

CONCERT REVIEW

Ranky Tanky astonishes with spirit and virtuosity

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Ranky Tanky, a quintet that mixes the Gullah music of coastal South Carolina with jazz, opened Reading Area Community College's Downtown Performing Arts Series on Friday night at the Miller Center for the Arts, with an astonishing display of virtuosity and spirit.

From its droll name to its selection of children's songs, church music and other material drawn from the culture of African slaves and their descendants on the Sea Islands near Charleston, Ranky Tanky is unlike any other band. Founded by friends who once had a jazz quartet, the band, with vocalist Quiana Parler, draws on its top-flight musicianship and arranging skills to create music that can be profoundly tragic or giddy or ecstatic.

Trumpeter/vocalist Charlton Singleton, electric guitarist/vocalist Clay Ross, drummer Quentin E. Baxter and upright bassist Kevin Hamilton — all with brilliant careers in other bands — joined Parler for the opener, a fast, catchy song with mouthfuls of words and an infectious beat.

That playful mood returned later with "Old Bill" and "Green Sally" — frenzied versions of hand-clapping songs.

Near the middle of the evening, Ross, in explaining the band's name, jokingly called "ranky tanky" a "cure-all" for any pain, launching them into the song "Ranky Tanky," another children's song with a Mardi Gras feel.

Parler's gentle delivery of the

lullabies "Turtle Dove" and "Go To Sleep," with Singleton's sweet, melodic trumpet solos, showed her full, open vocal qualities.

But it was in the spirituals and more serious songs that the band shone the brightest, beginning with the joyful "You Better Mind," with a beautiful trumpet solo.

In "You Gotta Move" (done by the Rolling Stones), Hamilton broke into a bass solo, making the thick strings sing seductively; Singleton and Ross contributed the main vocals and fine solos as well.

Parler's heavily rhythmic "Sink 'Em Low," her prayerful "Watch That Star," and her upbeat "That's All Right" soared; her singing is unparalleled.

Hamilton led a series of solos with a longer, more intricate one that included percussion on the bass's body; Ross and Singleton each contributed, gathering more steam in a thrill ride; Baxter had his moment with a drum solo like a big, churning engine with many components; and Parler unleashed her ecstatic sound.

That changed to an elemental cry from deep in her soul in "Been in the Storm," accompanied by Baxter, who provided the thunder. Her voice became a force of nature.

In her rendition of their haunting arrangement of "O Death," Parler again reached deep and high; and you'd swear Singleton's trumpet actually cried "Lord, Lord."

In between, the band played a very African-sounding song that came from the earliest days of slavery; the joy was overpowering.

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