

REVIEW | MUSIC

A multi-genre jam rocks the Parkway

By Dan DeLuca
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

This year's Philly 4th of July Jam — the Saturday night pre-fireworks extravaganza culmination of the Wawa Welcome America festival on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway — featured a little bit of country, a little bit of outré R&B, and a whole lot of the Roots.

The country came courtesy of big-voiced Georgia vocalist Jennifer Nettles, and the envelope-pushing R&B from Los Angeles singer Miguel. The Roots were hosts and house band for the fifth year running for the giant celebration on an unseasonably cool evening in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art steps.

Before the prime-time portion of the show, revelers along the Parkway were entertained by a stream of acts on the smaller Questlove Stage, curated by Roots drummer Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson. As the cheese-steak-and-funnel-cake-munching crowd milled about in red, white, and blue garb, Philadelphia songwriter Kate Faust played a compelling set of brooding electropop, and energetic R&B entertainer Julian King got the crowd fired up with a slickly choreographed mix of originals from an upcoming debut EP and covers of hits like Gnarls Barkley’s “Crazy” and Nick Jonas’ “Jealous.”

This year’s Jam was broadcast locally on 6ABC, but VH1, which broadcast the show nationally in 2013 and 2014, dropped out this year. Instead of a national celebrity such as Kevin Hart and Marlon Wayans, *Action News’* Rick Williams and Cecily Tynan served as hosts.

The action began under drizzly skies shortly after the appointed 7 p.m. start time, with Northeast Philadelphia singer Twin Ghost — real name Eric Steven — who did the yeoman’s work of warming up the chilly-for-July crowd,

expected to grow to more than 500,000, by only strumming his acoustic guitar and singing in a resonant voice on four of his own engaging-enough-on-first-hearing folk-soul songs.

The lesser-known 4th of July Jam act on the undercard who is clearly headed for bigger things is Zella Day. The Arizona-raised songwriter, 20, is now based in Los Angeles. She sang a series of booming, radio-ready songs from her album *Kicker*. They swaggered with confidence while hinting at dark shadows of trouble behind sturdy choruses.

Los Angeles pop band MKTO — the duo of singer Malcolm Kelley and Tony Oller — preceded the three principal acts on stage, presumably on the strength of their fitting-for-the-Fourth signature song “American Dream,” which establishes the band’s generational identity by contrasting themselves with John Cougar Mellencamp: “This ain’t the same summer song that you used to know, because Jack left Diane 30 years ago.” They followed that na-na-na singalong with the relentless hybrid hip-hop rock positivity of “Just Imagine It” and, lest they come across as overly serious types, reminded listeners that what they’re really interested in is “Bad Girls.”

The Roots took the stage for the first time shortly after 9 o’clock, introduced by a hyped-up Mayor Nutter. He reminded attendees that they were part of “the largest free outdoor concert in America” and called the Roots, led by Thompson and Tariq “Black Thought” Trotter, “the best house band in America, if not the world!”

The Roots then launched into a free-flowing jam, starting with “Game Theory,” the title track from their 2006 album, located in “downtown Philly, where it’s realer than a heart attack.” They

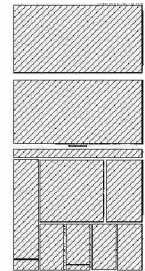
moved from sharply snapping funk to playful marching band rhythms and jazzy interstitial interludes. Black Thought, shadowed by sousaphone player Damon Bryson (also known as Tuba Gooding Jr.), displayed dazzling verbal dexterity and a breath control so impressive it made you gasp just to listen to him.

Nettles, one half of the Nashville country-pop duo Sugarland, brought members of her band to play along with the Roots, and with Questlove snapping her songs to attention, the results were impressive. As popular a mainstream country force as Sugarland is, Nettles was hardly a natural fit for a Philadelphia audience more open to an act like Miguel, but she’s an undeniable powerhouse singer, and she had the gumption both to play an as-yet-unreleased single called “Sugar” for the first time live and to remake Bob Seger’s “Like A Rock” with gospel overtones in a way that surpassed the original.

After a second energetic Roots set, featuring ginger-haired guest Jeremy Ellis on the beatbox — plus a break for TV commercials — the band brought out Miguel, the songwriter whose just-out third album, *Wildheart*, keeps him on the leading edge of a movement of alt-R&B artists who freely mix musical elements from all over the pop and rock landscape into their sound.

Dressed in flowing white from head to toe, Miguel played the role of the genre-blending love man who at his best — as in the falsetto-fluttering come-on “How Many Drinks” — makes music that lives up to the example of his musical heroes like Prince.

✉ ddeluca@phillynews.com
☎ 215-854-5628 📧 @delucadan
🌐 www.philly.com/inthemix





Grammy-winning R&B singer Miguel was among the biggest stars at Saturday's concert. Despite the drizzly weather, the mood was celebratory. MICHAEL PRONZATO / Staff Photographer



Hometown favorites the Roots were on the big stage. There also was a smaller area for lesser-known acts. MICHAEL PRONZATO / Staff Photographer



Singer-songwriter Zella Day, a 20-year-old from Arizona — now based in Los Angeles — sang several songs from her debut album, "Kicker."

The duo MKTO — Malcolm Kelly and Tony Oller — performed the holiday-appropriate "American Dream" and other numbers. MICHAEL PRONZATO / Staff Photographer



INDEPENDENCE DAY 2015



A flag flaps in the face of Norman Marcelle of Trenton as the Third and Sixth Regiment Colored Troops Civil War reenactors march.



Parading through Philly



Milo Matthew Lopez, 3, gets into the spirit as he helps lead the Migrant Heritage Commission contingent along Market Street.

As flags were the stars — and stripes — of the day, Shelby Frank wears two and helps carry one along Chestnut Street. CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer