

'The Fan Who Knew Too Much' Is Written by an Astute Fan of Gospel with a Well-Honed Critical Sense

[17 August 2012]

By **Mark Reynolds**

One is tempted to wonder if Anthony Heilbut ever paid much mind to this assessment of his first magnum opus:

"This book, in my opinion, was written from the perspective of a fan. There are numerous books written on music by music scholars... which I prefer to this type of writing because the authors ideas are backed up by examples that include musical knowledge and music history knowledge. Heilbut makes many statements about the importance of Gospel music as an influence on US pop music that are untrue and not backed up with any facts or examples ... I know enough about music and US music history to know when the author was getting emotional about a music that touched him personally. This is a problem if the reader is not educated in music and US music history, they may take the many fantastic claims that Heilbut makes about Gospel music as truth.(sic)"

The above was a reader review of Heilbut's *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* posted on Amazon in 2001 (and easily rebutted by another reader). I normally don't factor such postings into my assessments of a work, but this one's especially telling.

Indeed, *The Gospel Sound* is short on the who-what-when that most history books, music or otherwise, dispatch. But it was a revelation when it was first published in 1971, and it is still an authoritative work, even next to more conventional gospel histories published since then. It's authoritative because Heilbut captures the essence of gospel music not through facts and dates, but through the words and experiences of its creators. He considers several of gospel's titans, from Sallie Martin, who helped popularize gospel in the '30s, through Rev. James Cleveland, who emerged in the '60s. He shares close knowledge from first-hand interviews and observations – which he had to, because there simply wasn't much prior scholarship on gospel music to draw from at the time.

It's the tone of *The Gospel Sound* that gives it its staying power. Heilbut is anything but a dispassionate scholar. The book's chapters are as much long-form portraits as much as history lessons. He's critical, but never caustic. He comes across as an evangelist for gospel – not its religious message (he is, after all, an atheist), but the artistry and perseverance of the performers who defined gospel during its mid-20th century "golden age." He speaks of craft and skill and various technical aspects, but he also speaks of who these artists were and what they lived through in service of their art (and faith). And he does so reverently, unobjectively, personally.

That reader review was right to this extent: Heilbut wrote like a true gospel enthusiast. Not a breathless, raving slobbermouth, but someone who loves the art and respects its artists enough to take them seriously as such, which no one prior to him had done. *The Gospel Sound* is, absolutely, written from the perspective of a fan – an astute one with a well-honed critical sense, but still a fan.

Heilbut himself confirms as much decades after the fact, in the title of his current collection: *The Fan Who Knew Too Much*, with "Fan" in bright yellow letters against a hot pink background. He *is* a fan, and proud of it, thank you very much.

Gospel music, it turns out, is only one of his passions. Heilbut, a child of Jewish émigrés from Germany, is understandably fascinated with the lives and times of German-Jewish intellectuals who fled Nazi Germany for America: why they left; what they did here; their relationships with their new home; and how they continued to navigate their German and Jewish heritages. From that exploration sprang a particular interest in the work of novelist Thomas Mann, best known for his novella *Death in Venice*, written before he left Germany in the mid-'30s. Heilbut argues that Mann's output as a writer in America, though far less celebrated (even though it includes the novel *Doctor Faustus*), is equally compelling, especially as it explores themes of homosexuality that the author drew from his own life.

Heilbut has written in great detail on both subjects: *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America from the 1930s to the Present* and *Thomas Mann: Eros and Literature*, respectively. The former book is similar in form to *The Gospel Sound*, the latter a blend of literary biography and cultural critique. The seven essays in *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* contain examples of all those approaches, but the book itself is largely a compendium of extensions from his previous work. Subjects that he only touched on previously, such as pioneering soap opera creator Irna Phillips, get a longer look here. Years after he published his major works, Heilbut hasn't finished being fascinated by their subjects.

The essay "The Children and Their Secret Closet" is a case in point. The subject of homosexuality in gospel music, and the black church by extension, merited only a few pages in the 1997 addendum to *The Gospel Sound*, but Heilbut holds nothing back now. In fact, he expands his scope, moving into an area that has up-to-the-minute implications beyond the pulpit.

He gets right to his primary assertion in only a few sentences: not only is it basically an open secret in the black church that many gay men over the years have helped shaped gospel music, "...it is impossible to understand the story of black America without foregrounding the experiences of the gay men of gospel. From music to politics their role has been crucial; their witness, to quote their mother's Bible, prophetic."

The first part of that construction is likely a revelation to those outside the black church. That institution, by and large, has a reputation as being less than inclusive on matters of homosexuality (as do other faith institutions, to be sure). But outsiders don't know about the winks and nods that happen when those gay gentlemen – the "children," as they are discreetly known – get to singing and shouting, leading the choirs, and thrilling the faithful.

