

## The Record - Music News From NPR

### Gospel's Secrets Come Into The Light

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by RJ SMITH



Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

Clara Ward, one of gospel's greatest divas and Aretha Franklin's favorite singers.

Anthony Heilbut's book *The Fan Who Knew Too Much: Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations* is that too-rare thing: music writing that lays claim to the larger world. Oh, Heilbut knows the music he writes about like the avid listener he clearly is, but he

ain't preaching to the choir.

The essays in his book, which was published in June, are only partly about music; others are about the history of soap operas and European intellectuals in America. But the music pieces are the most provocative, and after reading his stories about the giants of gospel like Clara Ward, Marion Williams and Charles Campbell, many of whom he knew and worked with, I wanted more.

**RJ SMITH:** In your book's first essay, "The Children and Their Secret Closet," you write that the story of gospel music is a story of gay and lesbian singers and musicians. You write, "I long ago concluded that gospel music was the blues of gay men and lesbians," and call gay men "the master orchestrators of the Spirit." Not stuff we have read about in gospel memoirs or reference books.

**ANTHONY HEILBUT:** The world of gospel music was a world gays had made, and made their own, by the 1950s. And yet, they became like the Bolsheviks were to Joseph Stalin: every time there was an official portrait released, there were fewer of the original Bolshies in the image, until there was one where everybody had been airbrushed out but Stalin himself. I know that the influence of gays in the church is comparative news to the general public, but it is known within the community. It is known. Especially in the black church.

**SMITH:** You say in ways the erasure has gotten worse in recent years, and blame it on certain Pentacostal leaders and the mega-churches. What has the response to your essay been from church leaders and churchgoers?



book reviews

**Aretha, Einstein  
And Knowing 'Too  
Much'**

**HEILBUT:** It's been varied. A conservative ex-gay blogger called unreformed gays in the church a cancer and claimed I was simply some writer trying to make a fast buck. In the *New York Times*, [Reverend Emmett Burns told Sam Freedman](#) that while it was okay having gay men and women play and sing in church, they were somehow less than human, and not worthy of their civil rights. I've had friends, gay people, warn me: "They're gonna kill you! You're gonna need bodyguards." That hasn't happened. Instead, I have had people come up to me at readings with tears in their eyes and say "Thank you."

**SMITH:** "The Children and Their Secret Closet" was published just before the R&B singer [Frank Ocean](#) shook up the secular music world by announcing he was gay. So far, the response to Ocean's declaration has been pretty supportive. His debut went to #2 on the Billboard charts in its first week. What do you make of this?

**HEILBUT:** I'm touched by it, and I'm impressed, I guess, that he's not being boycotted for being a f—-. But what this means in the church that I write about, and

what it means to all those damaged lives, I can't say. It's much too soon.

People ask if I thought that Frank Ocean's courage combined with Obama's pro-gay marriage statement indicates a sea change. I'm afraid not. To outsiders it might seem so [but] virtually all the mega-churches, which have memberships of 10 to 50,000 have not shifted. They are virulently anti gay.

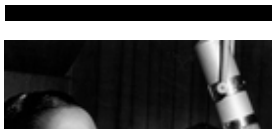
**SMITH: I wonder: You wrote the definitive overview of gospel music, *The Gospel Sound*, in 1971. You shaped the official story, and the book's still considered something of a standard text. Yet there's almost nothing of this information in it. Wouldn't you have told a more accurate story, and really spoken truth to power, if you'd made some of the material you just published available in 1971?**

**HEILBUT:** But back then, [being gay] was really considered shameful. And in fact, the little stuff I said about it in *The Gospel Sound* probably got more attention than anything else in the book! It was overpowering the content of the book. Since then [along with the deaths of many performers who were gay or bisexual], we have seen the rise of all these people, in and out of the mega-churches, saying AIDS was God's punishment. That was motivation. I tried to write this piece in the '90s for the *New Yorker*, in an essay I titled "The Holy Ghost Fascists." It went unpublished. Those who know me know this has been eating me up for ages.

**SMITH: What was it like being a white teenager from Queens going to the gospel singing showcases at the Apollo Theater in the mid-'50s?**

**HEILBUT:** I saw [Jackie Wilson](#) there, and maybe [James Brown](#). The ushers took pity on this lonely white boy, and one of them said, "Boy you think THIS is good — you ain't seen anything until you seen one of our gospel shows."

He was right. I remember once in 1958 at Easter, the crowd was going nuts and this little lady in front, she was maybe 4 foot 11 and 90 pounds. She started thrashing around, what I call the gospel aerobics. This usher, a big strong guy, comes up and he and I get up and look concerned — I held one arm, the guy held onto another, and she probably thought, "You boys don't know the trouble I seen!" Then Marion Williams and Clara Ward sang a duet on "The Old Rugged Cross." We just gave up.



**SMITH: In your essay on Aretha Franklin, "Aretha: How She Got Over," you prove no less provocative, arguing that her first pop recordings, the ones on**



'Rejoice And Shout'  
Celebrates Gospel  
Music

**Columbia which precluded her big years on Atlantic, were by far her best. Rock critics have long discounted mid-'60s Aretha, but you give the later Atlantic era — "Respect," "Dr. Feelgood" and all the rest — a real back of the hand slap.**

**HEILBUT:** She made blues and gospel the same on those records, and I think that's a huge achievement. I'm sorry, but "How Deep is the Ocean" is a whole lot better than "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman." Her deepest song is still "Every Day I Sing the Blues."

**SMITH:** You gracefully sketch what you call the ambivalence present in her gospel and pop performances, the withdrawing performer uneasy on the stage. What is that about?

**HEILBUT:** Some things I can't answer. It would be really chutzpah for me to try to declare where it came from. I think her musical vision was that, "I'm gonna take everything I know from these brilliant singers and not change it that much. I'm gonna be the most gifted daughter of all these great women. But I'm gonna stay a gospel girl."

Everyone finds her mystifying. I prefer to think of her as an artist.

**SMITH:** You are entertainingly frank regarding your fannish interest in gospel. *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* includes essays on soap operas and German Jewish émigrés and their relationship to America. You are skillful at weaving gossip and scholarship and witticisms together in all your writing. Is being a fan what ties all your interests together?

**HEILBUT:** It's my realization that for some reason I am drawn to the same kind of personality. Aretha is a fan who knew too much because she assimilated everything. Over and over.

The émigrés — Brecht and Eisler, Hannah Arendt and Mann and the rest — fit the bill entirely because they were huge stars and they loved America, and they were terribly paid. They all loved America and they were all disappointed in America. I guess ultimately I'm talking about another kind of emotion — it's like love and it's like sex and I try to show the parallels.