



## **Swamp Sistas: Beth McKee and a socio-musical swamp revival online and real time**

Author: **Susan Wilson Mills**

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Beth McKee, the singer/songwriter known for her Mississippi roots and music- recording career created a community of mostly American women known as the Swamp Sistas. Although the network was developed to energize McKee's female fan base, it quickly became a virtual and real-time social fabric, where artists, authors, colleagues and friends weave an ongoing tapestry of tradition and renewal. McKee's performances, tours, merchandise and albums ground the artistic and social repertoire of the Swamp Sistas. The message of sharing with and supporting one another served as a powerful and creative vehicle for McKee's musical presentations to new audiences. Her collaborations with educators, authors and artists fuelled the shared socio-musical trend, along with the performance venue she created in collaboration with the Swamp Sistas called the 'La La'. The Swamp Sistas phenomenon is about fans who became co-creators. They inspired song lyrics, planned, staged and performed with McKee or in other groups at La Las, changing a musician and her audience into a community, complete with shared values and social engagement. This article describes the Swamp Sistas based on research in the field that included online and real time musical and social participant observation. Lessons from the swamp include emphasis on the participatory and co-creative culture of Swamp Sistas and implications for building community in music education settings.

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# Swamp Sistas: Beth McKee and a socio-musical swamp revival online and real time

## Abstract

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## Keywords

social networking  
co-creativity  
participatory culture  
socio-musical  
community  
virtual and real time  
online music  
communities

## Introduction

The open group statement appearing on their Facebook group site defined the Swamp Sistas:

We are the Swamp Sistas, brainchild of musician Beth McKee, a Mississippian who now calls Florida home. The group was born on Nov. 26, 2010, conceived as a way to connect the women Beth met while touring the south-eastern United States. She wanted to introduce us to each other and forming this group seemed the perfect way.

(Swamp Sistas 2014)

Members identify primarily as modern-day southerners, referring to their cultural origins in the south-eastern United States, who love their traditions. This article will utilize the term 'southern' to refer the area represented in the map viewable at <http://www.swampland.com>, unless otherwise indicated.

Beth McKee was born, raised and spent her professional life in the geographical south-eastern quadrant of the United States, developing her love and expression of the Blues and multiple other genres through years and varied contexts of musical experiences. This study focused on the creation of the Swamp Sistas and their twenty-first-century La La based on a vision of hosting house parties for some stated purpose or good cause. The recycling of the old tradition from Creole culture of southern Louisiana into the new southern culture surrounding and supporting McKee's music highlights the Swamp Sistas' love for traditions and energy into future musical endeavours together, as a community of creative collaborators.

## Method

A fluid team of researchers reviewed literature and discography of Beth McKee's published recordings (Allmusic 2014), publications about Beth McKee and/or the Swamp Sistas, and Internet blogs about music termed 'swamp' or 'southern roots' music that included discussions about McKee's career and musical appearances. Using combined ethnographic and cyber-ethnographic (Waldron 2011) methods, we collected field data in-person at eight McKee performances, including three performances at La Las hosted by Swamp Sistas, three club gigs and two university informances, spanning three states representative of McKee's musical appearances. Internet radio broadcast events and researcher presence at multiple rehearsals and sound checks provided further opportunity for observation, conversation and interviews in a qualitative study (Lofland 1984) of the role and characteristics of the Swamp Sistas as a community. Researchers conducted twenty interviews in total: eight in-person and two via Skype with Swamp Sistas and one to two interviews each with McKee and seven colleagues, including band members, event organizers and musician-peers. Conversations and information sharing continued naturally and with informed consent as those individuals served in the dual roles of interviewees and cultural informants (Lofland 1984). Informants included McKee, other documentarians, audience members, collaborating musicians and Swamp Sistas who contributed information but did not participate in interviews.

Photographic, audio and transcript data were shared with documentarians working on a related videography project in an effort to collaborate on respective areas of expertise (e.g. videographers held expertise in camera, lighting

and audio recording; academicians were experienced with interview protocol and transcription analysis). Additionally, researchers established an e-mail account solely for communication with and about McKee, with the permission of the participants contacted through that account to utilize the content of those online discussions in the data set.

Researchers documented concerns about McKee's status as a professional musician and marketing a positive image possibly conflicting with the needs for truthful representation in service to academic purposes. Although we were aware of possible tension with regard to ethical scholarship, we did not find the celebrity culture surrounding other socially networked musicians such as Lady Gaga (Click 2013) to be a prominent component in the context of McKee's performances and communications with Swamp Sistas. The decision to delimit the study to omit investigation of celebrity culture was based on this grounding belief about McKee and the Swamp Sistas.

