

The Fan Who Knew Too Much

*Aretha Franklin,
the Rise of the Soap
Opera, Children of the
Gospel Church,
and Other Meditations*

Anthony Heilbut

Author and record producer Tony Heilbut's landmark '70s volume "The Gospel Sound" was a definitive examination of that music's vital legacy, particularly in terms of its impact on American culture as a whole, and the black community in particular. But Heilbut, the holder of a doctorate from Harvard in English and a scholar in many other areas, really comes out firing in his newest work. It's a book that covers a host of interests and takes aim at some major targets, both secular and theological. *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* profiles with verve and opinionated flamboyance gospel and blues vocalists, European writers and intellectuals, radio soap opera actors and network moguls. The main theme linking these subjects: much of what people think they know about cultural phenomenon is inaccurate, incomplete, and in many cases misguided and twisted.

Both his opening and closing sections, "All God's Sons and Daughters" and "The Fans Who Knew Too Much" respectively, attack homophobia within the church and gospel communities, skewering the rampant hypocrisy that has kept Gay and Lesbian performers in the closet for decades. Heilbut doesn't hesitate to name names, cite details, and offer ample proof of his contentions. He peels back the covers on a world where many of the most passionate and deeply religious people have been forced to hide their true identities. As an insider who's produced award-winning albums by some of the music's greatest singers, as well as a confidant and friend to numerous gospel greats, Heilbut's testimony is a powerful counter to the harsh, anti-Gay rhetoric emanating so often from sanctuaries and pulpits.

The middle section "Not Quite At Home" mixes literary and political criticism with a wide-ranging look at the bygone world of radio soap opera. How much interest readers have in this portion will depend on their fondness for the subject matter. Heilbut's analysis of Jewish and other ethnic writers backgrounds, family life, philosophies, etc. is thorough in these sections. He traces the roots of neoconservatism among Jewish intellectuals one moment, and dissects Thomas Mann's prose the next. Likewise, you'll seldom read a more exacting discussion on radio soap opera, the backgrounds of its stars and writers, or its reach into the culture. Heilbut's preference leans more toward the radio version, where the audience's imagination was stimulated by vocal dexterity and writer ability rather than the physical attributes of the performers championed by the television shows. Today, daytime soap opera is almost dead. Both ABC and NBC are down to one show apiece, and CBS is the network leader with a mere two (neither Fox nor the CW ever got into the daytime arena).

Still, it's Heilbut's reporting and commentary on gospel music that makes his work so valuable to music fans, even though that's far from its only virtue. Anthony Heilbut's impressive knowledge – and his stunning ability to relay it in an appealing manner– makes *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* a delight.

Commentary