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Books

BOOK REVIEW

'The Fan Who Knew Too Much' by Anthony Heilbut

By Ian Crouch | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 21, 2012



ANDREW H. WALKER/GETTY IMAGES

Anthony Heilbut's book devotes a chapter to Queen of Soul Aretha Franklin's many roles as "foxy lady, proto-feminist, earth mother, avatar of high culture from opera to ballet, and storefront evangelist."

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In this new collection of essays, Anthony Heilbut identifies himself as a fan of gospel music, but that undersells his connection. He is a leading scholar of the genre — having produced the seminal popular book on the subject, "The Gospel Sound," in 1971 — as well as an accomplished record producer. Still, like a fan, he

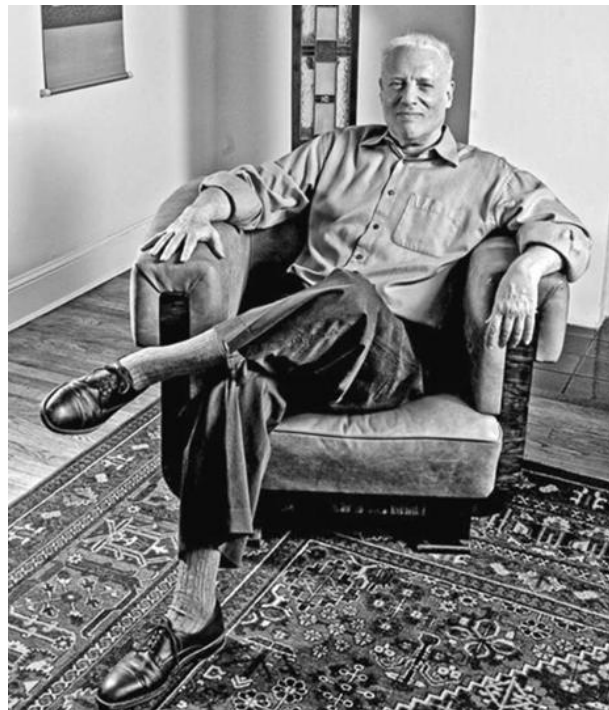
remains apart from the world of black Protestant church music; he is Jewish, the son of German émigrés, and, not incidentally, an atheist.

Yet sometimes an unlikely convert can be the most clear-minded critic of the thing he loves. The book's first chapter offers a surprising and deeply moving glimpse at what Heilbut identifies as an open secret: that "[w]ithout lesbians and gay men there could be no gospel music." Like their straight counterparts, gay performers played a tenuous, complicated role in the church — part entertainers, part spiritual leaders. Citing this history, Heilbut condemns the contemporary hard-line stance on gay rights, writing that "the black church, once the very model of freedom and civil rights, has acquired a new image, as the citadel of intolerance."

The chapter is a rousing and impassioned argument, one likely to spark debate on both sides of the church door. The rest of the collection, though it will surely prove less controversial, nonetheless extends a similar theme, which is Heilbut's fascination with outsiders, loners, and exiles in 20th-century American culture.

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In one chapter, he weighs the triumphs and failures of the German Jews who fled Hitler, people such as Hannah Arendt, Thomas Mann, and Albert Einstein, who achieved immense fame in America, but who met with harsh criticism over their iconoclastic views of politics and religion,



STEVE LADNER

Anthony Heilbut

THE FAN WHO KNEW
TOO MUCH: Aretha
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most often from within their own ranks. In another, Heilbut introduces Irna Phillips, a Jewish woman who specialized in playing Irish characters in the early days of the radio soap operas — and who went on to create some of the best-known shows in the television era, such as “Guiding Light” and “As the World Turns.” Heilbut credits Phillips for many of the daytime serials’ familiar tropes — amnesia, evil twins, faked deaths, gaudy weddings — as well as for their widespread appeal, particularly among women, minorities, and those who perceive themselves as different: “Soaps became the one form uniquely geared to society’s outsiders and pariahs, ‘losers for losers.’ ”

Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations

Author: Anthony Heilbut

Publisher: Knopf

Number of pages: 354 pp., illustrated

Book price: \$30

Throughout the book, Heilbut is interested in the claims laid upon popular figures, and in turn, the claims they make for themselves. That theme gets its fullest examination in a chapter on the life of Aretha Franklin. Over her half-century of fame, the pop-gospel diva has inhabited such roles, Heilbut writes, as “foxy lady, proto-feminist, earth mother, avatar of high culture from opera to ballet, and storefront evangelist.” Franklin is a transcendent star, yet her life has been filled with all kinds of trouble — divorce, financial embarrassment, ill health — and Heilbut views her finally with the kind of pathos that matches her most soulful laments in song. For all of Heilbut’s exiles, the road is a hard one.

Heilbut’s various obsessions are weaved through this deeply personal collection, giving it the charismatic stamp of a single man and a single mind. As a social critic, Heilbut relies on a tightly spinning solar system of cultural and artistic references; his perhaps eccentric obsessions will certainly not be everyone’s. Yet his various enthusiasms become infectious, as when he describes gospel’s power to move: “women threw hats and pocketbooks, and men would run around the aisles and jump over balconies.”

The closing chapter, which gives the book its title, brings together the roles of artist, critic, and fan, all of whom take the same risk: Devotion to a particular art, especially one that lives on the fringes of popular culture, can lead to disappointment. And a fan is especially doomed, in a way, by the fact that he cannot do, but only watch or listen or read. Still, though, Heilbut ends on a hopeful, if still partly ambivalent note: "For a great many of us, the outer reaches of fandom have become our most essential selves."

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