As a principal investigator accustomed to ethnographic field methodology, I participated in roles authentic to my social and cultural identity by talking with documentarians, playing at La La jam sessions and singing harmony vocals with McKee's band at some of the performances. On the Facebook page, I occasionally posted fun facts about music and musicians featured in McKee's repertoire during La Las and communicated with interview participants using the Facebook messaging system. I was present as a known participant-observer throughout the data collection period, identifying myself as a researcher, a musician and a Swamp Sista.

### ***Pseudonyms, self-descriptions and locations of interviewed Swamp Sistas***

- Tammy – artist, Louisiana
- Loretta – artist, gardener, mother, Florida
- Wanda – attorney, mother, musician, Florida
- Bessie – author, mother, North Carolina
- Emmy Lou – Swamp Sista, Orlando, Florida
- Nina – attorney, breast cancer survivor, Florida
- Bobbie – McKee's niece, Swamp Sista, North Carolina
- Minnie – research collaborator, camera operator, Florida
- Bonnie – research collaborator, documentary producer, Florida
- June – performance artist, poet, North Carolina

### **FundaMental and shared values**

In a discussion about online music learning communities of interest, with relationships occurring at many levels, Hugh Brown (2010) outlined four principles for groups wishing to harness technologies and techniques to grow their community. Brown's principles were adapted and applied to the study of the Swamp Sistas as a means of organizing the fundamental and shared values found throughout the community. In summary, the four principles include:

1. Community as part of a co-creative whole: sharing resources, ideas and efforts; enhancing all parties; and being greater than the sum of its parts.
2. Value of participation lies in network, not necessarily accrued directly to any single member.

3. Strengthening of the community by 'thought leaders' who are not necessarily formally appointed, though encouraged (Waters in Brown 2010: 288).
4. 'Reputation mechanisms' (Jeppesen and Federiksen in Brown 2010: 288) rewarding members for their efforts (Brown 2010: 287–88).

### **community as part of a co-creative whole**

Swamp Sistas' celebrated their own and others' artistry online and offline, and Facebook posts include numerous notices of musical performances and activities not related to McKee's career, and quite different in musical genre. In one interview, McKee referred to her own repertoire as having 'genre flotation'. Co-creativity through Swamp Sistas connections appears to have been the seed from which the Swamp Sistas community grew. Meeting people and friending them on Facebook became inefficient as a means of staying in touch with new friends and fans, so creating a collective network that manifested in their own Facebook group made sense to McKee. Musician Jessica Daumen spoke positively about the need for connection when she spoke about the collective effort in creating the musical programme at the Orlando La La in June 2012. She agreed with McKee that 'the sense of community is something like a gift we all give to each other'.

Distributing and dividing creative roles was observed in every aspect of the La La context. A spreadsheet displaying planning details for one La La listed musicians, announcers, greeters, pimiento cheese leaders, vendors – all of it itemized. Informants indicated interest and anticipation towards the culmination of the real-time event on several occasions. New to Swamp Sistas, but a featured La La performer and professional musician, Daumen reflected, 'When I get to really get in front of these people and meet them, I'm going to feel like it's a real family'.

In the virtual world, where Sistas may never have met each other or McKee in real time, they usually planned to find their way to a performance or a La La. McKee's songs written for the *Next to Nowhere* album were written specifically with the Swamp Sistas in her mind both as inspiration and in dedication to them. In turn, informants spoke of McKee as being their representative or their voice. While some Swamp Sistas contribute through Facebook activity, others do so through organization and participation at La Las and other performances. Still, others contributed by participating in this study and other independent projects being carried out within this network.

### ***La La***

Historic usage of the term 'la la' referred to both events and the music played at events that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as house parties, later becoming identified as Zydeco music (Dempsey 1996). To Swamp Sistas the term refers to a specific event created by McKee and Swamp Sistas that celebrate and raise awareness for any number of various businesses, non-profit organizations, social causes and southern culture. At the inaugural Swamp Sista La La, women-owned and independent businesses were featured, bringing media attention and nearly one thousand people to the small Audubon Park business district of Orlando, Florida, showcasing women musicians. No tickets were needed for admission, but food trucks and vendors sold art and crafts in the parking lots, and the businesses in the district opened their doors, with a locally owned record store

serving as the main stage for McKee's collaborative performance with several Orlando musicians.

