

Ranky Tanky brings sounds of Gullah culture to RACC

Rooted in coastal Southern towns like Charleston and Savannah, the band's music is heavy on improvisation, just like jazz.

By **SUSAN L. PENA**
READING EAGLE CORRESPONDENT

THE BAND Ranky Tanky will conjure up the Gullah culture of South Carolina's Sea Islands and give it a jazz spin on Friday at 7:30 p.m. in the Miller Center for the Arts as the opener of the 2017-18 season of Reading Area Community College's Downtown Performing Arts Series.

Founded two years ago by trumpeter Charlton Singleton, guitarist/vocalist Clay Ross, drummer Quentin Baxter, bassist Kevin Hamilton and vocalist Quiana Parler, Ranky Tanky uses songs collected from the Gullah community as the basis for its own arrangements.

According to the website www.africanamericancharleston.com, when slaves were brought from West Africa in the 17th and 18th centuries as experts in rice cultivation to work on plantations on the islands and on the coast of southern North Carolina to northern Florida, they managed to maintain their arts, culture, cuisine and even language.

The largest concentration of this Gullah population is in the area around Charleston, S.C., where visitors can see and purchase their seagrass baskets; sample their food that includes rice, peanuts, okra and seafood; and hear their creole language (similar to the Krio of Sierra Leone). Glimpses of the Gullah culture can be caught in George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," and in Pat Conroy's 1972 memoir, "The Water Is Wide" (later made into the film "Conrack"), which is set on South Carolina's Daufuskie sea island, where he taught Gullah children during the 1960s.

Ranky Tanky's trumpet player, jazz musician and composer Charlton Singleton, in a recent telephone interview, said the Gullah people also played an important role in the formation of jazz.

"People always talk about New Orleans," he said, "but you can make the case that Charleston and Savannah have just as much to do with the formation of jazz as New Orleans does."

He pointed out that all three are port cities, melting pots of different cultures and nationalities and ideologies. All three are known for their cuisines and for their music.

"Jazz is essentially improvisation," he said. "People get in a group and sing songs and improvise. All of it was happening in all three places at the same time."

Singleton's own family was part of the Gullah community, he said. While growing up in the small fishing village of Awendaw, S.C., he heard his parents and grandparents speaking the Gullah dialect. His grandfather, Edward Singleton, was born on Capers Island, but a big hurricane in the 1890s forced his family to move to the mainland.

Singleton's mother, a school librarian, and father — a pastor who also taught students in the vo-tech program to be electricians — provided music lessons for their children, beginning with Charlton's older sister and brother.

"The teacher, Mr. Sanders, came to our house, and he'd be there for an hour," Singleton said. "He gave my sister a 30-minute lesson while my brother watched, and then they switched places. I was 3, so I'd run in and out of the room, and hit the keys and whatnot.

"Finally," he said, "my dad grabbed me and said, 'You can't do this anymore; you're disturbing them, and that's not right. But if you promise to sit still and be quiet and not touch anything, you can watch them.'"

Naturally, Singleton began trying out the music he heard, and one day played a piece for the teacher, who started teaching him 15-minute mini-lessons geared toward a shorter attention span. Later, Singleton studied violin and then took up the trumpet for middle-school band. The latter became his main instrument.

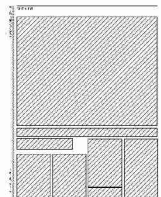
He attended Berklee College of Music in Boston and earned his bachelor's degree in music from South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, graduating in 1993. He moved back to the Charleston area, and there he met Baxter, Hamilton and Ross, who were finishing their music degrees at the College of Charleston.

The four became good friends, and formed a jazz quartet; later they went on their separate ways, all of them continuing to tour with other bands.

Then Ross, who had moved to New York City (where he is part of the band Matuto, which performed at the Miller Center in January 2016), came up with the idea of a band celebrating Gullah music. Since he was interested in African influences in American music, he had been researching the music of the Gullah community.

"It was funny," Singleton said. "He was telling us about researching it, and we were like, 'We live here. We grew up on this. I've been singing that song since I was 3.'"

"My grandfather would sing in church, and my first music lesson was from him. He'd sit



me on his lap and he sang and clapped a rhythm and stomped his feet. It was unforgettable. Everybody (all 54 grandchildren) got the same song.”

He said the band’s repertoire consists of songs like “The Ranky Tanky Song” (also known as “The Old Lady From Brewster”) that began as children’s hand-clapping games; some spiritual songs like “O Death” (made famous in the late Ralph Stanley’s rendition in the soundtrack of the 2000 film “O Brother Where Art Thou”); and songs that tell stories, like “Sink ‘em Low.”

“The audience can expect high energy, great musicianship and to learn some things about the Gullah culture,” Singleton said. “You can expect to clap your hands and stomp your feet and dance if you want to. It’s an exciting show.

“We’ve had fantastic gigs and receptions at performances here and abroad. The jazz in us takes over and we improvise, and that makes it exciting as well.”

Email Susan L. Pena: weekend@readingeagle.com.

If you go

Event: Reading Area Commu-

nity College’s Downtown Performing Arts Series presents Ranky Tanky

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Miller Center for the Arts, 4 N. Second St.

Tickets: \$27 adults; \$15 students, \$22 members

Phone: Call the Miller Center box office at 610-607-6270

Web: www.racc.edu/Miller-Center

By the way: There will be a post-performance meet-and-greet with Ranky Tanky members in the Miller Center lobby.



Ranky Tanky members are, from left, vocalist Quiana Parler, drummer Quentin Baxter, trumpeter Charlton Singleton, guitarist/vocalist Clay Ross and bassist Kevin Hamilton.