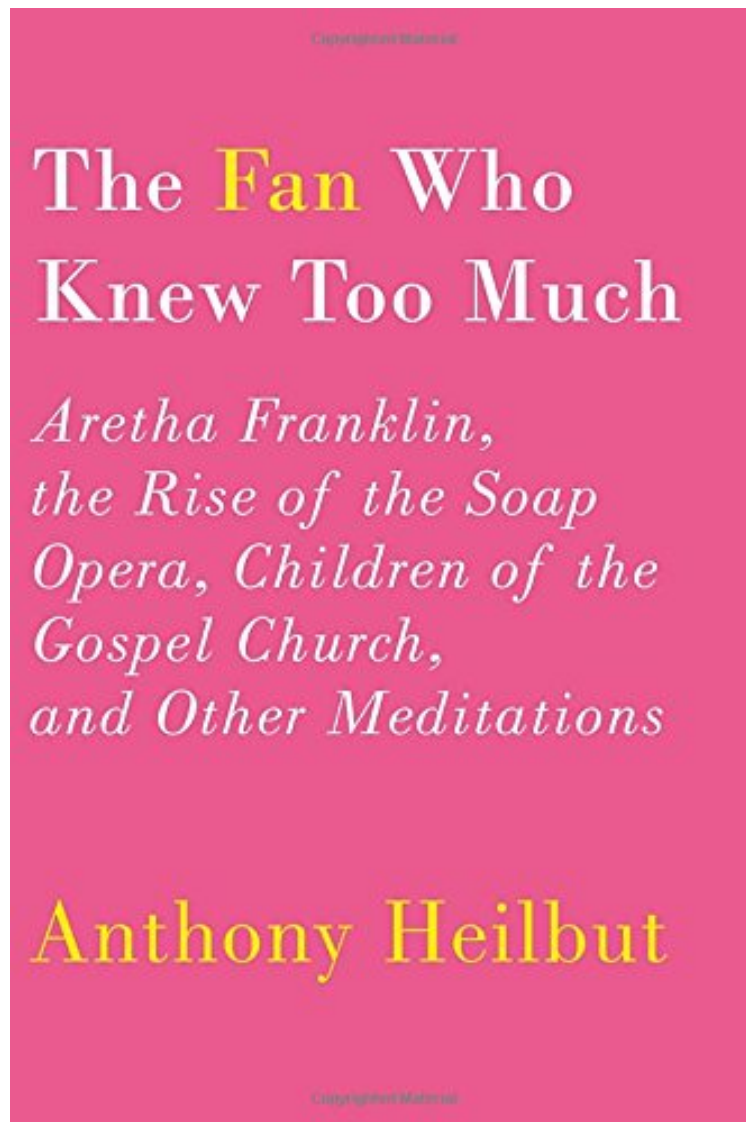


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The Fan Who Knew Too Much: Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations

Anthony Heilbut

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Anthony Heilbut : The Fan Who Knew Too Much: Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Fan Who Knew Too Much: Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. It's Your Time Now...By ardie dean strutzenbergDear 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 Rembrant'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.5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Great Book!By Brooke HopkinsThis 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.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Heilbut at his best!By John F Walker JrIn this engaging book of essays, Anthony Heilbut shares his deep understanding of many topics, including German literature, blues and gospel music, the history of the soap opera, gay black music artists, and what it means to be a child of ex-pat German Jews. His pieces sizzle with intellectual energy and passion. He is allusive and elusive - witness the title of the book. (I have a theory, but I'm still thinking about it.) He is best, in my opinion, when he is explaining the meaning of popular culture phenomena, such as Aretha Franklin's place in cultural history and the attraction of gay artists to gospel music. I loved the short essay about Joseph Roth, but then I love Joseph Roth. His piece on migr artists in America expands on his seminal study of Thomas Mann and the ex-pat German artists who so enriched American culture in the mid-20th century. But get your seat belt on. It takes energy to read these essays. Heilbut's writing is highly personal, a literary Brownian motion, and one must pay attention. But there's a rich payoff.

