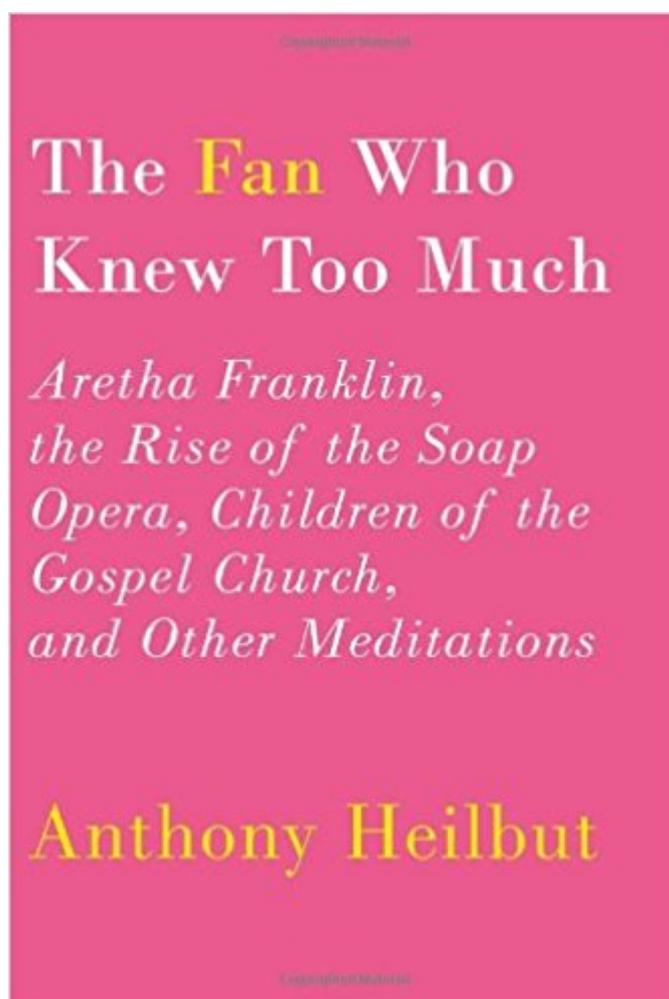


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# The Fan Who Knew Too Much: Aretha Franklin, The Rise Of The Soap Opera, Children Of The Gospel Church, And Other Meditations



## Synopsis

A dazzling exploration of American culture—from high pop to highbrow—by acclaimed music authority, cultural historian, and biographer Anthony Heilbut, author of the now classic *The Gospel Sound* (a “Definitive” Rolling Stone), *Exiled in Paradise*, and *Thomas Mann* (a “Electric” Harold Brodkey). In *The Fan Who Knew Too Much*, Heilbut writes about art and obsession, from country blues singers and male sopranos to European intellectuals and the originators of radio soap opera—figures transfixed and transformed who helped to change the American cultural landscape. Heilbut writes about Aretha Franklin, the longest-lasting female star of our time, who changed performing for women of all races. He writes about Aretha’s evolution as a singer and performer (she came out of the tradition of Mahalia Jackson); before Aretha, there were only two blues-singing gospel women—Dinah Washington, who told it like it was, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who specialized, like Aretha, in ambivalence, erotic gospel, and holy blues. We see the influence of Aretha’s father, C. L. Franklin, famous pastor of Detroit’s New Bethel Baptist Church. Franklin’s albums preached a theology of liberation and racial pride that sold millions and helped prepare the way for Martin Luther King Jr. Reverend Franklin was considered royalty and, Heilbut writes, it was inevitable that his daughter would become the Queen of Soul. In “The Children and Their Secret Closet,” Heilbut writes about gays in the Pentecostal church, the black church’s rock and shield for more than a hundred years, its true heroes, and among its most faithful members and vivid celebrants. And he explores, as well, the influential role of gays in the white Pentecostal church. In “Somebody Else’s Paradise,” Heilbut writes about the German exiles who fled Hitler—Einstein, Hannah Arendt, Marlene Dietrich, and others—and their long reach into the world of American science, art, politics, and literature. He contemplates the continued relevance of the émigré Joseph Roth, a Galician Jew, who died an impoverished alcoholic and is now considered the peer of Kafka and Thomas Mann. And in “Brave Tomorrows for Bachelor’s Children,” Heilbut explores the evolution of the soap opera. He writes about the form itself and how it catered to social outcasts and have-nots; the writers insisting its values were traditional, conservative; their critics seeing soap operas as the secret saboteurs of traditional marriage—the women as castrating wives; their husbands as emasculated men. Heilbut writes that soaps went beyond melodrama, deep into the perverse and the surreal, domesticating Freud and making sibling rivalry, transference, and Oedipal and Electra complexes the stuff of daily life. And he writes of the “daytime serial”’s unwed mother, Irna Phillips, a Chicago wannabe actress (a Margaret Hamilton of the shtetl) who created radio’s most seminal soap operas—*Today’s Children*, *The Road of Life* among them—and for television, *As the World Turns*, *Guiding Light*, etc.,

