

**'The Fan Who Knew Too Much'**

By Anthony Heilbut

Knopf

\$30

354 pages

[anthonyheilbut.com](http://anthonyheilbut.com)

**Aretha Franklin concert**

Saturday, Nov. 17

7:30 p.m.

DAR Constitution Hall

1776 D Street, NW

\$59.50-115.50

[ticketmaster.com](http://ticketmaster.com)



Vintage early '60s promo still of **Aretha Franklin** during her Columbia Records years. (Photo courtesy of Sony Music Entertainment)

In a roundabout way, there'd be no rock music without gays and lesbians.

That's the assertion of gay New York-based writer/historian Anthony Heilbut. In a sprawling, juicy tome that's as gossipy and anecdotal as it is academic, he writes in "The Fan Who Knew Too Much" that there would have been no golden age of black gospel music (roughly 1945-1960) without gays. He, and other rock historians also assert there'd be no mainstream rock and roll without classic black gospel influence.



Gay author **Anthony Heilbut** says Franklin's underrated work at Columbia Records is her best, contrary to popular opinion, which venerates her later Atlantic Records period. (Photo by Stephen Ladner)

"It means a lot to me that gay people know about this," Heilbut says during a lengthy phone chat last week. "Gospel is really the most essential American

music. Everyone sort of understands that black church singing, it's really been the center of American singing since the 19th century. It follows through in jazz as well. It's a great gay contribution."

Though white and an atheist, as a teen, Heilbut went to hear the great R&B and soul acts of the day at the Apollo in New York. He was often the only white person in the room. He got a heads up from the ushers.

"I think they kind of took pity on this lone white boy," he says. "They said, if you dig this, you ain't heard nothin' yet, the gospel shows are so much better. The showmanship, the vocalism. I came to know almost all the singers and became absolutely enthralled. They were so much more dynamic than their secular counterparts. You just cannot imagine rock and roll and R&B without the influence of these singers."



Aretha in concert at Wolf Trap, summer 2011, the last time she played the D.C. market. (Blade file photo by Joey DiGuglielmo)

Heilbut's book, out earlier this year, is a collection of lengthy essays. Subtitled "Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church and Other Meditations," it includes a lengthy essay on how many black gospel legends — figures like James Cleveland, Clara Ward and others were either gay, lesbian or bi. In the essay "Aretha: How She Got Over" he explores how the soul legend — in town this weekend for a concert at DAR Constitution Hall — integrated the styles of the gospel legends she admired as a teen into the hit secular records she later recorded at Columbia and Atlantic. Though Franklin's gospel roots are well known, Heilbut extrapolates the richness of those influences in unprecedented ways.

Other essays explore writer Thomas Mann ("The Magic Mountain"), the phenomenon of the male soprano and late soap opera maven Irna Phillips.

One senses, however, that despite Heilbut's many interests and decades — he's 71 — of following the careers of many, his heart is most deeply rooted in the gospel music of his youth. He eventually produced records for some of his favorites and writes and shares movingly of not only their great talent, but the hypocrisy with which the church has dealt with — often with scorn and outright condemnation — the contributions of its gay musicians.

Typical of many of the "old school" black gospel establishment, Heilbut quotes the legendary Shirley Caesar as "beseeching the 'sissies and bull daggers' to 'come up and be saved,' and warning that homosexuals were 'stealing our children.'"

More analysis than biography, though, Heilbut illustrates how a lifetime of following a singer or musical phenomenon can result in an uncanny insight that the subjects themselves are often loathe to discuss — Franklin, as journalists and long-time fans know, is famously prickly and evasive on many topics.

For the record, Heilbut says Franklin and her legendary father, Rev. C.L. Franklin who became a mid-century legend as pastor of Detroit's New Bethel Baptist Church — were way more accepting of gays than many others in the era.

Heilbut says Franklin, though not as vocal as some, has made her gay support known in several ways — from singing at a recent same-sex wedding to inviting gay-welcoming clergy (Bishop Carlton Pearson) to comment during a Whitney Houston tribute she hosted during a concert at Radio City Music Hall while Houston's mother, Cissy, stuck with old school, anti-gay leaders (TD Jakes, Donnie McClurkin) at her daughter's funeral.

"Aretha does these little things without really saying a word," Heilbut says.