

Book Reviews — “The Fan Who Knew Too Much” by Anthony Heilbut

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The Fan Who Knew Too Much: The Secret Closets of American Culture by Anthony Heilbut, Soft Skull Press, 354 pages

Despite his professed atheism, author Anthony Heilbut found refuge in the redemptive message of African American gospel music. In his impeccably researched collection of essays *The Fan Who Knew Too Much: The Secret Closets of American Culture*, Heilbut writes “I love gospel music without believing a word of it.” Before Cher and Lady Gaga, there were the original divas: Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward, and Marion Williams. Sporting colorful robes and sky-high bouffants, their domain wasn’t the concert hall or the disco but the church. The role of these women — and the gay men who loved them — in American music and culture constitutes the bulk of Heilbut’s book, which makes the fascinating argument that early-20th-century American black churches, particularly of the Pentecostal persuasion, were not just places of worship; they also served as safe havens for gay men and women who contended with economic struggle and racial discrimination, along with the stigma of homosexuality.

At 14, the precocious author visited Harlem’s Apollo Theater and fell in love with gospel, which he maintains is “the most essential American music.” Heilbut points out that many hymns abound with declarations of a kind of ecstatic, unfettered love that can sound both romantic and devotional. Titles like “I Bowed on My Knees and Cried Holy,” “Hide Me in Thy Bosom,” and “I Want Two Wings to Veil My Face” evoke visceral associations and offer broad interpretative possibilities. In exalting a relationship with the divine, religious music is effectively absent of overt sexuality or romance, and this, Heilbut posits, is precisely what made its message so enduring to gays. In a liturgical setting, one could sing of an earthshaking love that was not only free of stigma but in fact sanctified; a love that could not be denied or ridiculed. Of this experience, Heilbut writes, “A fellow could lose himself in his secret closet, dance with his eyes stabbed shut, stay in the spirit for as long as he chose, and then leave, ready for life in an unfriendly land.”

Heilbut draws fascinating parallels between blues music and gospel music — genres that sometimes overlapped yet diverged crucially in focus and audience. The story of Aretha Franklin, whose career has seamlessly bridged both musical styles, wends its way through the book. Franklin was raised in a household steeped in religion and music. Her father was C.L. Franklin, a

gifted gospel singer and a profoundly influential pastor, a “Mississippi whooper” with a masterful delivery and a thunderbolt voice. From him, Aretha learned how to infuse soulful pop songs with the purity and intensity of church hymns.

From his musings on Franklin, Heilbut switches abruptly to an essay about German émigrés called “Somebody Else’s Paradise.” Heilbut, the New York-born son of German Jewish refugees, explores the horrific ordeal of his parents and others like them, whose escape from Nazi Germany, though fortuitous, ultimately affected “no happy endings.” Though the relationship between black gospel singers and European refugees is not an obvious one, Heilbut suggests intriguing connections. He writes luminously about Thomas Mann, who left Germany prior to the outbreak of World War II but never really felt at home in the U.S. Other subjects of Heilbut’s essays here, including Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein, Hanns Eisler, and most touchingly, the brilliant but troubled writer Joseph Roth, experienced similar emotional conflicts. These densely intellectual essays aren’t easy reading, but they deftly and convincingly force us to examine similarities between seemingly disparate cultures and life experiences.

Elsewhere, Heilbut’s far-reaching interests are manifested in essays that aren’t as gripping as the lives and loves of gospel stars. “Brave Tomorrows for Bachelor’s Children” is an exhaustive dissertation on Irna Phillips, a pioneer of radio-serial soaps whom Heilbut credits with celebrating and consequently empowering American women. The problem is that it goes on and on, and Heilbut breathlessly dissects plot lines of old soaps with squeamish detail and intensity. In most cases, however, Heilbut’s propensity for tangents and parenthetical observations occurs as a worthwhile, even endearing exercise, the mark of an author who is unabashedly passionate about his subject.

Perhaps the most successful essay in *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* is its last, in which the author reveals himself as a music fan of epic proportions, marveling over the advent of the web and surfing YouTube with abandon in search of rare gospel videos and recordings. Heilbut suggests that the love of a fan is noble in its ravenous curiosity and loyalty. In many ways, his enormous enthusiasm for the genre and its practitioners is still that of his teenage self, who stepped into the Apollo Theater and was enchanted by the “Spirit feel music” he first heard there. It’s no mistake that Heilbut’s friend James Baldwin, who was black and gay, named his quasi-memoir *Go Tell It on the Mountain* after the African American hymn. Though Baldwin came to regard Christianity with ambivalence, he grew up adhering to its message of forgiveness and compassion and ultimately insisted that “if the concept of God has any use, it is to make us larger, freer, and more loving.”