Heilbut taps into his long association with gospel music and its artists to tell how black gay men have found not only sanctuary but also stardom through the church, and have shaped the music's traditions in the process. He cites figures like Charles Campbell, a portly singer in the Bradford Specials, Alex Bradford's '50s quartet, who confessed to Heilbut his need for a brassiere because "my titties are too big;" by the way, Bradford was gay too, and Heilbut shares some of Bradford's great stories.

Another seminal figure Heilbut cites is Rev. Cleveland, one of the most influential post-WWII gospel artists. At his peak in the '60s, he took over the reins of a venerable gospel music workshop; under his watch legions of black gay singers gained an entrée into the industry. Heilbut also points out that Rev. Cleveland had been outed, more or less, well before he died of AIDS in 1991.

The second part of Heilbut's construction – that to know black America, one must know the nature of the relationship between black gays and the black church – seems like hyperbole at first glance. While he lays out the case for the cultural impact of gays in gospel, it's not immediately evident how that ties into the broader racial narrative (even with two gay men rooted in the church in particular, political strategist/organizer Bayard Rustin and author James Baldwin, occupying places of prominence in that narrative). But as Heilbut pivots from the historic music of the black church to its current politics, his point becomes clearer, and more forceful by the word.

While the black church celebrates the musical contributions of its gay members on the one hand, it attacks their gayness on the other, Heilbut asserts with no shortage of indignation. He discusses how the church, always fundamentally conservative on social matters, evolved from occasional warnings against homosexuality to a full-blown "war on the children" in the '80s and '90s. He indicts some of the most prominent figures in the church, including mega-pastors T.D. Jakes and Bishop Eddie L. Long and singer Donnie McClurkin; even Tyler Perry takes a hit for his films' caricatures of sissified choir directors. (To be fair, he doesn't spare white evangelical churches from this criticism; going further, the parallel he draws between the conservatism and emphasis on the "prosperity gospel" of salvation-through-conspicuous-consumption of both white and black churches deserves further exploration.)

The Homophobic Center Might Not Hold Forever

The church, of course, doesn't have a monopoly on homophobia in the black community. Books like J.L. King's *On the Down Low* fed into fear that a closeted black man might be infecting an innocent black woman at the height of AIDS paranoia, and anti-gay sentiments by the likes of civil rights movement elder Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth gave credibility to black distrust of gays. Indeed, it was the homophobia of the black church, along with its anti-abortion stance, that gave George W. Bush enough entrée into the black voting populace to siphon enough black votes in swing states like Ohio to win re-election in 2004. (It's too bad that Heilbut makes little of the fact that some black churches and congregations have responded to the AIDS crisis progressively, offering outreach and education programs and AIDS testing in their communities.)

Heilbut's concern here is only the institution of the church, but because of its influence on the black mainstream, his analysis has ripple effects throughout black life. We saw evidence of that this spring, when President Barack Obama – beloved by the black church in 2008 – came out in favor of same-sex marriage. Many in the church were outraged, and several prominent black pastors pledged to withhold their support for him in the current re-election campaign. For most black churchgoers, though, Obama's stance won't change their minds one whit, neither in the pew nor the polling place. But as the issue moves forward, it will be interesting to see how the black church reconciles, or not, its hatred of the sinner (or at least the sin) with its love of her/his music.

Heilbut remains wary of how it will play out, but he seems to sense the homophobic center might not hold forever. He cites what happened to Bishop Long in 2010: his reputation cratered and his empire all but crumbled upon revelations of amorous liaisons with four young boys, with photos of Long in spandex as viral proof. The essay is a must-read for anyone interested in the life of the modern black church. Few other observers have ever displayed such an intimate and informed insight into the institution's culture, not to mention Heilbut's no-holds-barred guts in taking on this tripwire of a subject.

He puts that insight to further use in the next essay, "Aretha: How She Got Over". Playing on the title of a popular gospel standard, the piece is a critical appreciation (amazingly, one of the few such works to date) of how a teenaged gospel prodigy named Aretha Louise Franklin became the most beloved and influential pop singer of her time.

Most with a cursory knowledge of Franklin's work focus on her glorious 1967-1974 run as the Queen of Soul, but Heilbut all but ignores that period while looking at her career's complete arc, beginning in the Detroit church of her father, Rev. C. L. Franklin, where she made her first recordings. Aretha and her sisters were the beneficiaries of Rev. Franklin's own musical talent, as well as the talent that came through his church.

The key connection here is the Famous Ward Singers, one of the most influential gospel groups. Rev. Franklin, who first gained stature as a blues-tinged gospel singer, toured with the quartet after a recording of his sermon "The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest", became a hit in the early '50s. He took up with Clara Ward, daughter of the group's matriarch, in a years-long, oft-tempestuous relationship. Heilbut draws Franklin's musical lineage back to both her father and Ward, along with fellow Ward Singer Marion Williams and Dinah Washington, the pop-jazz-r&b hitmaker who had long ago jumped off the gospel train.

