

Tank and the Bangas band members Albert Allenback, Tarriona Ball, Joshua Johnson, Merrell Burkett and Norman Spence. Missing are Anjelica Joseph and Jonathan Johnson

TANK'S TOPS

Tarriona “Tank” Ball doesn’t go onstage unless she’s looking the biz. Her outfits must be test-pattern-loud and boldly put together. It’s a look she accessorises with vintage glasses, ankle socks and attitude – and sometimes, as in the video for *Quick*, her band’s current single, a cherry-flavoured Chupa Chup. Her hair must be big, styled into boulder-like buns or great puffy side ponytails, to match her gigantic vocals.

“If my clothes are right and my hair is banging then I’ll give you a great show,” says this diminutive powerhouse, 29, in her Louisiana drawl, sitting in a London café the day after her band Tank and the Bangas wowed the EFG London Jazz Festival, and will go on to take Berlin and Paris.

“My style gets me ready; it says that I’m colourful, that I like what’s going on with myself, and that I am going to surprise you.

“I wasn’t always like this,” she continues with a shrug. “At school I wanted to blend into the walls. But then [in 2005] came Hurricane Katrina, which was the worst of times – I cried every day for New Orleans – and the best of times. It helped me redefine who I wanted to be. And I wanted to be in a band.”

Formed in 2012 by a bunch of musician friends from New Orleans, Tank and the Bangas are killing it right now. Sure, the seven-piece has long been a well-known force at home, where they continue to wow crowds with their off-the-hook renditions of tracks called things like *Eggs Over Easy*, *Rhythm of Life* and *The Bradys* (a 21st century take on ’70s TV show *The Brady Bunch*). Where the music they play – a genre-blending mix of funk, soul, jazz, gospel, reggae, hip-hop and spoken word – has defied classification.

“We call it ‘soulful Disney,’” says Tank, whose cartoonish stage persona is heightened

Expect a New Orleans gumbo of funk, soul, jazz, gospel, reggae, hip-hop and spoken word from these rising stars

WORDS JANE CORNWELL

by her arsenal of squeaky, funny and pitch-perfect “fake” voices. “Or a really great gumbo [stew], straight outta New Orleans.”

The Grammy-winning singer Norah Jones is a longtime fan, recruiting Tank and her bandmate Jelly to add extra soul to her October 2016 performance of *Flipside* on high-rating talk show *Tonight With Jimmy Fallon*. But it wasn’t until February last year, when Tank and the Bangas beat 6000 other competitors to win the 2017 NPR Tiny Desk Contest, an offshoot of the wildly popular Tiny Desk Concert series (streamed from the Washington offices of National Public Radio), that doors swung open all over the planet.

Watch Tank and the Bangas perform *Quick* during their Tiny Desk Concert on YouTube and it’s easy to see why all 10 judges voted in their favour (“Tank is a force of nature, just full of joy,” enthused one). There’s the five-man line-up on keyboards, flute, saxophone, drums and bass, all of them encouraging, and often surprising, each another. There is co-vocalist Anjelika “Jelly” Joseph, whose bestie-style back-and-forths with Tank feel organic, inspired, and often audacious.

There is Tank, of course, finger snapping here, belly laughing there, firing off her musicians with the sort of on-the-spot energy that comes from spending hundreds of hours together, touring. Singing in the rich deep alto that has drawn comparisons to the likes of jazz/blues icon Etta James and soul chanteuse Jill Scott. Speaking – declaiming – poetic prose with an authority all the more authentic for her roots in the slam-poetry scene, and the fact several members of her family, including

her grandfather, were church pastors. “I would see the way they used their voices to inspire people,” says Tank, “and that’s what we try to do as a band.”

Growing up, quite literally, on Music St, Tarriona was the second youngest of five children born to a father who was variously a DJ, mechanic and singing carriage driver in New Orleans’ French Quarter, and who died when the girl he’d nicknamed “Tank” was just four. She and her sisters had always sung – their dad would get them busking in malls, on street corners – but it wasn’t until Tank started attending after-school classes in poetry and song that she could picture herself down the track: “I was an insecure kid but I immediately knew I wanted to combine the two in a really unique way.”

Then, when Tank was 16, came Hurricane Katrina, wreaking devastation, breaking levees, plunging her beloved New Orleans under water. Her family was temporarily relocated to Indianapolis, 1320km away, to an apartment complex next to a warehouse stocked with second-hand clothes.

“Me and my sisters were in thrift-store heaven. We would go there at night and rummage through the clothes, like we were swimming.” She breaststrokes through the air. “We were looking for something to make us feel good, and help us forget what was going on. So I would create these different outfits and express myself that way, which then helped me express myself with words.

“I wanted to speak for people who couldn’t verbalise how they felt, and I did that in the

poetry slams,” says Tank of the competitions in which poets read or recite their original work, often concerning inner-city life and the urban experience. “They are so cool and intense. When you slam you only have three minutes and 10 seconds to nail a poem.”

Being from a deeply musical city put Tank and the Slam New Orleans team at an advantage. They won the National Slam Poetry Championships in 2011, 2012 and 2013. “Everything we do in New Orleans has a beat to it, a certain cadence, even walking or talking. Anyway, I had all these little songs in my head so I eventually put it out there that I wanted a band, and bit by bit these people became part of my inner circle.”

Tank and the Bangas released a debut studio album, *Think Tank*, in 2013, and a live album the following year. Tired of waiting for international offers to roll in (“People said once we played the big home festivals we’d be sorted, but nope”), they saved money from their shows and decamped to London for three months. “Seven of us in a two-bedroom apartment. We played so many open-mic gigs here in England I should be a skinny girl,” Tank quips.

This time around, and with a new album in the works, things are different. “Captivating! Fresh!” gushed the UK press of their London Jazz Festival show. Next month Adelaide gets to see what all the fuss is about, when Tank and the Bangas play at WOMAdelaide, which is their ideal gig: an outdoor festival.

“There’s just something about the vibe when you’re playing outside. I’ve heard that the crowds in Australia are with you all the way, which is great because we feed on that energy, and they feed on ours.”

Tanks flashes a grin. “And if I’m looking banging, that’s the best kind of show.” ●

Tank and the Bangas, March 9, 6.30pm, womadelaide.com.au