

“AIN’T NO PARTY LIKE A HILLBILLY PARTY!”

In Review: The Ebony Hillbillies at St. Francis College Oct. 13, 2015

By Angelina Impellizzeri

While most New Yorkers were busy enjoying their typical Tuesday afternoon work, coffee and subway routine—The Ebony Hillbillies were busy bringing down the house at St. Francis College in Brooklyn! As one of the only remaining black string bands in the United States, The Hillbillies are the wildly entertaining manifestation of (Lead Fiddle) Henrique Prince’s dream. Prince, from an early age, had aspirations to form a band that would bring an awareness and education of the music that his enslaved ancestors played for themselves. It is this, very often forgotten, music that played a key role in influencing the American jazz, blues, bluegrass, rockabilly, rock and roll and country that we know of today.

Prince’s ambitions brought forth these incredibly talented Ebony Hillbillies, who are also led by the strikingly cool Norris Bennett (banjo, mountain dulcimer, guitar, vocals)—featuring the powerful Gloria Thomas Gassaway on vocals and bones, the three time Grammy Award winning William “Salty Bill” Salter on acoustic bass (accompanied by his radiant life partner, singer and actress, Mrs. Allannah Salter), along with the exhilarating A.R. **on drums** and Newman Taylor Baker on washboard and percussion. Combined, the Hillbillies have worked with some of the greatest musical pioneers in history: Pete Seeger, Odetta, Harry Belafonte, Miriam Makeba, Aaron Copland, Herbie Mann, Oscar Brown, Jr. Marvin Gaye, The Temptations, The Four Tops, Bette Midler, Horace Silver, Ahmad Jamal, Joe Henderson and the famous Riverside Church of Harlem. Just to name a few credits...

As the Hillbillies took the stage in front of a jam-packed 300-seat audience at St. Francis College Founders Hall, they began laying down a beat that immediately started pulsating throughout one’s spine. Co-sponsored by Circuit Productions, Inc., and The Healing Arts Initiative, the audience, at first glance seemed to be mostly comprised of senior citizens. But, after taking a closer look, it was clear that there was actually quite a diverse range of attendees: from senior citizens to seniors in high school—and even younger teens. Even though the audience itself was a wonderful mixture of different backgrounds and life experiences, there was one thing that very quickly bonded them all together—the beat. Looking around the auditorium as the Hillbillies pounded, plucked and strummed their hearts out to quirky and lovable “Animal Song”, the audience couldn’t help but bob their head or clap their hands along with them.

But, these rhythms were only the very beginning—a warm up for the audience. Soon, after a few toe-tapping rhythms, we met the stunning vocalist, and former James Brown dancer, Ms. Gloria Thomas Gassaway. Like a rocket ship, Gassaway exploded out of her chair, leapt to her feet, and belted out her desires for a “Big Fat Daddy.” Ms. Gassaway

not only graced us with her infectious presence and singing ability, but she also acted as a spiritual conjurer of sorts as she physically made her way throughout the audience singling out men, calling out to women—asking people directly through her music what they thought about what she was saying and how it made them feel! And the audience answered back!

And then, to quote the Hillbillies, “They took us to church!” The highlight, thrill, and most exhilarating part of the experience was when the Hillbillies got the entire audience on their feet and began to teach everyone how to move to the beat. People who entered the auditorium with escorts and walkers were up and moving from side to side. Teenagers, who are normally found glued to their cell phones and iPads, were up and physically enjoying the moment with their bodies by dancing and vocalizing. For the next fifteen minutes, the Founders Hall transformed itself from a performance hall to a gyrating party! The Hillbillies asked 300 people to drop it like it’s hot—and 300 people dropped it like it was hot. They also shook their moneymaker and the junk in their trunk—with a twerk or two.

Gassaway and the Hillbillies created an interactive experience between themselves and the audience that is rarely found in the arts. There was no line that separated performer and viewer. **There was equal lighting.** (delete) There was no pretense of “theater etiquette.” In fact, Ms. Gassaway challenged the audience by saying, “Nobody said you have to sit in those seats—if the spirit moves you—get up!” She continued to provoke the audience by shattering the generational divide and bringing a beat directly over to a group of teens and asking the question, “I don’t know why kids close up so much? Open your mind. Open your spirit.”

Open your spirit seems to be the main take away from The Ebony Hillbillies experience on Tuesday. When the Hillbillies eventually brought the afternoon to a close, the audience seemed to dance their way out of the hall even after the music had stopped. The Ebony Hillbillies were successful in leaving their legacy and historical footprint on the stage, and also they brought a wonderful surge of energy and life to a community of all sorts of different people.

It has unquestionably been determined that there “Ain’t no party like a Hillbilly party.” If you have the chance to see these musical legends in person, you better go—your body and your spirit will thank you.

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