At other La La locations, the venues were creatively developed based on the causes important to the members of those local communities. In Lewisville, North Carolina, the event was smaller, not advertised outside the Swamp Sista network and held at the farm property of a McKee family member. In yet another North Carolina location, the ticketed La La was devoted to the local food movement at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, advertised as 'a house party with a purpose; celebration of music, food and art in honour of the good food movement in the NC Piedmont' (Klutz 2013). The event raised funds and awareness for Cobblestone Farmers Market's dollar matching programme and more than doubled that first Swamp Sista La La in attendance figures. All La Las included vendors, food trucks, local artists, women musicians and other characteristics typical of music festivals such as jam tents, picnics, dancing and networking. Musicians in the jam tents and on the main stage included professional and non-professional male, female and transgendered participants. While the professional musicians anchored the main stage performances, Swamp Sistas and other audience members participated in the planning, staging and performing of the music. Asking readers to imagine musicians differently, Gaztambide-Fernández (2010) proposed three likely views of musicians, one of those representing what he called the radical: musician as border crosser. In this view, concepts about the genius or talent of a musician would be replaced by concepts about social location and socially bound stylistic conventions. Here, musicians as artists are imagined to destabilize the hegemonic control of dominant ideologies, crossing symbolic and concrete boundaries that divide and order society (2010: 73). Co-creative community leadership is both symbolic and concrete when non-professional musicians are sharing decision-making and music-making normally reserved for the locus of the activity, the performer.

## **value of network participation**

The evolution of virtual communities in cyberspace points to shared communication as a central component of the relationship, one that may trump geographically bound communities in ways that have never been envisioned (Waldron and Vleben 2008: 101). McKee's vision of the Swamp Sistas virtual community as a part of the larger socio-musical context trumped the boundaries of geography, because she defined the community with characteristics she viewed as southern and rooted in the 'little zone in between the tradition they grew up in and the modern life that exists out there'.

Swamp Sista June referred to herself and her poetry writing as her performance art, valuing the support she identified as coming from both Beth and like-minded others. She expressed that more important than shared political views or interest in any specific song or musical component, the community is a network of valuable relationships that began virtually for her and culminated in real time at a La La.

Having Facebook at my fingertips does connect me to like minds, to people who may be politically aligned, but more importantly who are aligned by heart and thought and deed. I mean that's a big deal, Facebook is a share and support kind of thing, other than the people who abuse or otherwise bore us to tears with ... you know. But it's good,

it serves a purpose. There are going to be a whole lot of people here who have never met, who are friends on Facebook, I'll see their faces in person for the very first time.

### ***The virtual social network***

The Swamp Sistas Facebook group members discussed and some posted messages daily, describing and announcing events that promoted their professional interests including musical performances, art exhibits and charitable causes. McKee's performance information, as well as La La information were frequent in the posts, along with her occasional thanks for selling merchandise at gigs or bringing attention to promotional articles about her. McKee's own web presence was already established with numerous and accessible formats and forums for learning about her performing schedule and musical interests (Bledsoe 2010; Brady 2012; McKee 2014; Sickler 2011; Spera 2011), so networkers could link to those sites or move along to other information as they chose. Some exchanges of material culture (Baker 2012) appeared on the Facebook site including an amalgam of crafts, artwork and event tickets – though not at the expense of rich conversation. Those exchanges later became a central fixture at La Las, and McKee jokingly referred to the real-time variation on those exchanges as a 'Swamp Sista Swap Meet'.

The virtual conversations clue readers to the socio-musical context of interest in Beth McKee and her music, but include a considerable number of topics unrelated to performances, recordings or merchandise. At the start, a few Swamp Sistas knew and supported McKee and each other using the Facebook group to supplement real-time contact. Informants affirmed a clear function of the virtual network. Emmy Lou said 'if you know Beth, and you like Beth, and I know Beth and I like Beth; then we have something in common'. The emotional connection seemed palpable given the virtual format, which may or may not have been the exact intention of McKee's original vision, one that she termed 'energizing' the women in her audiences.

Personal notes were frequent and integrated into discussions and posts as when clicking 'like' on another Swamp Sista's message or asking questions. Swamp Sistas also shared photos of new haircuts, grandchildren, jewellery and recipes as would seem appropriate in a community of interest (Collins and Halverson 2009), but notably shared personal concerns and information about loved ones or themselves undergoing surgery or health problems. Promises of prayers and good thoughts follow those posts, including a particularly moving and virtual vigil kept by attending Swamp Sistas on one occasion during the final days and death of one of the Swamp Sistas. Topics of discussion ranged from the ridiculous to the poignant, and the members often named each other as well as their brothers, husbands or sons when announcing accolades, such as one husband being named Mardi Gras King in his hometown. McKee discouraged political discussions out of concern for the content becoming divisive, but she engaged those Swamp Sistas in other ways, such as allowing them to post their ideas on her personal Facebook page and adding encouraging comments.

Her role as the site administrator is part of her role as a career musician, managing her professional affairs including any that may affect her public image. Thus, McKee and the Swamp Sistas appeared to embrace the duality of professional boundaries with personal and individual ownership of the virtual network.

Becoming a member of the Swamp Sistas began in 2010, simply as a process whereby fans clicked 'like' on Beth McKee's Facebook page or provided an e-mail address at a performance venue. Over a two-year period membership grew to over 2000. The community shared a vision for both the potential and strength in McKee's music as well as the effectiveness of social networking. McKee's vision of the Swamp Sistas group launched the network, but she did not consistently post messages as often as many other people did. At times, she posted as 'Swamp Sistas', and sometimes she posted as herself. The page was her brainchild, but outgrew the initial idea of keeping up with the women she met at gigs. As McKee began encouraging everyone to share and support through the page, women became closely connected to each other, and the network became a virtual support system or 'safe space' that transcended geographical restrictions.

