

## The Fan Who Knew Too Much is a revelation

Publish Date: September 5, 2012

By Anthony Heilbut. Knopf, 354 pp, hardcover

The Queen of Soul gets top billing in the subtitle—which, for the record, is *Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations*—but it's Anthony Heilbut's insight into the stirring, shouting world of gospel music that makes *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* a must-read.

As the author of the definitive guide to the style, *The Gospel Sound*, Heilbut is perfectly placed to reveal gospel music's inner workings. Not only has he chronicled its stars, but he's produced best-selling anthologies of both black and white religious music. Yet his insider's perspective has been shaped by his outsider status. He's a gay, Jewish, New York City-born atheist, and as such he's perfectly positioned to blow the whistle on gospel's best-kept secret: many of its most prominent artists, along with some of its most revered songwriters, have been queer.

Since the 1930s and even before, Heilbut argues, gospel has offered a safe haven for those who might otherwise have been mocked or worse in what remains—as rap so clearly evinces—a deeply homophobic culture. That “secret closet” is no longer so welcoming, however: like their white, working-class counterparts in the various fundamentalist sects, black Evangelicals have responded to our disorderly times by shunning the other: in this case, the “sissies and punks” within.

Heilbut is understandably torn between love and rage: love for the music and its makers, rage at a church that has abandoned the inclusive principles of the civil-rights era. In outing hypocritical preachers and naming names, he's writing on behalf of “all the gay men killed for being themselves”, and also for “so many others, those beaten but not dead, forced into half-lives”. It's an important story, sensitively and passionately told.

Heilbut's other “meditations” are just as weighty. In particular, the 64 pages of “Aretha: How She Got Over” say more about soul's greatest singer than the entirety of the famously opaque Franklin's autobiography. *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* is a book of revelations, and an essential document of our times.

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