

Tricia Walker: Building Community Through Songwriting

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by Kara M. Bachman

For Tricia Walker – founder of the Women in the Round at Nashville’s landmark Bluebird Cafe – songwriting, performing, and encouraging others to make music is a way to grow communities and bring people together. This Mississippi native and Nashville notable has made a mark on her world for decades, and it seems she has no plans to slow down.

Back in the early 1980s, the Bluebird Cafe opened in Nashville. Walker had relocated there several years prior, and she wanted to start a regular event for female performers like the groundbreaking songwriter circle composed of men that had already started at the venue.

She suggested to the café, “Hey, we wanna see if we can do a women’s circle.”





That original circle consisted of Walker, plus Karen Staley, Ashley Cleveland, and Pam Tillis. In the time since the circle started, major contributions to the world of music have come from this assemblage of musicians who started out sitting together in a cafe and showcasing the music they were putting together. Tillis has since become a household name.

“We had a great chemistry from day one,” Walker said. “It’s a unique dynamic.”

These core women have continued to show up as Women in the

Round has survived for over three decades.

All the while, Walker writes and records music, with some of her songs recorded by big names such as Faith Hill, Patty Loveless, and Alison Krauss. The Walker-penned “Looking in the Eyes of Love” won a Grammy for Krauss.

As if that weren’t enough, for the past 13 years Walker has devoted herself to the direction of the Delta Music Institute at Delta State University in Cleveland, Miss. She had been pulled back home to Cleveland in 2006 and decided to devote herself to a life both performing in Nashville and building and growing something in the place of her roots.

She recently retired from her role there at the university, but the free time was quickly re-filled with two new projects: A position on the board of directors at Grammy Museum Mississippi – which just happens to be in her neck of the woods in the Mississippi Delta – and development of a new music program called Deep Roots.

“I’m almost just as busy as I was in my Delta State position,” she said.

Walker seems deeply invested in the Deep Roots project, which she described as “a small roster of local musicians. We planned to do live music on a regular basis.”

<https://youtu.be/vriM9Nb15NA>

The pandemic halted these live performances, forcing things to go virtual for a time. Walker is hopeful that the project – which can be found at Deltadeeproots.com – will soon be fully back on track.

“We’re gonna really work to brand Cleveland as a roots music town,” she explained.

Walker seems to have a comprehensive attitude about performing. Maybe this comes from sitting so often in a

circle, telling the stories of the music. Maybe it comes from working in a university setting. It's an attitude that music is about something more than hitting notes and strumming chords. It's about finding ways to connect, and it seems Walker thinks success in the ever-more-competitive field of songwriting depends upon those connections.

"Do you just want to get famous," she asks, "or build community?" It's clear she believes one goal to be more valuable, and that the other can't happen at all in a state of disconnect.

"Part of your job is to entertain *and* educate about how music can be so valuable beyond just a throwaway product," she said. "When music comes back, I hope people will value it more than they did before the pandemic."

With so many chomping at the bit for live music to return in full force, we have no doubt Walker's wish will become reality.

