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## The Queen of Soul's Long Reign

By **EDDIE DEAN**

One of the more indelible moments from the Obama inauguration was the spectacle of Aretha Franklin singing her gospel rendition of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," as poignant to watch as it was painful to hear. Bundled in an overcoat, gloves and a Sunday-go-to-meeting hat with a jumbo ribbon bow, she struggled in the raw winter cold to kindle her time-ravaged voice, once one of the wonders of the modern world. The performance was less about hitting the high notes than striking a chord with the flock: Here was America's Church Lady come to bless her children.

It's a role that the 70-year-old Ms. Franklin plays quite well at ceremonies of state and funerals and whenever the occasion demands. But she also enjoys a Saturday night out as the reigning Queen of Soul, as when she regaled a stadium crowd at WrestleMania 23 in 2007 in her hometown of Detroit. Such cameos run the risk of making her a kind of caricature—someone who has overstayed her welcome on the pop-culture stage and become, like Orson Welles in his later years, the honorary emblem of antiquated if revered Americana.

She deserves a better fate. Four decades ago, Ms. Franklin made history in the way she fused sacred and secular elements in popular music, an unprecedented alchemy. "She is not merely one of the best-selling vocalists of all time," writes Anthony Heilbut in "Aretha: How She Got Over," from his new collection of essays. "She is also the most purely folkloric to succeed in a worldly context, surely the only pop singer to bring so rich an alternative tradition into the arena."



Andrew Kent / Retna Ltd.

Aretha Franklin performing in 1967.

### The Fan Who Knew Too Much

By *Anthony Heilbut*

Knopf, 354 pages, \$30

The tradition of black gospel music that begat Aretha Franklin, along with a pantheon of stars from Sam Cooke to Whitney Houston, has received scant attention compared with its hipster cousins, jazz and blues. Mr. Heilbut has spent a lifetime trying to overcome that neglect, most notably with "The Gospel Sound," a history of the music's golden age written with the precision of an eyewitness and the passion of a convert, though Mr. Heilbut readily avows: "I love gospel music without believing a word of it, at least anything beyond triumphing over impossible conditions."

Published in 1971, "The Gospel Sound" remains the definitive account of the so-called church wreckers, the dynamic musical acts that ruled the postwar gospel scene: pew-clearing, fits-inducing male quartets like the Dixie Hummingbirds and the Soul Stirrers and the solo vocalists, like Mahalia Jackson and Alex Bradford, who epitomize the music's finest

practitioners. As a teenage loner attending shows at Harlem's Apollo Theater, Mr. Heilbut saw these legends in

their prime, and he later befriended his idols, producing their records and becoming their confidant.

### The Gospel According to Aretha

*Precious Lord* (1956)

Recorded live at a worship service at New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, the 14-year-old Aretha Franklin moans and shouts the stately Thomas A. Dorsey hymn with the conviction of a fierce old prayer warrior who has weathered the storms of life. The ams from the congregation go beyond the usual exhortations; you can hear a sense of wonder ripple through the pews as church members realize the full import of the public anointing they are witness to. One elder marvels aloud: "Listen at her!"

*'Nobody Knows the Way I Feel This Morning'* (1964)

One idol for the young Aretha was Dinah Washington, a gospel singer who forged a secular career. Ms. Franklin's version of her mentor's song reveals the new territory she had staked out, improvising wherever the mood took her. "She gets so caught up in the process," Mr. Heilbut writes, "that she cracks on the verse's last iteration of 'scream and cry,' a failure of the flesh that affirms the spirit."

*'Good to Me as I Am to You'* (1968)

Ms. Franklin composed many of her biggest hits, defiant, brutally frank and sexually charged love songs like "Think," "Dr. Feelgood" and this searing track, where, as Mr. Heilbut notes, "she sails to the top of her register, violating meter, decorum, and bel canto as she implores some loving reciprocity as fervently as she might call on Jesus to make a way out of no way."

*'Young Gifted and Black'* (1972)

This adaptation of the ballad by Nina Simone, an anthem of the black-power movement, is transformed by Ms. Franklin into a rousing hymn in the tradition of her childhood heroes, the Famous Ward Singers. Her uplifting, gospel-choir arrangement, with Billy Preston on organ, burns away the self-righteous anger and rancor that suffuses Simone's original, sanctifying a lament into a redemptive prayer for an entire people.

—E.D.

she wore at show dates and galas; and what she told *People* and *Jet* about her divorces and her diet. In short, it is a handy reference guide for completists and celebrity stalkers alike. Mr. Heilbut admits that he is a dedicated "Aretha watcher" himself, worried about her weight fluctuations and recent health scares. But he is careful to try to keep his obsession focused on the music.

What makes Mr. Heilbut's essay so valuable is his grasp of the full arc of Ms. Franklin's career. When he first saw her perform at a Brooklyn church in 1960, she was a seasoned veteran of the gospel circuit, anointed at age 14 as a singer in the troupe led by her father, the Rev. C.L. Franklin, whose recorded sermons, such as "The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest," made him the nation's most popular black preacher. The shy prodigy sang from behind the piano in a voice "precociously fatigued," and she was overshadowed by the lead soloist, Miss Sammie Bryant, a "dwarf with more volume than most bass-baritones."