In the essay on gay gospel singers, Heilbut establishes both gospel's showmanship and its often-suffocating culture. Even though Aretha's artistry literally sprang from her father's church, both father and daughter recognized that as much as she had soaked up from first-hand connection to gospel's queen mothers (Heilbut's term), her destiny lay in broader pastures. Thus, Rev. Franklin drew on his secular show-biz connections, and Aretha landed a deal with Columbia Records in 1960, all of 18 years old.

Over the next six years, she recorded all kinds of material, from string-laden pop to swinging jazz, singing the tunes of everyone from the Gershwins to Ashford & Simpson. None of it made a commercial impact, and not until Sony re-released the entire output last year as an 11-cd boxed set (*Take a Look: Aretha Franklin Complete on Columbia*) did many Franklin fans, myself included, ever think to examine it. Looking at that section of her canon turns out to produce one revelation after another, the overarching being that all the artistry and musical passion she displayed as the Queen of Soul had been largely in place for years.

Heilbut's assessment reveals that he probably didn't need the reissue to acquaint himself with Franklin's secular roots. He breaks down the authority with which she essays "Today I Sing the Blues" on her first album, and the ease with which she swings through and transforms a ditty like "Rock-A-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody". Heilbut notes that while her gospel background is apparent throughout her Columbia recordings, she was already well on the way to transcending it, with the crispness of her diction, the clarity of her tone and her innate musical chops (not that gospel singer was ever all that far removed from other styles of black pop singing).

It shouldn't be surprising, given Heilbut's leanings, that the Atlantic Records-era album he devotes the most (actually, only) attention to is *Amazing Grace* her 1972 live gospel album. From that point, he whips through the key points of her next 40 years: the not-always-stellar pop recordings of the '80s; her pinch-hitting for Luciano Pavarotti on the 1998 Grammy Awards (duly noting how she fell back on her gospel training to compensate for a missed high note); her performance (or, perhaps more memorably, her hat's performance) at Obama's 2009 inauguration; her influence on pop singing; and all the tabloidy stuff too (the weight, the men, etc). While most of *Fan* expands upon Heilbut's previous work, it's possible to see "How She Got Over" as the first pass at a future, fuller consideration of Franklin's life and work.

Similar analytic vision, if not the same level of detail, is brought to bear in the book's second section, in which he offers codas of a sort to his previous work on German-Jewish intellectuals and Mann. Heilbut then goes on to the Irna Phillips profile (itself a mini-history of the evolution of soap operas), a roundup on male sopranos, and a brief essay that starts out about blues music and authenticity, spends some time on folksinger Josh White, passes through Alan and John Lomax and other blues collectors/chroniclers, and winds up on the arch-conservatism of Zora Neale Hurston. Fascinating stuff, but the reader attracted to *Fan* by the gospel-related material can't be blamed for wondering how these disparate subjects (the "other mediations" of the book's lengthy subtitle) connect.

Let's take that one step further: how did it come to be that Heilbut can write so knowingly and vividly about subjects whose only apparent connection is that he's interested in them? He takes that on in the book's title essay, which travels from a look at fandom in general to an exploration of his own.

As strong as the "other meditations" material is, the gays-in-the-black-church and Franklin pieces are easily the most compelling. They're less dependent on Heilbut's prior work than the other essays, but more to the point, they're more energetic and passionate. There's a reason for that: gospel music gave Heilbut's young life meaning and hope. As a bullied youth, gospel became his balm in Gilead.

"Gospel grounded me and kept me sane," he writes, "not because 'it gets better,' but because for most people, it does not. Blues knows this. But gospel

won me with its complex balance of the joyous and the grim—or, as I subtitled my first book, its good news and bad times.”

That faith in the power of the music and the dogged humanity of its voices not only sustained him emotionally, it also opened a professional path (as a gospel record producer as well as a chronicler of its life and times). But he’s yet to become jaded about it, or too far beyond his difficult years to still draw sustenance from it. He can’t stop thinking about it, and he won’t stop loving it. Ain’t no fan, he surmises, quite like a lifelong one:

“Keats, who dwelled in melancholy, longed for ‘a life of sensation, and not of thought.’ That immersion in sensation can be a fan’s highest bliss. But then he may aspire to something else: and dream of becoming, in Wallace Stevens’ words, ‘the man who has had time to think enough.’ Sensation and thought: that may be an old fan’s last reward.”

Heilbut, ultimately, is part historian and part critic. Those who enter either vocation generally do so because they’re drawn to the subject for reasons of both the head and the heart. Heilbut brings all of both those resources to bear in his work, and when they’re fully engaged, as in the best moments here, the learned, rear-gazing wistfulness the above passage implies seems a long way off.



Published at: <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/161827-the-fan-who-knew-too-much-by-anthony-heilbut/>

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