Informants reported that they know each other well, even though they did not see each other daily. They perceived the ironic distinction that the Swamp Sistas saw each other as friends, though they recognized that many have never met in person. Nina described an unreal virtual feeling yet also described the planning of a La La as 'beginning to feel real and [that] having an event like this makes it feel real. You get to talk to lots of other people, make new friends and actually meet them in person'.

Loretta did not use the word connection but spoke about never being alone saying, 'if you are at home and you want to have a glass of wine, well they say "never drink alone" but there's another Swamp Sista that just opened another bottle of wine'. Bobbie talked about the feeling of being at home, even though she was living abroad and missing her home and family. Homesick and looking for a silver lining, she said, 'The Swamp Sistas group is an amazing outpouring of positive energy'.

Benefits of a social network reported as part of music learning communities (Sattler 2013) are similar to those reported in music festival communities. Festival attendees may demonstrate a temporary connection to each other socially, in which the discourse style is 'of restraint and friendliness when necessary' (Wilks 2011: 17). Swamp Sistas' more accessible virtual connection bonded them beyond temporary connections. Combined, musical participation on La La stages, side stages and tents bonded McKee, McKee's professional musicians and Swamp Sistas as a community even though commercial interests were present. Perhaps McKee's status as professional concert musician was only one of her roles, and in the community music of Swamp Sistas, her role was that of co-creative leader, crossing a boundary between commercial and community music.

### **thought leaders – co-creative leaders**

The principle of thought leadership may apply to Swamp Sistas, but researchers adapted the term focusing specifically on creative thinking, substituting the term 'co-creative leaders'. McKee catalyzed the group as a voice and public face of the Swamp Sistas: she personally reached out to all the people involved and often sent friendship suggestions to Swamp Sistas, not necessarily posting and active on the page constantly, but carrying out her role as a member. Swamp Sistas would not have existed without her voice and her music. Yet McKee was only one of the several administrators on the group page, and she was not leading 2000 women to organize the La Las – she was sharing leadership, ownership and even musicianship among this group.

McKee gave researchers several names of potential informants at the outset and throughout the study, noting their leadership and active involvement of various aspects of virtual and real-time events. Like other aspects of Swamp Sista culture, fluidity was evidenced by changes in primary co-creator rosters, having a great deal to do with the fact that the real-time events took place in several different cities. McKee's band membership was somewhat stable with three musicians nearly always appearing in performance and on recordings with her. Only one of them, Juan Perez, consistently appeared, and his co-creativity leadership was musical – not being a Swamp Sista by virtual definition, though influential in McKee's musical and creative decisions.

It may be most accurate to consider Perez one of McKee's many musical co-creative leaders and, by association, a Swamp Sista co-creative leader, since they were married in 1997 and have been performing consistently together since 2003. McKee's other co-creative leaders in the musical sense would then also include her musician colleagues in the multiple southern venues of her performances and recordings.

In a series of e-mails, McKee and I discussed the development of a mission statement for the group, and she commented, 'We have other sistas following various leads'. McKee explained that one excited Swamp Sista has connections and ideas regarding a possible La La in the future, and this La La came to fruition in 2013. Informants demonstrated a sense of responsibility to the group, beyond the passive presence that might typify an enthusiastic audience member at a festival or club.

Some co-creative leadership was artistic, like Loretta's drawings and one Swamp Sista's enquiries to the group about defining Swamp Sistas to inspire a new work of art. Nina identified herself as an audience member. She felt that it was her job to support McKee as a singer/songwriter. Affirming collective responsibility to connect and lead, McKee framed it by saying, 'You bring your crowd and I'll bring my crowd and we'll leave with each other's crowd'.

## **reputation Mechanism**

The occasional public forum of La Las served as a reputation mechanism, where McKee invited or collaborated with musicians and other performance artists to share the stage or a lineup of staged events spanning several hours. At times, members who were not professional musicians appeared onstage to give announcements, sing harmonizing vocals with McKee or simply dance. Swamp Sistas who shared site administration on the Facebook page often used their administrative privileges to acknowledge good works and great ideas from among the community. McKee used the term 'shout out' referring to the thanks, kudos and acknowledgements she highlighted in her own posts on the group site.

## **the south – Mind, heart and geography**

Not every Swamp Sista can or desires to attend every La La, since they take place in various locations, all considered southern. McKee has been touring and performing in the region for many years, meeting women through various performances, concerts and promotional events. McKee's interviews often include references to Charlotte, Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa, Oxford, New Orleans, Winston-Salem, Boone, Asheville, Knoxville and other southern towns and cities. She played the 'chitlin circuit' during early years of her career, performing alongside musicians of multiple genres

–mostly southern,

but many, like Bobby Bland and Johnny Taylor, usually known and identified as Blues musicians (De Jong 2012).