In the title essay of "The Fan Who Knew Too Much," Mr. Heilbut admits that his infatuation with black gospel music is unusual for an academic and atheist and the son of German-Jewish émigrés; nor are his roles of fan, scholar and friend easily understood, much less applauded. "When my gospel book appeared," he writes, "I received hostile glances from black cultural nationalists, who viewed me as an interloper, and white intellectuals, who thought I was slumming. The singers themselves were more welcoming."

It is his outsider status that Mr. Heilbut says made him susceptible to the siren song of gospel and its 'buked-and-scorned disciples. This outsider theme runs through the collection, which takes on subjects ranging from the evolution of daytime soap operas and a celebration of the male soprano to a requiem for German intellectual exiles like Thomas Mann. At the book's heart, though, alongside the title essay, is the extended meditation on Aretha Franklin as well as a soul-searching exposé on the outing of gays in the black church. These essays form a highly personal epilogue to "The Gospel Sound" and allow Mr. Heilbut to deploy a confessional mode that suits his elegy for a dying American art.

The 165-page centerpiece on Ms. Franklin is the most incisive and illuminating portrait yet drawn of an enigmatic figure whom the late producer Jerry Wexler called "Our Lady of Mysterious Sorrows." Certainly Mr. Heilbut has little competition from Ms. Franklin's 1999 memoir: "From These Roots" amounted to a dull chat with an agreeable grandma whose few bursts of deep feeling were reserved for her late father, toward whom she apparently feels an undying love, and for her rival divas (Tina Turner, Beyonce), toward whom she feels an undying spite.

An unauthorized biography—"Aretha Franklin: The Queen of Soul," by Mark Bego, originally published in 1989—has been updated in several editions, most recently this year. It is a well-researched clip job of all things Aretha, chronicling in relentless detail what she sang on records and in concerts; what

Bryant and other stars who often traveled along the circuit—such as Clara Ward of The Famous Ward Singers, whose 1950 hit, "How I Got Over," was a gospel anthem—were tough acts to follow. The church-wrecking talent of these elders often gave Aretha stage fright, Mr. Heilbut says, but it "didn't prevent her from studying them, and although her glance was characteristically aslant, she didn't miss a thing."

Not long after attending that gospel show in Brooklyn, Mr. Heilbut heard Ms. Franklin's first Columbia single, "Today I Sing the Blues" (1960), recorded shortly after she had embarked on a career as a secular pop singer. He was staggered by the transformation. "The voice was thrillingly clear, combining the beauty of her two favorite singers, Clara Ward and Judy Garland," he writes. "There was also a note of fearsome urgency, an expressive directness . . . both angry and introspective."

Though still a teen, Ms. Franklin could deftly worry a line or wring a litany of emotions from a wordless moan, expressing a wisdom and grit that stood out from the make-believe cooings of most pop-music songbirds. A single mother of two sons, she had lost her own mother to a heart attack when she was 9, only a few years after Barbara Franklin had walked out on the philandering C.L. Young. Aretha was also a graduate of the rough-and-tumble life on the gospel highway, made even harder in the segregated South, where dangers lurked around every bend. In fact, the Ward Singers' entourage was once threatened by Klansmen while on the road to a show in Atlanta; they escaped only when Clara's mother, Gertrude, feigned satanic possession convincingly enough to send the would-be attackers into retreat.

Ms. Franklin tackled "Today I Sing the Blues" as if she had lived every word, and she delivered every syllable with a "modern voice" that eventually won her crossover success. Mr. Heilbut pinpoints how her "crystalline diction" made possible her breakthrough into the mainstream. The love of elocution was a direct inheritance from her preaching father, "a master of old-school oratory—he almost never strayed into ebonics."

This watershed record foreshadowed Ms. Franklin's epochal soul hits in the late 1960s and early '70s with Atlantic producer Jerry Wexler, records such as "Respect" and "Chain of Fools" thundering with a seismic life force and gravitas that made other pop fare of the day sound like child's play. In Mr. Heilbut's estimation, Ms. Franklin was the first bona fide gospel performer to cross over without sacrificing a crucial element of the tradition, "spirit feel," a transcendent realm beyond mere talent and virtuosity that suggests the spontaneous, untethered freedom of expression that the Holy Spirit was said to bring to the anointed.

Even crossover pioneers like Ray Charles, who paved the way for Ms. Franklin, don't make the cut in the standard set by Mr. Heilbut. "Charles was an R&B-jazz musician whose adaptation of gospel devices was both derivative and expedient," he writes. "According to his musicians, he never improvised; once an arrangement was figured out, it was not to be toyed with. This totally subverts the idea of spirit feel." Ms. Franklin's performances, he notes, "have often been criticized as erratic, undisciplined, free-form. Without excusing the less inspired moments, that's what makes her so quintessentially gospel."

