

## FEATURE

# Royal music

New Aretha book explores tensions in African-American churches — among many things



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Aretha Franklin at Barack Obama's inauguration.

By [W. Kim Heron](#)

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**Anthony Heilbut's** *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* (Knopf) isn't officially out until June 20, but advance copies have generated headlines and some controversy for its exploration of tensions in African-American churches between the long tradition of closeted, but quietly accepted gays (from the local choir to some gospel stars, a sort of don't-ask, don't-tell policy) and the more recent trend of grand-standing homophobia from some pulpits.

But the cultural historian's enthusiasms span a wide range — from a history of soap operas to male sopranos to tensions between Einstein and Zionism to a glorious retelling of the Aretha Franklin's story and its enormous arc. Author of a classic history of gospel, Heilbut roots Franklin not in a generic *church*, but in specific forebears, her father, the Rev. C.L. Franklin, Clara Ward, Marion Williams, etc. — not to mention her great secular influence, Judy Garland. The cultural historian revels in

parsing Franklin's style, from her "finishing school enunciation" to the sly, subversive wit of her ad-libs to her work with successive generations of younger producers and artists (the equivalent of "Louis Armstrong jamming with Cecil Taylor").

*Publishers Weekly* suggested the essay "Aretha: How She Got Over" is worth the price of the book, and it's hard to disagree, given nuggets like these:

- "There may be no other show-business saga quite like hers. She is not merely one of the best-selling vocalists of all time; she is also the most purely folkloric to succeed in a worldly context, surely the only pop singer to bring so rich an alternative tradition into the arena."
- "Thanks to her example, women vocalists of all races were allowed a freedom, a chance at an uninhibited transcendence, that would never have been the option of middle-class Brits or working-class Mexicans or Catholic girls from Newark."
- "Her role was such that a history of black America could well be divided into pre- and post-Aretha."

And the Aretha of today, after much-publicized health and personal travails, is for Heilbut still evolving, growing in mastery, skipping the segue to go "from the blues to the shout, as if there were no contradiction ... reasserting her oldest self."

All hail the queen. —**W. Kim Heron**