and who became known as the "queen of the soaps." • Hers, Heilbut writes, was the proud perspective of someone who didn't fit anywhere, the stray no one loved. *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* is a revelatory look at some of our American icons and iconic institutions, high, low, and exalted.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Dear curious readers, here's a rare chance to get a most brutally insightful and painfully passionate work from one of America's best. "The Fan Who Knew Too Much" is almost an understatement. Anthony Heilbut wrote the definitive bible on Black Gospel music over 40 years ago! Critics, scholars, fans and most importantly the living souls he wrote of instantly agreed, "The Gospel Sound - Good News and Bad Times" was a masterpiece. Today that same author has honed his pen even sharper and painted a picture that would leave Rembrandt's brush in shame. Some of his subject matter here is not for the faint of heart, but the truth is usually ugly and only a master can make sense of the myth. His forays into soap operas to drag queens, black radio and the blues are precise, honest and funny. Mr. Heilbut takes the reader deep into the Mariana Trench of Aretha Franklin's universe, from her first child at 13 to her singing for Barack Obama, it reads as written by a family member, like a Grandfather who knew her soul and what was coming before she did. Slowly the author's grasp of persecution becomes crystal, it could only come from a German Jewish kid lovingly adopted into the "Golden Era" of America's most insanely influential source of the Nile. (There's a reason it's still called the "Golden Era" ...nobody's ever topped it!) He surely did it by

attending countless store-front churches to the Apollo on many, many occasions. It just so happens that Heilbut has the writing chops to do what most can't, walk the last mile of the way and tell the truth. 40s, 50s black American's soul? German Jews? Sames? (some say Gays) ....don't get more persecuted than that! Buy this book NOW... you'll be richer than Noah. Somebody say Amen.

This is a great book of essays ranging over a huge and diverse set of topics. I have to admit that I'm a little prejudiced. I know Tony very well and have followed the writing of this book over many years. But the result is more than I ever expected. Or maybe I really knew that the result would be as fine as it is if it ever got completed. Because I have to read slowly (I'm a quadriplegic and have to read slowly I'm only part of the way through the Aretha chapter) I found the one on homophobia in the world of gospel music and in which it plays such a central role absolutely fascinating. I only knew Marion Williams slightly. I listen to her singing practically every day so it is wonderful to read of the role she played in the gospel music tradition. I saw Black Nativity back in 1962. Arranged the concert for her at Harvard of all places. She blew everyone away and by the end the lily white audience was clapping and shouting. A memorable experience. Anyway, I would encourage anyone who loves great writing about all sorts of subjects to read this book.

At last, Anthony Heilbut's long awaited collection of wide-ranging essays. Even topics of little initial interest to me revealed fascinating insights, controversy, humour, a unique perspective, luminous language, expansion on themes from previous books, plus courageous new exposes, much of which resonated even here in far away Australia ...now I'm only sorry it could be ages before more such delights.

In the Gospel Sound, Heilbut wrote one of the seminal books on American vernacular music. He also wrote a great book on Thomas Mann. This is a great series of essays on gays in black gospel music, Aretha Franklin, German exiles in Los Angeles, the origins of soap opera and other topics. Highly recommended

Heilbut's work has long been distinguished by his gift for taking on polysemous topics and spinning the reader through them, gracefully and compellingly--teasing out all sorts of unexpected associations along the way. It's a pleasure to read intellectual history where the frame of reference is so unabashedly broad and the weave of ideas so rewarding to follow. In this volume, the essay "Yesterday's Heroes," which looks into the afterlife of some of the figures he explored in his great

book "Exiled in Paradise," contains a tour de force of cascading cultural links that takes readers from Hannah Arendt into Marlene Dietrich and Hedy Lamarr--then back around the block to Bertolt Brecht. It's an irresistible ride and full of discoveries.

Imagine a memoirist with the passion and urgency of a teenager and the sophistication of a Harvard Ph.D. in English. That's who you'll meet in "The Fan Who Knew Too Much," a brilliant collection of essays by Anthony Heilbut. He writes about the gospel music world that entranced him as a non-believing teen in the 1950s (and its gay counterculture); about the complicated life of Aretha Franklin; about soap operas; about German exiles who shaped America; about soap operas and male sopranos. He is the fan who knows too much, and he does not hesitate to reveal secrets and insights that make the book crackle with surprises. His immigrant mother said, "My poor son is always discovering areas of American culture that nobody else appreciates." She was wrong about one thing -- this book makes all those unappreciated cultural corners seem very important indeed. And as a longtime Aretha fan, I will say I have never read anything better about the Queen of Soul. R-E-S-P-E-C-T for the good Dr. Heilbut.

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