McKee and Swamp Sistas Loretta, Bobbie and June delighted in explaining what it meant to be southern and what it meant to be a Swamp Sista. McKee described ‘ex-pats’, women who live elsewhere and people who do not live in the regional south but who identify with the Swamp Sistas as ‘not southern by definition, but southern by default’. Loretta defined the southern characteristic of the group similarly, saying that you could be from ‘South Jersey, South Park or South Miami!’

In Swamp Sistas terms, the south is ‘really a state of mind, where women will hug you and tell you they love you (that is *if* they love you), and may greet you with open arms upon arrival’, and it manifested when researchers arrived at a La La held in Orlando, Florida. While you do not ‘have to be from the swamp’ to be a Swamp Sista, Loretta persuasively argued that one of the characteristics of that state of mind is that ‘everybody’s got a little music in them’. Throughout the fieldwork, audience members, vendors, La La business partners and Swamp Sistas all identified often as being part of the music. Music at the centre and at the edges both grounds and surrounds the Swamp Sistas, who convincingly and collectively consider music to be a southern value.

Tammy is a prominent North Carolina artist who was born and raised in New Orleans, where she knew McKee by reputation from the band *Evangeline*, and who had grown up with McKee’s close friend Leigh Harris, the R&B musician aka ‘Little Queenie’. Swamp Sista Emmy Lou from Orlando, Florida specifically referred to McKee as a ‘Delta Mississippi’ southerner, and all the Swamp Sistas seem to realize the diversity within their geography, as well as the diversity in their own group. Even in the music of the swampy south, Swamp Sistas mentioned the variety in music and the possibilities for blending the various styles. Nina, wearing a New Orleans *Jazzfest* shirt said ‘so you can see, I like it all’. Wanda lived and worked as an attorney in Florida, where she has been active in a professional organization for women lawyers. Her life as a professional businesswoman as well as a musician and the mother of a musician (also a Swamp Sista) points to the value that Swamp Sistas appear to hold for musicianship at all levels and for working together with other women.

In between tasks at a North Carolina La La red beans and rice counter, Bobbie described the Facebook group and the people who connect in real time at performances and La Las as an ‘outpouring of southern women and some “not” southern women’ – pointing to a perception of diversity within the group and the idea that it is all right not to be a geographically defined southerner. June even said, ‘I’m from California, it is my parents that are from North Carolina’, joining the group that McKee once defined as ‘southern by default’.

Listening to Swamp Sistas talk or reading their Facebook posts may invite notice of some southern dialect. ‘Y’all’ was the customary pronoun of choice when McKee addressed an audience and ‘Maw Maw and Paw Paw’ are the terms for grandparents that McKee grew up with in Jackson, Mississippi. The ‘way we speak’, however, may be a short-sighted way to view the group, and no one seemed to mind how anyone else pronounces words or refers to his or her grandparents. Outsiders to the group noticed that the name has a southern colloquialism built right in: note ‘sista’ not ‘sister’. Loretta often pretended to speak southern, even though her original hometown is in Colorado, so

when she e-mailed us to let me know she would grant an interview, her exact message read, 'Honah, my deah!'

### ***Southern roots, community and family***

The Swamp Sista state of mind holds duality of life in the south and also of virtual friends who experience real-time friendships and music on their own time. As with the acceptance of personal embedded in the professional, the traditions can be embedded in the present and modern life. Defining a Swamp Sista, McKee described the multiple roles and experiences of southern women.

Sure, sure let's see, a Swamp Sista loves Bon appetit, you know high quality gourmet food, but you know she loves to eat right, but she will also dig right into a bucket of chicken. A Swamp Sista loves to dance, they all love to dance, and they don't mind dancing with other women, either way, they don't care, or with nobody. They're mothers, they're daughters, they're artists, you know a lot of care givers [...] in the health care industry, teachers, artists of all kinds, writers, glass blowers, singers, painters, they seem to like rootsy music, which makes sense. They're very tied to one foot in the traditions they grew up in and one foot pointed toward the future.

McKee left her home in New Orleans, Louisiana and moved to Orlando, Florida with her husband Juan, in order to take care of octogenarian relatives. She often referred to these years as transitional and challenging on a personal level, to the extent that the 'hopeful heart' she later wrote as text in the song 'On the Verge' had not yet begun to beat (Ryan 2012: 35). Nonetheless, and because of the musical influence of one of those elders, McKee heard Latin music and played Latin music in her new home, adding yet another element of the south into her music.