A dazzling exploration of American culturefrom high pop to highbrowby acclaimed music authority, cultural historian, and biographer Anthony Heilbut, author of the now classic *The Gospel Sound* (Definitive Rolling Stone), *Exiled in Paradise*, and *Thomas Mann* (ElectricHarold 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 operafigures 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 Arethas evolution as a singer and performer (she came out of the tradition of Mahalia Jackson); before Aretha, there were only two blues-singing gospel womenDinah 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 Arethas father, C. L. Franklin, famous pastor of Detroit's New Bethel Baptist Church. Franklins 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 churchs 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 Elses Paradise*, Heilbut writes about the German exiles who fled HitlerEinstein, Hannah Arendt, Marlene Dietrich, and othersand their long reach into the world of American science, art, politics, and literature. He contemplates the continued relevance of the migr 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 Bachelors 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 serials unwed mother, Irna Phillips, a Chicago wannabe actress (a Margaret Hamilton of the shtetl) who created radios 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.

Dazzling . . . Can a real fan actually know too much? The fulsomeness and jesuitical detail of Heilbut's essays argue no, and his arguments frequently spin off in serendipitous digressions, down whatever path it seems his enthusiasms lead. Eric Banks, The Chicago Tribune Leapt off my desk and refused to be put down . . . Everything I know about gospel music I've learned from Anthony Heilbut's compilations and writings; thanks to his crazy compendium The Fan Who Knew Too Much, he has now, also, taught me everything I know about radio soap operas, Aretha Franklin, and homosexuality in the black church. Lorin Stein, Yahoo! News "What Do You Give a Book Lover" Gloriously detailed . . . absorbing . . . Heilbut's fandom and sharp critical eye allow for an enthusiastic but well-balanced analysis . . . searing and valid. Lambda Literary Profiles with verve and opinionated flamboyance gospel and blues vocalists, European writers and intellectuals, radio soap opera actors and network moguls . . . powerful . . . stunning . . . a delight. Ron Wynn, ArtsNash Sprawling and juicy; as gossipy and anecdotal as it is academic. Washington Blade Goes where most are wary to tread . . . a masterful piece of writing, ranking among the author's best work . . . revelatory and stirring. Bob Marovich, The Black Gospel Blog Meditates evocatively on the place and plight of the children . . . Heilbut draws on a repertoire of vividly emblematic anecdotes, personal histories, and first-hand experiences that bear a deeply felt witness. . . by turns tragic, bawdy, transporting, and balefully beautiful . . . a dishy yet devotional guide to gay sense and sensibility that defined black gospel. The Gay and Lesbian Fascinating . . . Heilbut knows his stuff [and] argues persuasively. Greg Kot, The Chicago Tribune A must-read . . . weighty . . . a book of revelations, and an essential document of our times. Straight.com That all-too-rare thing; music writing that lays claim to the larger world. R.J. Smith, NPR Holds nothing back . . . has up-to-the-minute implications beyond the pulpit . . . as Heilbut pivots from the historic music of the black church to its current politics, his point becomes clearer, and more forceful by the word . . . a must-read . . . intimate and informed. PopMatters There aren't many fans like Heilbut, with his cataloguing ardor, his teeming frame of reference and his thirst for experience. . . . The people who fascinate him are the ones who walk the same tightrope he did, between old and new. Louis Bayard, The Washington Post Anthony Heilbut has been a guide and a mentor to me. I know of no one who has the love and depth of knowledge of this extraordinary author. Paul Simon Elegant . . . Heilbut's generous book demonstrates that no fan can know too much, or love too much. Slate Soul-searching . . . The 165-page centerpiece on [Aretha] Franklin is the most incisive and illuminating portrait yet drawn . . . about the wellsprings and inspirations of an American original. The Wall Street Journal A fine collection . . . arguably, the highlight of Heilbut's writing career . . . heartbreaking and angry . . . never afraid to express an opinion loudly. Michael Schaub, NPR Rousing and impassioned . . . likely to spark debate on both sides of the church door. The Boston Globe [Heilbut's] enthusiasms span a wide range . . . a glorious retelling of Aretha Franklin's story . . . is worth the price of the book. W. Kim Heron, Detroit Metro Times A brilliant, one-of-a-kind and immensely challenging book by a brilliant, one-of-a-kind, immensely challenging American writer . . . profound, personal and candid. The Buffalo News Feels like a late Beethoven string quartet, drawing on a rich career's obsessions and paying tribute to sources of inspiration. The Daily Beast Fascinating, revelatory . . . [a] breathtaking trip through American culture . . . moves seamlessly (and stylishly) from music to literature and other historical reflections on popular culture. Shelf Awareness The timing of Mr. Heilbut's book, and the intensity of his argument, has thrust it from the dusty corners of arts criticism into the heat and light of the political arena in a presidential election year. Samuel G. Freedman, The New York Times Blends biography with criticism and anecdotes to create marvelously zesty, erotically frank, assumption-blasting essays. . . . This vigorous collection . . . takes us on a guided tour unlike any other through the spirals of the psyche and the mazes of social and cultural convention and dissent. Booklist Full of contagious enthusiasm, razor-sharp wit, and stunning insights . . . his musings on Aretha Franklin alone are worth the price of the book . . . The sensations of spending a few moments in Heilbut's company provide great bliss indeed. Publishers Weekly Detailed, freewheeling and very personal cultural essays from an admitted obsessive and an amiable and intelligent rambler . . . A cook's tour through the passions of an expert whose style is as eclectic as his subject matter. Kirkus Take in his witty, passionate prose, his uncanny blend of scholarship and reportage, his analytic brilliance and his joie de vivre. You will be stirred and delighted. Margo Jefferson, author of On Michael Jackson Nothing new in the last year gave me as much pure reading pleasure . . . Heilbut ranges over the culture like a madman, but with a fierce sanity in his eye, debunking myths and erecting new ones. I finished The Fan Who Knew Too Much wondering how, without it, I'd ever thought I understood a thing about America in the twentieth century. Let me ask: are you familiar with the history of gays in gospel? Or with the early, radio roots of soap operas? Then

