



## Raising her voice

Lowcountry singer  
Quiana Parler stands  
at career crossroads

Quiana Parler balances an active music career with motherhood. Born and raised in Harleyville, she now lives in Summerville.

PROVIDED

BY ADAM PARKER

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**S**he's from Harleyville, about 50 miles from the coast, and that explains a lot. When Quiana Parler was summoned to the grand Angel Oak for a photo shoot recently, she made her way downtown from her home in Summerville, thinking she was supposed to meet her bandmates somewhere inside Hampton Park.

She'd never heard about the sprawling tree on Johns Island that's at least 500 years old.

When she was first introduced to the songs her band Ranky Tanky was to learn, everyone else — drummer Quentin Baxter, trumpet player Charlton Singleton, guitarist Clay Ross and bassist Kevin Hamilton — knew the material already; the African Americans in the group had grown up with these tunes.

Not Parler, who was more familiar with the church hymns of upper Dorchester County than with the songs of the sea islands. She was learning the music as they recorded it, she said.

The musicians of Ranky Tanky are about to leave the country for a set of concerts in Europe. For Parler, 37, this will be the first time she has traveled overseas. These

performances likely mark "Phase Three" of an evolving career, one that has enjoyed slow and steady growth.

Accustomed to singing backup vocals, or leading her party band, Parler now faces the prospect of a sudden breakthrough. Ranky Tanky has been getting a lot of attention for its authentic yet contemporary interpretations of Gullah songs.

Late last year, band members raised money to make a CD and plotted a modest 2017 performance schedule of maybe 10 gigs at festivals and special events. The last thing any of these seasoned musicians want at this point in their careers is to spend weeks on a tour bus. They have families. They have lives. Charleston is home sweet

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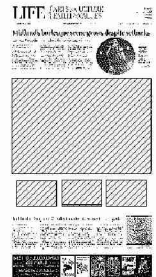
A glance at the Ranky Tanky website, though, reveals that 36 gigs are on tap this year, with more to come.

Something is working.

Probably that something has to do with Parler.

### Normal life

"I've always been a singer, I've never had a 9-to-5," Parler said.





She sang in church growing up. She sang while she was attending Harleyville-Ridgeville Middle and High School. Starting at age 8, she took private voice lessons with the late June Bonner, a storied teacher and former opera star who ran the Coconut Club and who eventually introduced the young singer to the local jazz scene.

"Growing up, that was normal for me, that was normal life," Parler said.

While Parler was still in high school, she enrolled at the College of Charleston, starting in 1998, accumulating college credit and capturing the attention of Baxter and pianist Tommy Gill. Both of them taught music at the college and played in the pit band for Brad and Jennifer Moranz's revue called "Serenade" at the Charleston Music Hall.

The show needed a singer. Baxter and Gill recommended Parler. She was 15 years old.

"My parents would bring me," she recalled. "I didn't go to my prom; I was doing the show." She had to abandon her graduation party early to get to the Music Hall. She missed other typical teenage experiences. But she learned how to be a professional musician.

In 2003, she auditioned for the TV show "American Idol." It was the show's second season. Parler was among thousands to try out, and she ended up in the top 29, among the last of the singers cut before the show aired.

She might not have enjoyed the effects of TV fame, but the experience nevertheless brought her success. She befriended Clay Aiken, who finished second and got a record deal with RCA, and Ruben Studdard, who won that year and landed his own record contract.

She's been touring with

them ever since, especially Aiken, who became godfather to Parler's son, Chamberlin, when he was born in 2006. She's also performed with Miranda Lambert, Kelly Clarkson and Maroon 5. She was on the road for 10 years after her "Idol" tryout. Her parents, Barbara and Joe Parler, helped by looking after Chamberlin.

Mom and dad are very supportive of her efforts, Parler said. Joe Parler once was a member of the band The Soul Drifters, which put out a hit, "Funky Soul Brother." He sang and played saxophone. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbpFPSga2xU>) Both her parents sang at weddings.

On the road, Parler felt torn. She wanted to be home with her son more. "I'm a full-time mom when I'm at home," she said, pausing to answer a call from Chamberlin's school. In 2008, she started her local party band, Quiana Parler and Friends. She has good friends: Stephen Washington on keys; LaVonta Green on bass; Demetrius Doctor on keys, trombone and sometimes bass; Greg Loney on guitar; Aaron Hines on backup vocals; and J.T. Rollerson on drums. Often, others join.

"The wedding business has been great to me," she said.

But now things are changing.

## Rooted in Charleston

Singleton, who called Parler "authentically honest," remembered first meeting the singer when she was in "Serenade."

"I was very impressed," he said. "I mean, Quiana was polished. She was singing Whitney Houston tunes and things like that. It was just flawless. She's the perfect blend of raw talent, polished talent and professional coaching, you know what I mean? That's a serious trifecta."

"She knows how to breathe. She knows how to go operatic,

she knows when to go church, she knows when to go pop. She can switch on and off, make it sound effortless."

