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The Fan Who Knew Too Much - Anthony Heilbut

Anthony Heilbut

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Much:

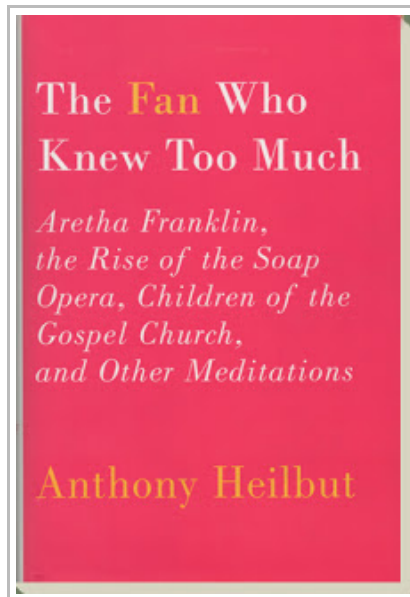
Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations

Alfred A. Knopf, 354 pages (2012)

www.anthonyheilbut.com

By Bob Marovich for [The Black Gospel Blog](#).

Anthony Heilbut is quite possibly the smartest person I have ever met.



Although he completed *The Gospel Sound* in 1971, the book remains indispensable to anyone interested in gospel music. It helped jumpstart serious writing about this distinctive American art form.

Lo, some forty years later, Heilbut returns to gospel's Golden Age, a term he coined and a subject dear to his heart--and adds a few other topics, too--in *The Fan Who Knew Too Much: Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations*,

In the opening essay, "The Children and their Secret Closet," Heilbut goes where most are wary to tread. He chronicles the historic and estimable contributions of gay men and women to gospel music. No cultural interloper he, Heilbut has, since the late 1950s, walked among

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gospel's pioneers, become a friend and confidant to many of them, and produced several award-winning gospel projects. Almost singlehandedly and for decades, he kept Marion Williams, and a score of Chicago singers and musicians, active behind the recording microphone when major labels had blithely moved on.

Heilbut writes with full permission from those whose tragic tales he tells. We learn how a community (gay) within-a-community (black) within-a community (migrant) walked with dignity through the most undignified of trials to transform the sound of the African American church and, ultimately, American popular music.

The irony, Heilbut points out in "The Children," is how some benefited personally from the talents and gifts of musicians whose sexual preferences they decried publicly. He quotes one person who even exclaimed, "God wants you dead." Had the "you" trigger been pulled against any other disenfranchised group of people, the public outcry would have been deafening, and rightfully so. But it was aimed at the homosexual community and nobody said a mumblin' word. No one, whether white, black, church, organization, writer, or political figure, who has disrespected the "sissies and bulldaggers" are spared Heilbut's ire. It is a masterful piece of writing, ranking among the author's best work. I admire and applaud his courage to tackle a subject that most of us have been far too craven to cover.

Gospel enthusiasts will also find Heilbut's extended essay on the musical passage of Aretha Franklin from PK to Queen of Soul to be of interest. It is as insightful and eye-opening, and places its subject as squarely within the context of American life and culture, as Greil Marcus' "Presleyiad" did for the Hillbilly Cat in *Mystery Train*.

Gospel plays a significant role in other chapters of *The Fan Who Knew Too Much*. In "The Male Soprano," for example, Heilbut discusses the above-the-stave singing of virtuoso artists such as Carl Hall of the Raspberry Singers. In "The Curse of Survival," Heilbut's argument for understanding blues singers in the context of their times—as popular entertainers, not mythical figures—parallels the trend among gospel record collectors who elevate the raw, amateur, and obscure over the artists who were the public face, the bread and butter, of gospel music during the 1950s and 1960s.

Reading *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* is a revelatory and stirring experience. It is an elegy for, and ode to, the émigrés and exiles —"those who are heavy laden," to quote a gospel lyric—who despite their suffering contributed significantly to the richness of American culture. *De grandes souffrances vient du grand art.*

Five of Five Stars

Posted by [Bob Marovich](#) at [9:00 AM](#) 



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