Majesty the Queen of the Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) with which he was formally invested at Plantation House by Governor Smallman at a small gathering of family and friends on Thursday 8th April 1999. Eric was ever a self-effacing and modest man and on this occasion he gave all credit to his students, their parents and their teachers.

Eric was generous, thoughtful, sensitive and of course a family man. He contributed so much to the Island, and his input cannot be underestimated on any level especially on the music level. His family often jested that MBE stands for 'Music Before Everything' and it is a tribute to Eric George MBE, the man and the family support behind the man, the driving force that kept his life going for so long in the face of physical hardship.

Eric was a man of great achievement and experience. He helped with almost every musical endeavour that has taken place on the Island during the last 50 years.

During the Commemorative Funeral Service held at St Paul's Cathedral on 19 November 2001 at which several hundred people were present including students and former students as well as colleagues, Bishop John Salt said: "There are some people that we expect to see around for ever and we cannot imagine life without them. Eric was one such person... the remembrance of Eric will be kept alive in all who were trained by him and make music today." Bishop John continued: "I got to know Eric and we became good friends, I think he was happy with me because I knew something about music. We also liked to drink our whisky neat!

I was privileged to minister to him when he was in hospital, and although he became weak, he never lost the sparkle in his eyes." Patrick, Eric's son, played *Adieu to the Piano*, by Beethoven which was one of Eric's favourite pieces of music. Eric Benjamin gave a moving Eulogy covering Eric's career and his significant contribution to the musical culture of the Island. Tributes were paid by Stacey Young for the Young Musicians, Mrs Pat Musk for the Ladies Orchestra and Natasha Richardson for Harford Middle School.

Eric is survived by his wife Ivy and his children Sandra, Patrick and Christopher as well as grandchildren

and great-grandchildren.

*Praise him with the trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
Let everything that breathes praise the Lord
Psalm 150.*

May he rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen

By Johnny Drummond

Papa

You were always there for me
In times of joy and sorrow
You encouraged me throughout my life
To look towards tomorrow.

An Inspiration, a guiding star,
You always shared ideas
Patient, understanding and oh, so wise
I know you always cared.

How many times have I called on you
To ask for your advice?
How many times have I questioned you,
Asked what's wrong or right?

Whenever I've needed you, night or day,
You've always been there for me
I would like to thank God now
For giving you to me.

So even though you've left this Earth
I know God will want you above
Conduct His Angels in heavenly song
Papa, you are remembered with love.

Tanya



Governor Smallman and Eric George MBE



Eric with his family at Plantation House (8th April 1999)

Sandi and I were very sad to learn the news of the death of our friend Eric George on 8 November. As well as leaving an indelible impression on generations of schoolchildren that he taught, Eric's musical talents will be an enduring legacy to St Helena and to all those with whose lives he came into contact.

I recall coming across the following words in the story of Nelson Mandela's life, "Long Walk to Freedom:-

"You may be poor, you may have only a ramshackle house, you may have lost your job, but (that) song gives you hope"

Nelson Mandela was referring to the African music of his Transkei homeland, which he said was often about the aspirations and hopes of the people. A song lived in the soul of Eric George and he had the gift of expressing it in a hundred and one different ways to inspire young and old alike and to give them hope that they too might aspire to something they had thought might be beyond them. To Sandi and me, Eric was a patient, firm and inspirational music teacher. For some four years he painstakingly coached us, pushing us to attain a standard with which we knew Eric would be satisfied. We often failed, but Eric's talent as a teacher ensured that we continued to aspire while, nonetheless recognising our own shortcomings.

Retirement is often looked upon as a time for winding down one's activities. For Eric, although he retired from full-time teaching on grounds of ill health, it became an opportunity to achieve musically much that he had thought about but not had time to fulfil. His transcription of "Fibre", the musical tribute to the flax industry that the children of St Helena staged for Prince Andrew at the time of his visit to the Island in 1984 was a significant contribution to musical heritage, as is his anthology of Island songs. What will live in the memory of many, however, is the time and effort that Eric devoted to the creation, first of the Young Musician's Orchestra, and more recently of the Ladies' Orchestra. He transcribed a great deal of music on his computer for each of the many instruments, and for many of his individual pupils too. He made a tremendous contribution to music on the Island over many years and it was most fitting that Her Majesty The Queen was graciously pleased to make him a Member of the

Order of the British Empire.

We have missed Eric's inimitable style of teaching since leaving St Helena, frequently wishing that he was here to help us through a difficult piece of music, but comforted in the knowledge that he was helping others at home to get a grip of their timing or to understand a little better. That he is no longer able to do this is very sad and marks the end of an era. Our deepest sympathy goes to Ivy and the family. We shall always have a special place in our hearts and memories for our teacher, Eric 'Music' George."

David and Sandi Smallman

I only knew Eric a short time, but was amazed at his stamina and drive: his energy in bringing and recording music on St. Helena was incredible (as well as being the author of two books on music and the island - including one where he transcribed and researched songs from the Island's past, he was the leader of the Island's Young Musicians group, and so much more, doing everything from arranging and printing out music on his computer for various groups to play, to organizing concerts and tirelessly promoting music on the Island). I was lucky enough to spend an evening meeting his Young Musicians, and then go up to his place afterwards where he spent the night into the wee hours showing me how he arranged and printed out scores on his computer. As a professional musician myself, I was amazed at his knowledge and drive... I remember him showing me the entire set of numbers he arranged for Prince Andrew school production of "Annie" a while back, all from just a score (for the available instruments and players in the production). Really an amazing fellow, and one that will be sorely missed. I count myself lucky to have had the chance to meet him.

Larry Greenfield



Ladies' Orchestra lead by Eric



The Young Musicians at the Consolate

The following poems are a tribute to
Mr Eric George from Harford Middle School.

As pupils of Harford

We knew Mr George as a teacher and friend,
He shone like a star amongst the dark sky,
He was kind, loving and always happy,
When he touched the piano it was like magic,
The gift he was given he shared with us all,
When he arrived in the car park we all knew we were
in for a great fun lesson in music,
Now so sadly we say
God has called him to his home,
His music teaching we will long remember
As always he was a good listener,
We love you Mr George
May you rest in peace.

By Natassia Richardson.

Acrostic Poems

M for music that he taught us,
R remembering him for all he did,

G the gift he had in music,
E encouraging us along the way,
O organising our lessons in school,
R the recorder that some of us played,
G giving his time to us all,
E everything he did for us.

By Greg Coleman & Kacy Henry

A for always we will remember you

M is for music you taught us to play
U for understanding our needs
S is for support that you gave to all
I for increasing our knowledge in music
C is for communicating with us.

L is for love we shared together,
O for obeying you, at most times we did,
V for voice, so sweetly you sung,
E for encouragement
R for relationship we shared.

By Samara Henry