you, too, are similarly benighted. Get with this. John Jeremiah Sullivan, author of *Pulphhead* About the Author Anthony Heilbut received his Ph.D. in English from Harvard University. He has taught at New York University and Hunter College and is the author of *Exiled in Paradise*, *The Gospel Sound*, and *Thomas Mann: Eros and Literature*. Heilbut is also a record producer specializing in gospel music and has won both a Grammy Award and a Grand Prix du Disque. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter 1 THE CHILDREN AND THEIR SECRET CLOSETS

Some years ago PBS ran a special on Dr. Alfred Kinsey and his investigations of homosexuality in American society. One historian was less than persuaded. He admitted that Kinsey had been impressively thorough in his considerations of business or the military or education. But he had ignored certain groups, the scholar argued. "What if he had interviewed the members of a Pentecostal church?" Having been a close observer of African-American gospel music for almost fifty years, I decided to ask the same question of several singers and musicians, and got the following responses: "They woulda lied." "From the pulpit to the door." "Baby, those figures would have gone up the roose-rooftop." "Church? That's the children's home away from home." But most often, the response was simple laughter. They heard the question as rhetorical; everyone knew better than the quizzical professor. They also knew that it is impossible to understand the story of black America without foregrounding the experiences of the gay men of gospel. From music to politics their role has been crucial; their witness, to quote their mother's Bible, prophetic. That witness has not always been acknowledged. Occasionally it has been suppressed. One of Glenn Beck's arch black supporters happens to be Martin Luther King's niece Alveda. She denies any connection between civil rights and homosexuality. "The civil rights movement was born from the Bible," she insists, and everyone knows that "God hates homosexuality." She neglected to mention that two of the movement's greatest architects were gay men, Bayard Rustin, a former singer, who made his recording debut with a gospel quartet, and Alfred A. Duckett, who was, among many other roles, Mahalia Jackson's publicity agent. From the storefront church to the courts of Europe, from the poor house to the White House, the gay men of gospel have, as the songs say, opened doors that were closed in their face, and made a way out of no way.

