

Genre-blending Ranky Tanky gives top-ranked performance at the Dakota

By Jon Bream
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Like many acts that perform at the Dakota Jazz Club in Minneapolis, South Carolina's Ranky Tanky doesn't fit neatly into one category. Unless that category is good music.

In its sold-out Twin Cities debut on Friday, the rootsy, old-timey yet modern Ranky Tanky showcased many styles in various songs, reflecting what could be classified only as genre-blending.

For example, "Join the Band" found an unlikely intersection between South Africa and New Orleans. "Turtle Dove" was part kids' song and part spiritual. "You Gotta Move" melded a jazzy rhythm section with bluesy guitar and bluesy, jazzy and spiritually vocals.

The songs come from the Gullah culture in the Sea Islands off South Carolina. (Read about Ranky Tanky's story, courtesy of freelancer Pamela Espeland.) All five Ranky Tanky members hail from that state. The four core musicians formed a jazz group in the late 1990s after meeting at the College of Charleston. Ranky Tanky emerged in 2016 with the addition of singer Quiana Parler.

Ranky Tanky (it's Gullah for "get funky") got the attention of jazz promoters at their conference in 2016, according to Dakota proprietor Lowell Pickett. Then when Ranky Tanky released its self-titled debut album in fall 2017, a feature by Terry Gross on NPR helped propel the album to No. 1 on Billboard's jazz chart and expand the group's national tour.

At the Dakota, Ranky Tanky's harmony vocals were impressive; so were the musical chops, especially the New Orleans-inclined trumpeter Charlton Singleton and the West African-influenced guitarist Clay Ross. Both were engaging explainers about the Gullah culture and pretty good lead singers, too. And they collaborated vocally on a wonderful bluesy, jazzy version of "You Gotta Move," though, unlike Mick Jagger's famous rendition, they sang it with explicit enunciation as "you've got to move."

But the real star of Ranky Tanky was Parler, a former "American Idol" contestant (Season 2) with a rich, rangy voice that made her equally convincing as a robust folk singer, sassy blues mama and fiery gospel testifier. In other words, she was as exciting and uplifting as Jennifer Hudson, a more famous "Idol" alum, was the previous weekend in concert in Minneapolis.

While Parler was kept under wraps on mostly ensemble vocal numbers in the first of two 50-minute sets at the Dakota, she was a knockout in the late segment, especially on "Knee Bone," "Sometime" and "O Death."

Ranky Tanky encored with a group a cappella number that sounded like an African field holler. The five musicians were still singing while walking through the exhilarated crowd, exiting with an old-pro's promise to "meet you at the merchandise table."

Source: <http://www.startribune.com/genre-blending-ranky-tanky-gives-top-ranked-performance-at-the-dakota/483157291/>