Occasionally, Singleton would sit in with Parler's party band.

The party band was meant to be upbeat, but Singleton and Parler also wanted to do some contemporary jazz and R&B tunes, pay homage to Roberta Flack and Anita Baker. So Singleton put together a new band, Contemporary Flow, meant to provide the music that accompanies the cocktail hour before everyone starts dancing, he said.

Years later, when Singleton was musical director of the Charleston Jazz Orchestra, he turned to Parler once again when a program required a powerful vocalist.

Probably she has had opportunities to go solo and chase stardom on the road, but Parler's priorities are family and friends and community, Singleton said. And in the Charleston area she can more easily nurture her small business and earn a living.

It can be tough singing backup and bouncing from city to city, Singleton said.

"It's nice living here; there's less stress. You can make more money and live more comfortably here than out on the road or living in New York."

Besides, Parler is allergic to cigarette smoke, which often fills up clubs and bars, and she's sensitive to loud music, especially when she's not the one producing it, she said.

Charles Carmody, who manages the Charleston Music Hall, as well as the local band Susto, said Parler's attachment to the Lowcountry is one of the things that makes her such a compelling artist.

"She's almost a household name, in the sense that she's been around a while now," Carmody said. "Everyone knows





her name, everyone's expected her to make it big. ... She's doing exactly what she needs to be doing. She's rooted in Charleston, she's rooted in the scene."

She's appeared more than 30 times on the stage of the Music Hall during the past five years, he estimated.

"She's on everything, she's all over the place. Her energy's amazing. Her voice and talent are amazing."

And now, Ranky Tanky.

"It's cool to see them really pull something original and unique out of the Gullah culture and be nationally accepted," Carmody said of the new venture. "I hope that she can, like Shovels & Rope and some others have done, live in Charleston and still tour, to call Charleston home and be invested in the Charleston community."

Safe bet.

## Taking off

"I'm very grounded," Parler said. "I have the same friends I had in childhood."

And she's in a good relationship with Cory Broadwater, a detective who's been with the Charleston Police Department for 20 years and who acts in TV shows and movies on the side.

The family lives in Summer-ville, and Parler commutes to downtown Charleston for gigs or to Harleyville to visit her parents. She's very involved in Chamberlin's life. Now 10, the boy plays baseball and soccer, and he studies piano with Richard White Jr. and drums with Dave Patterson.

Parler isn't the only successful child of Barbara and Joe; her brother Malik is a photo-journalist in Tampa, Florida.

Their work ethic surely was inherited. Barbara Parler was a supervisor at the Department of Social Services before she retired. But she's not comfortable with the concept of

leisure, her daughter said. So she helps to run the Trident Technical College campus in St. George. Joe Parler works at Argos cement plant in Harleyville. Each year, Quiana Parler and Friends play the Christmas party.

Now she's gearing up for a tribute to Michael Jackson (June 9 at the Music Hall) and a bunch of summer Ranky Tanky gigs — in the northernmost reaches of eastern Canada, in California, in northern and Eastern Europe.

"I've never been overseas," Parler noted.

Performing Ranky Tanky songs is always interesting. Audiences beyond the Low-country don't know what Gullah is. They become intrigued and, often, very engaged in the music-making, she said.

Often, Parler and Ross will arrive early for a concert and visit a local school or group home or prison, bringing along a prepared curriculum. They will demonstrate Gullah rhythms and explain the history.

"I think Ranky Tanky will take off," Singleton said. "It is in the process of taking off. When people hear Quiana sing, she will definitely get calls and inquiries to do a lot more, to appear on people's recordings and stuff. ... I'm looking forward to seeing how she shoots away with that."

Parler said she's glad to have the chance to share an important American culture with patrons across the country and, now, around the world.

"It feels good," she said. Before Ranky Tanky, she was becoming aware of a hard-to-reach itch. "I felt I was supposed to be doing something more." Now that the band is gaining steam so quickly, she's little taken aback.

But she's ready for whatever

might come.

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## If you go

**WHAT:** Quiana Parler with Contemporary Flow at Fill Restaurant & Piano Bar

**WHEN:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday, May 25 (dinner starts at 6 p.m.)

**WHERE:** Fill Restaurant & Piano Bar, 1150 Hungry Neck Blvd., Mount Pleasant

**COST:** Dinner package is \$50 and includes a ticket to the show and three-course meal. Bar package is \$30 and includes a ticket to the show and two drinks of your choice.

**MORE INFO:** [fillbar.com/upcoming-special-events](http://fillbar.com/upcoming-special-events), or call 843-800-3042.



TERRANCE ANTONIO PHOTOGRAPHY

Parker is comfortable singing a variety of musical styles, from pop to R&B to gospel to jazz.



RIVERLAND STUDIOS

Quiana Parler is a regular presence on Charleston stages. She fronts a popular party band and now provides lead vocals for the band Ranky Tanky.