McKee has spoken about the Mississippi's Pearl River flooding annually throughout her childhood and cites the annual event as partial inspiration for her song 'River Rush'. To audiences and in conversations, she spoke of concern for wetlands and the Gulf of Mexico and demonstrated a love for the natural southern surroundings: the swampy parts, the beaches and even the southern mountains of Appalachia, where she often spends time in the summers and holidays. Some of the activity surrounding the Lewisville, North Carolina La La reflected overlapping issues of concern for the environment and playing music to support a good cause. At that event, support for the Eagle's Nest Camp in Pisgah Forrest, North Carolina was promoted through the presence of the camp's director and staff set up like the vendors with a booth, literature and representatives to inform passersby. Connection to community is a value that is taught and reinforced at this camp, where wilderness activities and outdoor sports set the stage for learning about regional folk arts and music.

### ***The musical south***

Obvious southern influences in McKee's vocal and keyboard development included Shirley Caesar, Mavis Staples, Mahalia Jackson, Bobby Rush, Johnny Taylor, Denise LaSalle, Tyrone Davis and Doug Sahm. McKee's 2009 album *I'm That Way* was a tribute to Bobby Charles, known and loved in the south, and also commercially successful throughout the United States. She recorded

Charles' composition 'Last Train to Memphis', which received frequent airplay and requests on the Sirius XM Satellite Radio channel 'B.B. King's Bluesville'. McKee recorded in Cajun, Zydeco, Blues, Soul and self-described Southern Roots styles on the album *Next to Nowhere* (Ryan 2012). The title track has Cajun drums, accordion and references to Lafayette, a city in Louisiana often considered the centre of Cajun culture and life. While Cajun and Zydeco music have much overlap and may sound the same to the uninitiated listener, McKee described Zydeco music as having a combination of Blues, Jazz and Country music, embodied by the song 'Same Dog's Tail' (from the album *Next to Nowhere*). African American influences permeate Southern Roots music, heard in the gospel sounds of the harmonizing vocalists on the *Next to Nowhere* album and in live performances.

That first La La featured music made famous by southern women song-writers and singers including Carlene Carter, Iris Dement, Memphis Minnie and Marijohn Wilkins. McKee recycled repertoire from the vast offerings of women who belong to the southern category of musicians, if not actual songs composed by the women, certainly the styles they represented, like playing 'See you Later, Alligator' in the style of Wanda Jackson on the *I'm That Way* album. Informants expressed less concern about where the sounds have come from or whether they should be called Country, Blues, Southern or anything else. In fact, the issue of the music being 'women's' music was not raised by anyone interviewed, except in reference to McKee herself or their social network. Musically speaking, they demonstrated and described more interest in song lyrics and as Loretta said, 'that Zydeco thing she does with her little squeezebox'.

The southern musical influences rolled off the tongues and out of the instruments played by McKee's bandmates. Musician Terri Binion, featured at the inaugural La La, talked about a blend of banjo picking styles she applied to her interpretation of Memphis Minnie's 'When the Levee Breaks'. Backstage at another La La, Trent Moody offered that in the past, he had been in McKee's band playing Cajun and Zydeco music in and around Orlando, where he found a definite swamp culture. Moody is well known as a Bluegrass musician of high acclaim and brought a Bluegrass accent to his guitar playing, occasionally choosing a fiddle for lead breaks, rather than electric guitar.

On tours, musicians were substituted or added to her lineup of band members, bringing local musical tastes and traditions into shows. Musical collaboration allowed for the distinctive and recognizable artistry of the McKee band, but folkloric and commercial elements such as Puerto Rican percussion or New Orleans vocal music to reach out to local Swamp Sistas in those towns and move performances beyond recitations of songs on the albums. Merchandise sales may have taken place but the local community became part of the collaboration. McKee plans on professional outsourcing and crowdsourcing (Turner 2013) performances to feature on site-based live music recordings more prominently, reflecting, representing and opening up the Swamp Sistas and their beloved virtual and real-time ways of life as a musical community.

## **what about women?**

McKee's biography includes a notable connection to issues surrounding gender-based band formation (Schmutz and Faupel 2010), due to her membership in an all-female band at one point in her career. McKee's membership

in Evangeline (Bufwack and Oermann 2003: 406) represents only one point in McKee's career, having already performed with bands whose membership included mostly men as early as childhood and ever since that time. McKee may have particular appeal as the voice of Swamp Sistas exactly because she is critically legitimized in the sense that bloggers and critics have rarely bothered to place their critique in a context of 'women' musicians, but rather Blues, Rock, Country or Southern Roots musicians (Abbott 2012; Cook 2012; De Jong 2012; Fletcher 2012; Powers 2012; White 2012), yet she composed lyrics she attributed to inspiration from Swamp Sistas conjuring imagery of southern landscapes and situations well known to southern women.

