

No such thing as too much knowledge

BY ERIC BANKS

There's something terribly misleading about the title of Anthony Heilbut's excellent collection of what he and/or his publisher describe as "meditations": "The Fan Who Knew Too Much."

A Grammy Award-winning producer of gospel music and author of "The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times," as well as a biography of Thomas Mann and a history of German emigres in Southern California, Heilbut has far too many professional seasons under his belt to match the leisure-time escapism of most fans. Not many music enthusiasts devote their lives to the recording studio, and even top-shelf aficionados don't spend six decades thinking about a particular genre or the traces that European novelists, musicians, directors and critics in flight from ethnic or political persecution etched permanently on American popular culture.

The intellectual command and critical nimbleness on display in these essays are dazzling — they range from a minibiography of Aretha Franklin to a reflection on the high-pitched male voice in both pop and classical music.

This nearly 100-page piece is driven by ethical and political urgency. Evidently written before President Barack Obama's endorsement of same-sex marriage, "The Children and Their Secret Closet" makes a timely case for the nonpareil role played by gays and lesbians in the creation of the gospel sound, and catalogs the anti-homosexual rhetoric that plagues the black church.

"Without lesbians and gay men there could be no gospel music," Heilbut writes. "I'd known it for years but had avoided discussing it in print. But after the church abandoned its responsibility toward gay men suffering from AIDS and, adding insult to injury, began to swim in homophobia, I resolved to write this essay."

The "sissies" and "bull daggers" who found a home in the Pentecostal church include some major gospel players: James Cleveland, the Chicago powder keg who was an early casualty of AIDS; the great '50s star Alex Bradford; and behind-the-scenes guys like Shannon Williams, a white A&R man who was so right wing that Heilbut jokes he'd have been a Klansman if he hadn't been attracted to black men.

Would these pillars of gospel find a place in today's black church?

The Fan Who Knew Too Much

Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations

Anthony Heilbut

The Fan Who Knew Too Much

By Anthony Heilbut, Knopf, 368 pages, \$30

edge, and the black church, once the very model of freedom and civil rights, has acquired a new image as the citadel of intolerance. This development would have national repercussions, particularly on the career of President Barack Obama. It would introduce an ugly but not uninformed term, 'black redneck.' "

Heilbut indicts powerful black preachers like T.D. Jakes and Eddie Long, the pastor who blasted anti-gay sermons in his Atlanta megachurch before being caught in his own sex scandal. ("Even white America could not claim so many powerful bigots. ... Joel Osteen and Rick Warren were models of tolerance compared to Long or Jakes.")

But his angriest words are reserved for today's gospel firmament — Shirley Caesar, Mary Mary, Deitrick Haddon, Donnie McClurkin — who don't flinch at dishing out prejudice against black gays and lesbians.

"How could you deconstruct this leviathan? The arch-homophobes were singing the music of gay people, acknowledging with every breath and step that if you banished the sissies and bull daggers, the tabernacle might crumble. It would be like Germany without its Jews."

At least Caesar et al. could be expected to know their history. But as Heilbut demonstrates elsewhere in "The Fan Who Knew Too Much," even the once vibrant

"Everyone understood that gospel depended on the labor and talent of its gay practitioners. If everything wasn't spoken aloud, it didn't always need to be; 'don't ask don't tell' has rarely been so painless. But that has changed. The family secret has become public knowl-

cultural forms are subject to popular amnesia. The names of the German emigres he celebrates in a rambling essay that revisits his book "Exiled in Paradise" have ebbed in significance while their mark on the culture has paradoxically been indelible. Ditto black musicians such as Josh White, the "matinee idol" of the country blues in the '50s.

But perhaps the most forgotten among his sub rosa explorations is the landscape of radio soap operas that he unearths in "Brave Tomorrows for Bachelor's Children." Here the fan gives way to something approaching the fanatic. Heilbut vividly recalls the serials that brought a daytime universe of home-spun surrealism into millions of homes before television, a galaxy populated by lady lawyers whose husbands turned out to be impostors and bastard children who eventually exacted their revenge.

His fan-favorites include Jane Cruisenberry's insanely plotted "The Story of Mary Marlin," whose eponymous Rilke-quoting heroine goes from Cedar Springs, Iowa, housewife to wife of a senator, and whose adventures include speaking with animals. (After the show was canceled in the mid-1940s, Heilbut writes, "The weird splendor of Mary Marlin wouldn't recur until David Lynch's 'Twin Peaks' or the wilder HBO serials of the 1990s.")

But above all, his essay is a tribute to the queen of the soaps, "Guiding Light" creator (and early WGN star) Irna Phillips, who "conceived and mastered a form in which the most baroque stresses of psychological conflict became routine," all to the melodramatic swell of Hammond organ chords.

By the 1970s their creators were mostly forgotten (Phillips, who once took in \$250,000 a year, ended her days working as a saleswoman at Marshall Field's). But they infiltrated the fantasy lives of millions of listeners and, as one old writer put it, made daily life more like life in the soaps.

Can a real fan actually know too much? The fulsomeness and jesuitical detail of Heilbut's essays argue no, and his arguments frequently spin off in serendipitous digressions, down whatever path it seems his enthusiasms lead. I'm OK with that. In an autobiographical essay on the fan phenomenon, Heilbut writes of how frequently we forgive our heroes their excesses. Count me a fan.

Eric Banks, former editor of *Bookforum*, is president of *National Book Critics Circle*.

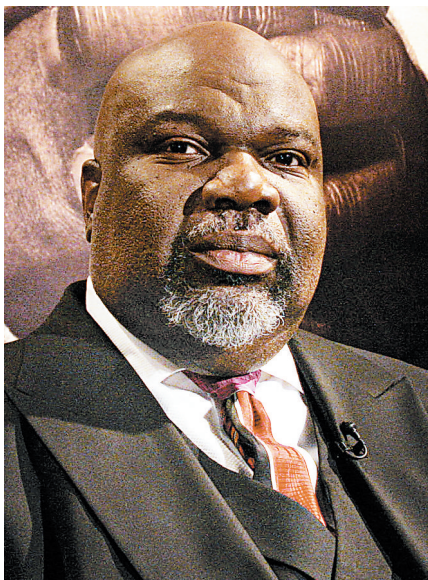


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Rev. James Cleveland



Aretha Franklin



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T.D. Jakes