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Review of Anthony Heilbut's 'The Fan Who Knew Too Much'

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If you haven't heard of Anthony Heilbut, it may be because his best work has been as sporadic as it has been definitive. "[The Gospel Sound](#)" (1971) is still the standard popular history of African American church music. "[Exiled in Paradise](#)" (1983) covers the progress of German artists and intellectuals across World War II America. As for "[Thomas Mann: Eros and Literature](#)" (1996), remember that stuffy old closet case they used to make you read in college? This is the book to make you want to read him again.

And yet, for all his accomplishments, Heilbut still flies under the radar — in part, I'm guessing, because he comes at his subjects quietly and humanely, with no agenda other than to understand. Many years ago, he acquired a Harvard doctorate in English, but as the title of his new essay collection alerts us, he is at heart an amateur: "[The Fan Who Knew Too Much](#)."

There aren't many fans like Heilbut, with his cataloguing ardor, his teeming frame of reference and his thirst for experience. Without breaking a sweat, he swings from the plight of modern academia ("a world of downsized intellectuals and lapsed wunderkinder") to the enduring values of the daytime radio serial ("the dramatic equivalent of a five-day-a-week psychoanalysis, marked by the same meandering small talk and the same world-shattering epiphanies." He drops in on old favorites such as Einstein and Hannah Arendt, and he pauses from time to time to consider the perils of politics and art: "The sadness of a lapsed radical or a betrayed fan rests on a common fear that they wasted the deepest, most imaginative hours of their lives on the wrong object."

Out of self-protection, maybe, Heilbut devotes himself to many objects, but by throwing them all into a single volume, he gives us the thread to bind them. And if criticism is, as Oscar Wilde wrote, the most refined form of autobiography, then the thread starts with Heilbut: a reticent soul who turns these pages into a piecemeal memoir.

He grew up in 1950s New York, the son of German Jewish refugees and, even worse for him, "the class bookworm, nerd, outcast." Prey to "gifted bullies," he found at age 16 an unlikely savior in

gospel music. That full-throated, emotionally naked sound “wasn’t merely about making it,” he recalls, “but about doing so in spite of your enemies. Gospel grounded me and kept me sane, not because ‘it gets better,’ but because for most people, it does not.”

Although he was a committed atheist, the young Heilbut became a fixture in black churches, fraternizing with the likes of Mahalia Jackson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, catching Aretha Franklin in her teens and eventually winning new audiences for his musical idols as an esteemed gospel record producer. Along the way, he came to a surprising conclusion: The folks who formed the church’s true “rock and shield” were gay. Imagine his dismay today as he watches these same believers cast out by homophobic Pentecostals. “If you banished the sissies and bull daggers,” warns Heilbut, “the tabernacle might crumble. It would be like Germany without its Jews.”

And with that, the author’s two worlds shift into balance. We come to see that the people who fascinate him are the ones who walk the same tightrope he did, between old and new. The socialist playwright Bertolt Brecht, for example, driven from his native milieu to the shoals of Hollywood screenwriting. Or the great Aretha, venturing from the arms of her illustrious preacher father into the cooler embrace of white America. Heilbut closes his account on a note both triumphal and hedged, with Aretha singing at a 2011 Oprah Winfrey tribute. “She had all reason to shout the victory. There she was, singing hard gospel to an audience way beyond counting; ten thousand megachurches couldn’t hold them. Her father’s daughter. Safe thus far.”

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