WE BUILT THIS CHURCH

Truman Capote once said that a faggot was a homosexual gentleman who had just left the room. In church circles, gay and bisexual men are regularly identified as "sissies" or "punks"-terms sometimes used, and often not more kindly, by the men themselves. Almost as common and much friendlier is the appellation "the children," a term rich with its allusion to the lifetime quest of a mother's favorite son. Thus, evangelist Willie Mae Ford Smith might slyly recognize the members of her congregation, "It's so good to see the children...and the children." For well over a hundred years, these men have been, along with their mothers and sisters, the black church's rock and shield. They have been among the most faithful members and the most vivid celebrants: "Nobody shouts like the children," said an old church mother, alluding to the folkloric term for holy dancing. With eyes shut, gay men have danced steps that would both anticipate and transcend the parties in any club. They have brought such imaginative and critical resources to the church that for many years-and even now during the homophobic reaction that has swept fundamentalism-they have been the unacknowledged arbiters of the culture. They have been the master orchestrators of the Spirit. Most preachers could not survive without the young, underpaid keyboard man underlining his words with rhetorical stabs and moan like runs. Evangelist Ernestine Cleveland grumbled, "You all can't have church unless you got some punk on the organ." Along with the women members of the congregation-all of them pledged to their pastor and many, according to legend, romantically attached as well-gay men have helped conduct the Spirit. "When the sissies jump out of their seats, folks know to stand up. "Their worship is gracefully athletic. I've seen gay men stand and move rhythmically through most of a pastor's message, anticipating the communal shout that may be a sermon's length away, that may never even occur. I've seen dancing leaps that can only be compared to broad jumps-while running, Reverend Isaac Douglas is said to have leapt over a small pond. The children have also brought the cold eyes of a professional to the ritual and ceremony. "If you ain't moved them," says DeLois Barrett Campbell, "you ain't done nothing." Mahalia Jackson was the world's gospel queen, but her gay pals could always upset her by saying that her best singing days were over. The critics were nice, and the fortune she earned spoke for itself. But she knew that the children were the real judges. They have also made the church their special arena. As Recently as 2007 I saw a middle-aged man dance around a Harlem church with a fire that no hip-hopper could approach. I asked Brother Charles if he had ever danced in a club. "Sir, they tried to make me a soul singer. They said I had the looks and the voice. But soon as that band started up I got as stiff as a white boy. I lost all my rhythm." Perhaps because it wasn't his blues. I long ago concluded that gospel music was the blues of gay men and lesbians. This may explain why so many great singers either didn't go into pop or failed in their trying. Bishop Carl Bean, a former Motown artist, says, "I just never felt right up there, singing about my girl." The late Gloria Griffin, who made a stab at club singing, in emulation of her great friend Aretha Franklin, gave it up. "I can sing about the love of God. The love of man, I don't know too much about that." However, the first time I heard the word "soul" as it is currently used, it was in a gay context. In 1957 Sam Cooke confounded the church by moving from gospel to RB. "He'll do fine," a clerk at Harlem's Record Shack assured me. "He's got soul." He then informed me that Sam liked men as well as women. "Sure he's gay, how else could he have that much soul?" (I next heard the term used by Malcolm X, who asserted that soul was black people's contribution to America.) One of gospel's great appeals to this nonbeliever has been the vast emotional territory it claims for itself. I first learned this at the Apollo Theater in 1958.