McKee freely chose an association with women at the outset of Swamp Sistas' establishment and expressed shared values in a virtual social network, but one that is a part of a larger professional and social real-time network. At public events, men were welcomed and honoured as musicians, audience members and celebrated business owners. Though Swamp Sistas hosted La La's and the fan base is formally organized through the Swamp Sistas identity and Facebook site, McKee mentioned concerns about including men several times. Therefore, the virtual identity remained *women only* on the Facebook page and by extension, 'sistas', but on several occasions, McKee emphasized that the group's identity is that of a group who can host La La's for everyone to enjoy. Swamp Sistas relate to the other members of their community as artists, highlighting a vulnerability that is at times attributed to women (Schmutz and Fapel 2010: 692), though Tammy articulated it as being an artist's trait.

We artists wear our hearts on our sleeves  
We artists wear our life on our sleeves ... all our work goes into what the public sees, hiding nothing ...  
It can be emotionally exhausting and painful and also very fulfilling at different times. Having the swamp sisters is like having a giant support system for the low times and a great group with thousands of high fives for the good times. All by e-love, except for the La La when we can get together and celebrate.

Bonnie and Minnie offered similar comments about the group being both made up of women and led by McKee, who they both perceived to be a strong role model. Bonnie told us that, 'as film school students, we created a documentary project encouraged and endorsed by our professor because of the prevalence of men over women in the film industry'. Minnie was also interested in the age group represented in their documentary because she had held a pre-conceived notion that Swamp Sistas were women in their 50s prior to filming a Swamp Sista La La.

## **Lessons From the Swamp For Music Communities and Educators**

This investigation about the role of McKee, her band mates and the Swamp Sistas led researchers to consider two questions, both starting with the premise that McKee could be the musician at the locus of music making in her familiar role as performer, while simultaneously crossing boundaries of commercial interest and sharing creative musical leadership: (1) Could the radical musician (Gaztambide-Fernández 2010: 65) sometimes place social engagement at the locus leading participants to become community musicians? (2) Could a

community of persons organized because of the musician and interested in the bonding social capital (Wilks 2011) become a community of music learners?

Swamp Sistas may simply be viewed as a cultural cohort whose public expression of their unique identity has found a home congruent with McKee's career aspirations, or perhaps they are an institution whose members' time together in cyberspace and real time is important to the development of a cultural and socio-musical group. Thomas Turino (2008) posited that people will seek out opportunities to be together and that music is a powerful force in helping them find those sympathetic networks. With the additional enticement of a musician strongly influencing the creative leadership of the La Las and sharing the administration of the Swamp Sistas' locus via the Facebook page, community music emerged, evolved and continued to grow. The purpose is not an attempt to identify the Swamp Sistas as community musicians, but it is worth noting that many of the traits posited as capturing the significant principles of community music practitioners (Higgins 2012: 5) were espoused by McKee, band mates and Swamp Sistas. These characteristics included but were not limited to the following:

- Commitment to the idea that everybody has the right and the ability to make, create and enjoy their own music
- Accessible music-making opportunities for members of the community
- Conscious encouragement towards active musical knowing and doing with participants
- Fostering confidence in participants' creativity
- Acknowledgement of both individual and group ownership of musics and celebration of participants' work
- Emphasis on the variety and diversity of musics that reflect and enrich the cultural life of the community, the locality and the individual participants

Turino's ideas about participatory culture in music education (Turino 2008) mirrored McKee's ideas about participation in the community of Swamp Sistas. There are valuable roles that all members of a socio-musical community might play, if given the opportunity to co-create, network and lead with peer and institutional affirmation (reputation mechanism) ongoing.

On the question of whether a community led by a radical musician (Gaztambide-Fernández 2010) might become a community of music learners, Swamp Sistas and other informants in the study indicated that many of them did. When Swamp Sistas who would not identify as professional musicians played instruments, sang, inspired lyrics, contributed repertoire and hosted at La Las, they crossed boundaries typically respected and bordering roles of musician, audience member and fan for the purpose of social engagement. In order to accept the development of a social network for growing a community of learners, music educators at all levels could challenge the myth of the musician as the locus of music making (Gaztambide-Fernández 2010: 65) and try putting social engagement at the core of music education.

Uphreaval of traditional boundaries of space being the same as place framed the argument presented by Partti and Karlsen (2009) advocating the construction of musical identities in web-based reality. Time-space separation experienced through new media, they argued, will bring about entirely new contexts for social interaction and affinity identities connected to participation in the community, including communities of practice (2009: 376). If their roles were understood to be that of co-creator, perhaps music students could develop

identities in the new context that includes affinity because of the participation. This is not to say that anyone who logs on or attends a concert will become a career musician in the commercial or artistic sense, but is that the purpose of music education for the majority of students in K-16 settings?

