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Gays, God and Gospel Music

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Without the artistic and emotional contributions of gay people there would be no gospel music. Throughout the middle decades of the 20th century, a significant number of gay or "queer" artists left their mark on gospel music, a cultural form that many consider to be America's most original. Indeed, the contribution of gays and lesbians to gospel music has been so large as to be absolutely "crucial and fundamental." They have been the "unacknowledged arbiters" of the gospel music world and no one can truly understand this American cultural form without careful attention to their lives and experiences.

This is the provocative and convincing claim made by Anthony Heilbut in "The Children and their Secret Closet," the lead essay in his majestic new book, "The Fan Who Knew Too Much." Heilbut, a writer, record producer, and cultural critic has been immersed (on his own terms) in the gospel world for nearly 50 years. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of gospel and has been closely connected to all of the major performers of the previous generation. To put it simply, no one knows more about the history of gospel music or has done more to promote it than this Jewish atheist from Queens. It is fair to say that most of what we know about gospel music we learned from him, beginning with his now classic book, "The Gospel Sound," published in 1971.

The essay on "the children," the familial appellation used to refer to gays in the church, is similar in content and theme to "The Gospel Sound" in that Heilbut is keen on revealing the gospel world in all its complexity, paradox and contradiction. We learn anew that many of these singing "saints" were not saints at all. They could be vulgar and mean, conniving and petty, selfish and unkind. This, to be sure, is one of the more fascinating aspects of the essay. It manages to humanize the gospel artists of the previous generation without demoralizing them. They were marvelously imperfect and tragically flawed; they were thoroughly human. It may not do much for Mahalia Jackson's "saintly image" to know that she was notoriously stingy and could cuss like a sailor, but it fills out her human portrait just fine.

The essay on "the children," however, is more a meditation on homosexuality and black churches. And as such it shines luminously. Heilbut gets us beyond simply acknowledging the presence of gays in black churches and the fact that gospel artists such as Sam Cooke, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Alex Bradford and James Cleveland (to name only a few) were known to be gay or "queer." He identifies a time when black churches were safe spaces for "the children," a time when gays and lesbians sought and found refuge in churches that not only acknowledged their presence but also their value. And they were drawn to the music principally, as Heilbut writes, for "the vast emotional territory that it claims for itself." The music played a "saving role" within the space of the church for those who would then have to gird themselves up to face a cruel world. For this reason, many black gays and lesbians once were among "the most faithful members" of black churches and "the most avid celebrants" of its worship culture. As an old church mother was known to say, "nobody shouts like 'the children.'"

The music, the churches, and the world of gospel have changed, however, and for the most part the safe spaces have become hateful ones. Heilbut has taken note of this. Not only does he find the current culture lacking the artistry of the previous era, it is also painfully off message. Indeed, he considers much of the music coming from today's gospel performers to be "hate speech." And one need not listen to very much of it to see that he has a point. There was a time when a gospel song about being "delivered" wasn't code for being "delivered from homosexuality." Now it almost always is. Anyone knowing anything about the music and the ministry of Donnie McClurkin, who Heilbut calls "the church's most visibly tormented self-hater," understands exactly what I'm talking about.

"The Fan Who Knew Too Much" is one of the best collections of essays to appear in many years. It is written with depth, clarity, sensitivity, wit and lyricism. It is Heilbut at his masterful and literary best. Also on display, however, particularly in the essay on "the children" is Heilbut's passion and a palpable sense of loss. When he surveys the current world of gospel, seeing it (with some exceptions) so far from its glorious past and so in denial of its gay roots, the anger and the grief nearly overtake him.

It is sobering to recognize that what Heilbut ultimately accomplishes in the essay is an accounting of gospel music's fall from grace into near irrelevance. He knows that the overemphasis on condemning homosexuality that one finds in the gospel world and in many black churches is not a sign of prophetic witness. Rather, it is evidence that many of these singers and ministers just don't have much to say anymore, and that spaces that once were, in Heilbut's view, "the very model of freedom and civil rights," have been restructured as citadels of bigotry and intolerance. It is sobering, indeed.

On the bright side, "The Children and their Secret Closet" reminds us of what is possible. The reminder comes from one who would know, the fan who has dedicated much of his life to the study of gospel music, the perfect "insider/outsider" and a professed "non-believer." Perhaps that's just how it should be.

A friend once told me that sometimes it takes an atheist to do God's work. If that is true, then that is precisely what we have in Anthony Heilbut, the fan who perhaps knows a little too much but has found a beautiful way to tell us all about it.