"Spirit feel" pervades the music of Ms. Franklin's commercial and artistic peak, studio albums of visionary grandeur like "Spirit in the Dark" (1970) and "Young, Gifted and Black" (1972), as well as recordings of her stellar concerts, like "Live at Fillmore West" (1971), where she took the hippies and flower children to church, and "Amazing Grace" (1972), where she returned to her roots with a two-night service at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles. Stoking the fervor of an old-time revival, Aretha helmed the pulpit with her father looking proudly on, rocking the congregation with renditions of "How I Got Over" and other classics, backed by the Rev. James Cleveland and a community choir as well as by her touring R&B band (which Wexler dubbed "the devil's rhythm section"). It remains the top-selling album of her career.

After these landmarks, Ms. Franklin spent the next decade trying to find her place in a market dominated by dance music. She put her career on hold for several years to nurse her father, who lay in a coma after being shot by robbers; she buried him in 1984. Four years later, her baby sister Carolyn died, one of the titanic-voiced backup singers, along with her older sister, Erma, on her best-known, most enduring hits. Her devotion to her family, including an adult son with mental illness, and to her hometown of Detroit, where she has lived for most

of her life, has never flagged.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the gospel tradition was fading, as the quartets and soloists lost the crowds' favor to the mass choirs popularized by James Cleveland and other flamboyant showmen. More and more, the old standards sung the old way were reserved for going-home tributes at the funerals of the elders, as when mourners paid their respects at a 1973 memorial for Clara Ward, who first inspired Aretha to sing and play piano. At the service, Ms. Franklin set the mood with the somber spiritual "The Day Is Past and Gone." But when the proceedings started to veer from the tried and true and toward newer forms of worship, Gertrude Ward, one of gospel's surviving matriarchs, couldn't hold her peace. "When a minister began to read a modern translation of the Bible, her King James upbringing rebelled," reports Mr. Heilbut. "What is this mess?" she complained. "Tell that fool my child's in the coffin. I want the *Holy Bible*."

The term "mess" comes up repeatedly in Mr. Heilbut's portrait, not only to bemoan the state of contemporary gospel music ("I don't know what they're playing," says an old warrior, "and they don't know what I'm singing") but to describe what has become of the black Pentecostal church itself. As street-corner congregations have given way to megachurches in recent years, a nationwide outing campaign has decimated the ranks of gay members, many of them performers, who once found sanctuary as "the children" in their secret closet. Back in the heyday, they were tolerated because of their undeniable contributions to the music. Some were influential stars, such as Alex Bradford, with devoted followings that reached from coast to coast. "It was easy to see why the small churches would welcome a talented gay musician," writes Mr. Heilbut. "The church didn't judge him and he gave it his all and all."

According to Mr. Heilbut, their complete expulsion from the pews "would be like Germany without its Jews." There are many who refuse to budge, despite the increased public harassment from sanctimonious church leaders targeting scapegoats to divert attention from their own scandals. He recalls a revival in Chicago when a famous evangelist "pleaded for 'all the sissies and the bull daggers' to 'come up and be saved.' One fellow turned to his friend: 'You going up?' 'No baby,' was the reply. 'If it was good enough for Mother, it's yet good enough for me.'"

Mr. Heilbut holds out some hope. Ms. Franklin still carries on the music and the teachings of tolerance and love that lifted the black church for generations, and she can still soar when the spirit moves her and her vocal cords allow. Mr. Heilbut reports that in 2011, after singing "Precious Lord" at the Martin Luther King Memorial in Washington, D.C., she went to New York for a same-sex wedding where she serenaded the grooms, "thereby reminding any haters that nobody could outsize the queen. Her appearance must have mortified the mega-pastors like T.D. Jakes, now forced to reconcile their Aretha-worship with her tacit embrace of gay rights."

There are some lapses in Mr. Heilbut's excursion into fandom, when the fanboy overtakes the fan and the author gushes over yet another Franklin visit on "The View," parsing tidbits about Ms. Franklin's rocky love life or her craving for fried food as if she were a prophetess instead of an aged entertainer all too enamored with the spotlight. For the most part, though, he stays on the music, where he is a reliable critic unafraid to say what he hears even when his heroine doesn't measure up. Ms. Franklin's less than triumphant moments include her turn at opera when she subbed for Luciano Pavarotti at the 1998 Grammys and attempted an aria ("a musical version of the Emperor's New Clothes," Mr. Heilbut says) and her erratic performance at the Inauguration in 2008 ("not her finest hour vocally").

The Church of Aretha is strong enough to withstand such dissent, especially when it comes from an acolyte as well versed in the hymnody as Mr. Heilbut. Until someone undertakes a full-length critical biography, his appreciation will stand as the most profound study yet about the wellsprings and inspirations of an American original, the wonder-child singer who grew up to conquer the pop-music world but who never left her father's church.

—Mr. Dean is co-author of Dr. Ralph Stanley's "Man of Constant Sorrow: My Life and Times" (Gotham).

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