Thomas Regelski (2013) suggested a resetting of agendas in music education in his discussion of the roles that performers and audiences play. He convincingly argued that the overwhelming majority of high school musicians do not make music one of their adult social realities after graduation or advance musicing in their adult lives. Maximizing participatory ethos could lead to motivating long-term interest in musical activities, bridging to the vast and highly active music world that students may know, but that does not exist in schools (Regelski 2013). Citing Turino's (2008) participatory rather than presentational performance model, Regelski's words served as a reminder that Music Education in the general education of all students, serves the community. He complained that default settings in higher education are to produce an elite cadre of professional musicians (2013: 9). The Swamp Sistas indicated clear participatory ethos and long term-interest in socio-musical activities, including bringing others along on their journeys as they sold merchandise, supported artistic ventures and jammed at the side of the stages at La Las. While the virtual connections supplemented the real-time connections, the social network included both the virtual user-owned supportive environment of the Facebook group and the real-time supportive environment surrounding musical events.

Implications of this study echo the idea that the social networking platforms (SNP) could serve as student-centred approaches to music education (Salavuo 2008), in which creative musical and socio-musical problems are relevant to students, because the environment is core-user owned rather than solo-musician owned. Salavuo linked SNP to student learning articulating that the user should, at least, partly define the entry point of any web-based environment (2008: 130). The co-creativity value for the network and leadership of Swamp Sistas in their projects and social network were the principles consistent throughout nearly all accounts of the characteristics and roles of various community members. If reputation mechanism, the fourth of Brown's (2010) principles for growing communities of learning, is equally important, it may be that the significance of networking by utilizing and celebrating each other's expertise can create lasting connections (Salavuo 2008), not only to other community members, but to lifelong music learning.

Cynthia Turner offered a perspective on crowdsourcing ensemble rehearsals, using SNP to take advantage of knowledge that is growing more collaborative and participatory by the digital minute (Turner 2013). Acknowledging that social music making is growing, Turner suggests that students and audiences have already led a paradigm shift, that teachers may fear the vulnerability of co-creativity with those stakeholders in their music performances. As one example, crowdsourcing could include a SNP such as Facebook to hold discussions about concert repertoire with members of a school ensemble, or it could generate ideas among the ensemble and the school community about the performance of the selected music and the socio-musical context surrounding it. A fear of sharing vulnerability or being perceived as less of an authority admittedly weighed on Turner's development of crowdsourcing activities, yet she found that students and audiences seemed to be awaiting direction and inspiration on the other side of the conducting podium. When opening up communications about decisions traditionally

reserved for the director, she reported that the community reaped 'fabulous rewards in terms of students' self-agency' (2013:70).

The fear of conducting research in public spaces and places was not unaddressed in this study. Taking a cue from the Swamp Sistas, we planned informances at two universities during the data collection period to introduce ethnographic research methods and folkloric elements of McKee's music to student audiences of all ages. Data and findings were not presented at these gatherings, though students could certainly access the open Swamp Sistas Facebook group site or attend performances, since the scheduling of the informances was possible when McKee's touring route brought the band to the surrounding university community. Some students co-created by preparing harmonizing vocals to sing with McKee at one of the events, and others demonstrated interest in the Zydeco roots and Latin rhythms they heard at the informances. Since the format included unstructured discussions between musicians and students moving about the space both on and offstage, Perez demonstrated percussion technique that drew one child into the conversation, relating her previous musical experience to Perez's technique and musing about her role as a musician in her community. Research methods students interacted with their instructor whilst in the active role of participant observation, where a sensitive disposition must be maintained that allows for access to participants in the field, but also allows the researcher the privilege of remaining discrete and unavailable at times for purposes of research integrity and objectivity (Lofland 1984).

## **summary**

The Swamp Sistas may have begun with a few women who loved hearing McKee's music and who connected at performances and through Facebook, but it became a phenomenon that is a complex and diverse network of women who profoundly support each other and who host La La events in various towns and cities throughout the south. Organized both in real time and via virtual social networking through Facebook, McKee's collaborations with friends, fans, educators, authors and artists were considered and explored as a exhibiting a participatory socio-musical trend, the phenomenon on which this research was focused. The recurring themes of Swamp Sistas social networking characteristics, southern roots and group dynamics were explored through collaborative participant observation and ethnographic analysis of the context and the data. Findings suggested that the online and real time combination in this network was most enjoyed and effective for purposes of co-creativity and leadership that led to positive and active participation in McKee's music production and performances. Most importantly, the co-creativity and leadership supported a dual forum for members to collaborate, share and support each other's common interests in music, art, literature, education and social awareness (1) through the development of the La La venue and (2) through communicative and bonding relationships with other Swamp Sistas via the Facebook page and in real time.

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Caley Wahl, though not a co-author, was a research team member and made significant contributions to the study, writing early drafts of summary reports, transcribing and data coding. Her competent and thoughtful analyses and technological insights helped sustain the collaborative nature of the project throughout the study.

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