At that time local disc jockeys would rent the place for a week and present "gospel caravans" featuring the leading stars in "programs" that ran for ninety minutes, three times a day. The last night was always the most memorable, the occasion for the singers to let out all stops, and programs might last for two or three hours—three times as long as a typical blues show. The 1958 Easter caravan had many highlights, among them Marion Williams and Clara Ward's hair-raising duet of the seasonally appropriate "Old Rugged Cross." But earlier, Julius Cheeks, a male quartet singer, had "plumb demolished the place" with a tribute to mothers. Nowhere in the lyric was a baldly religious image. The song was all about a mother working herself to death for her children. Sometimes I get to wonder, Did I treat my mother right? She used to moan early in the morning, She used to groan very late at night. The weeping and wailing had nothing to do with scripture, and yet would not have been countenanced in any other setting. Several years later, another last night coincided with the attacks on civil rights marchers. Prompted by the moment, Johnny Martin of the Mighty Clouds of Joy rushed to the microphone: "I wanna say this for the folk in Alabama... 'There's a Bright Side Somewhere.'?" The theater erupted; he seemed to leap out of himself, and the other Clouds could barely hold him down. All over the theater, men and women were running up the aisles, hollering their rage and despair. There might have been a biblical implication to the events down south; Dr. King had certainly insisted on that. But back in 1958, I saw something more surprising. As a novelty attraction, the caravan's sponsors had hired a professional actor named Gilbert Adkins to recite part of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*, a faux-naïf sermon called "The Creation." Adkins's performance would have been old school in the 1920s; the only appealing note came from the organist Herman Stevens, who accompanied the sermon with every noise a Hammond could make. But the Apollo audience was not used to Broadway, and they experienced Adkins's performance as a treat. On the last night, Fred Barr, the disc jockey-promoter, summoned Adkins back to the stage and handed him a large bouquet of flowers, the contribution of a group of church ladies who had attended every program. The actor was overcome. He started to laugh and cry. "You know," he said—and you could only reckon the difficulties of being an actor in those days— "my mother told me something that has stayed with me down through the years. She said, 'Boy, you can go a lot of places. But people don't have to love you.'?" He shook his head and left the stage. But the moment was not complete. Suddenly young people all over the Apollo rose to their feet and started to shout. Some singers on stage got happy as well. The shouting continued for twenty minutes, as ushers dashed around the floor, snatching the bodies of men and women overcome by the spirit. It was black church at its highest, and there had been nary a word spoken about Jesus. The point I derived was that gospel's emotional borders were almost limitless. Everything that Adkins had intimated—and surely this was a time when each person had a story to tell—could be comprehended in the form. In retrospect the particular appeal of gospel music to gays and lesbians was manifest. Why sing disingenuously about one kind of emotion—sexual love—when all the others were yours to intimate, convey, and command? The church and its gospel music have offered a second home, and often a friendlier place than the homes where boys might face ridicule or worse. (Though, as many have reported, the physical abusers could also be sexual predators.) Gospel has allowed the worship of a loving male—as we'll see later, a theme that has inspired numerous white writers. But the children, battered by poverty, racism, and homophobia, may have the richest testimonies. I have seen five-man groups weep and stagger as they sang, "When sorrow has taken my heart by surprise, He never has left me alone," or "I do not know how long it will be, or what the future holds for me." They'll wave glad hands when some old mother exhorts them, "Children, take it to Jesus, you don't need to tell nobody else. Just step into your secret closet." That secret closet is a constant in Protestant worship, most evident in the extremest form of Protestantism—Pentecostalism. (Matthew 6:6: "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.") The scripture also says that God resides where two or three are gathered. But the Pentecostal believer, more commonly known as a "saint" (whereby the Pentecostal-type churches have long been called "sanctified"), can reduce the number to one. The secret closet resembles the gospel highway in that old song, "On the Jericho road, there's room for just two, / No more and no less, / Just Jesus and you." A closet is where you shut yourself off from the world. And just so the church has always loomed as "the arc of safety"—even more a safe harbor when it's the place most identified with mothers and grandmothers. Bishop Carl Bean says, "It's always been that way. The straight boys who play around with girls, and make babies, and break their mothers' hearts, they live in the streets. The well-behaved boys, the sensitive, quiet kids, the ones we now call nerds and sissies, they've always landed in church. Church or the street, take your pick." He implies the great and constant battle within American fundamentalism between muscular Christianity and a womanly faith. Or, as figured in biblical imagery, between the gentle Shepherd and the Warrior on a battlefield. Obviously, for many hyperbolically butch preachers from Billy Sunday (pitching for Jesus) to Bishop Eddie L. Long (muscle building for the Lord), the religious vocation had to appear a guy's thing. For such men, even tears can seem virile. Carl Bean's flock considers this a false dichotomy. Their faith borders on the androgynous, even as their gospel music has always welcomed male sopranos and female basses. I once heard a young Carl Bean, years before he had founded Unity Fellowship, the first black gay denomination, when he was still a seminarian. Facing a small storefront church, filled inevitably with a pastor, a pianist, a guitarist, older women, and younger men, he declared, "In heaven they tell me there won't be no day or night. And there won't be no man or woman. Don't you want to go? Don't you wanna go?" He too advised the saints to hold fast before that glorious,

post sexual morning. "Look to the hills, children. And stay in your secret closet." Those who find consolation in the secret closet find it large enough to include any burden and every trial- "Just take it to the Lord in prayer." That other closet, the space from which the children move in and out, is also a place of secrets. "If I want a secret kept, I can tell this friend," sings Marion Williams. "I know that I will never ever hear it again." Some things needn't be uttered aloud; save them for your secret closet. This may partially explain why gospel lyrics are rarely as graphic or poetic as blues lyrics-though without calling names, they certainly expose unpleasant realities. "Your enemies cannot harm you," wails Inez Andrews. "Keep an eye on your close friend. "Dorothy Love Coates-Dot Love-sings of enemies "inflicting all the hurt they can, / Throwing their rocks and hiding their hands." It's up to every mother's child to fill in the details, imagine the particular betrayals. At choir rehearsals, I've seen men step away and cry to themselves. "I'm sorry, children. I was just thinking about some folk who did me so bad. "You could make a blues out of that, or simply abstract it into a gospel metaphor. If the deepest gospel songs tell of oppression, it's always overcome. Mahalia Jackson liked to say that a blues singer dwelled at the bottom of a pit, and she simply didn't live there. But many gospel singers have, including Mahalia herself at times, and many of the church children who followed women like her or Marion Williams, Inez Andrews, and Dorothy Love Coates. For all of them, church was the one place to express your sorrows, and trust in a spiritual catharsis, its sign, "The Lord has brought me out." For generations, virtually up to the homophobic present, the secret closet has allowed the faithful children the safest place to leave and return.