

***Forty-Seven Years on 47 Phila Street:  
From Radical Homespace to Third Place***  
**The Life and Lasting Legacy of Caff  Lena –  
America’s Oldest Continuously Running Folk Coffeehouse**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Jocelyn Arem: *Forty-Seven Years on 47 Phila Street: From Radical Homespace to Third Place. The Life and Lasting Legacy of Caff  Lena – America’s Oldest Continuously Running Folk Coffeehouse* (Under the direction of Dr. William Ferris)

Caff  Lena manifests two identities – a mythic past and an adaptive present. The Caff  is not just a time capsule but is an evolving connector. Caff  Lena began as a business venture, became what I call a “radical homespace” when Lena became proprietress, and became a third place after her passing. I build on Michael Ann Williams' and bell hooks' theories of homeplace and Ray Oldenburg's concept of the third place to define a "radical homespace," an actual, alternative, physical substitute for home, whose function as a "space" and not a "place" allows it to accept contrary opinions and provide a platform for complex viewpoints. Radical homespaces are not defined by the politics of resistance, but of survival in the face of changing times. The formation and defense of identity then becomes a radical act. My thesis explores Caff  Lena's function over time, from 1960 to 2008.

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated with love and admiration to the Queen of Saratoga, Lena Spencer.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	ix
<b>INTRODUCTION:</b> <i>Throwing a Spear</i>	1
<i>“All Roads Lead Back to Lena’s”</i>	1
<i>The Story</i>	2
<i>Thesis</i>	7
<i>Methodology</i>	13
<b>I. CHAPTER ONE.</b> <i>“Writing home.” Lena Spencer creates a radical homespace</i>	20
<i>“Nessun posto è come casa” (There’s no place like home)</i>	22
<i>Milford, Massachusetts</i>	24
<i>Food and hospitality</i>	28
<i>Lena’s Defiance</i>	30
<i>Identity</i>	33
<i>Returning home</i>	35
<i>Coffeehouses: a history of spaces for social interaction</i>	40
<b>II. CHAPTER TWO:</b> <i>“Sense of Place.” Saratoga Springs and 47 Phila Street</i>	44
<i>Lena the Queen of Saratoga</i>	46
<i>Phila Street: Molding friendship, gathering at a spring</i>	49
<i>47 Phila: A building with an uncertain future</i>	52
<i>“The Gut”</i>	60
<i>Struggle</i>	62
<i>Opening Night</i>	65
<i>Skidmore College</i>	67

<b>III. CHAPTER THREE: “Come Gather Round People Wherever You Roam.”</b>	
<i>The 1960s Folk Revival and Lena’s Extended Family</i> -----	73
<i>The 1950s: Setting the stage</i> -----	75
<i>The 1960s: “Casa dolce casa” (Home sweet home) and the folk revival movement</i> -----	80
<i>Coffeehouses and festivals of the folk revival</i> -----	84
<i>She didn’t need him she had her Caffè</i> -----	89
<i>A renewed concern with making a radical homespace: The sights, sounds and smells at Caffè Lena</i> ----	91
<i>Caffè Lena’s Musical Family: Testimonial</i> -----	96
<i>1970s-80s: “There is now a street that bears my name:”</i>	
<i>The Caffè’s recognition changes the landscape</i> -----	99
<i>From Radical Homespace to Third Place</i> -----	104
<b>IV. CHAPTER FOUR: A Third Place: Coffeehouse Culture and the Caffè’s future</b> ----	110
<i>The times they are a’changin’</i> -----	112
<i>Lena’s Open Door</i> -----	115
<i>Emergent programming</i> -----	118
<i>The power of legend: folklore as cultural capital</i> -----	120
<i>The Caffè sets an example for other third places</i> -----	124
<i>“The Northway and Beyond:” The Global Impact of Caffè Lena</i> -----	127
<b>OPEN DOOR CONCLUSIONS: Finding the Spear</b> -----	132
<i>The authenticity of belief</i> -----	138
<b>APPENDICES</b> -----	140
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> -----	151

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. <i>Gandalf Murphy performing live at Caffè Lena. Photo by Joseph Deuel</i>	1
2. <i>Lena Spencer: Portrait. Photo by Joe Alper</i>	20
3. <i>Article on Dominic Parisi</i>	41
4. <i>Caffè Lena postcard. Illustrator unknown</i>	44
5. <i>View of Caffè Lena and Phila Street. Photo by Jocelyn Arem c) 2008</i>	50
6. <i>Spatial layout of Caffè Lena. Courtesy of George Yesencheck and Engineering America</i>	52
7. <i>Caffè Lena and its neighbor, Hattie's Chicken Shack. Photo credit unknown</i>	56
8. <i>Caffè Sign. Photo by Jocelyn Arem c) 2008</i>	60
9. <i>Caffè stairs. Photo by Jocelyn Arem c) 2008</i>	61
10. <i>Skidmore Website homepage: Skidmore Students at Caffè Lena <a href="http://www.skidmore.edu">www.skidmore.edu</a> Accessed April 24, 2008</i>	67
11. <i>Color map of Saratoga Springs showing Phila Street: 2008</i>	69
12. <i>Bob Dylan, Suze Rotolo and Lena Spencer. Photo by Joe Alper</i>	81
13. <i>Lena Spencer featured in Fast Folk Magazine, Illustration by Tony Markellis</i>	90
14. <i>Caffè Lena Menu: 2008</i>	92
15. <i>Bob Dylan performing at Caffè Lena. 1961-62. Photo by Joe Alper</i>	133
16. <i>McDonald's website: "McCafe" <a href="http://www.mcdonalds.com">www.mcdonalds.com</a>. Accessed April 25, 2008</i>	135
17. <i>Lena Spencer bust, created by Sharon Boyd. Photo by Jocelyn Arem c) 2005</i>	107
18. <i>Caffè Coffee 2008</i>	120

**INTRODUCTION:** *Throwing a Spear*  
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*“All Roads Lead Back to Lena’s” -Torey Alder<sup>1</sup>*



*Gandalf Murphy performing live at Caffè Lena. Photo by Joseph Deuel*

If I have learned anything, it is that the study of history is not just “looking backward.” Too often, we see roads as paths to where we are, with old roads ending so that new ones may begin. We neglect the fact that these roads are intricately connected. In fact, whenever we “look back” at history, we are actually looking at ourselves, in our own time. We are looking at all the reasons we choose to look back at all. As Della Pollock suggests in her book, *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, “...stories about the past matter deeply in the present, indeed they only exist in the present.”<sup>2</sup>

If we look at history as *only* a narrative of the past, without giving any thought to its effects on present and future stories, history appears linear, always stopping and

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<sup>1</sup> Interview: Torey Adler, Saratoga Springs, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Pollock, Della. *Exceptional Spaces*. University of North Carolina Press. 1998. xxi



starting. Yet, when we understand the complex nature of history – how it continually begs us to reshape space and time – we begin to understand it as shifting, changing course, doubling back on itself like the intricate melodies of a folk tune sung by a singer in a long line of tradition bearers.

There are physical places that embody this perspective. In New Orleans this past spring, I visited a house built before the Civil War. Its current owners opened a tattered scrapbook and showed me photos of the house’s first owners and a former slave who they believe now haunts the premises. In the telling of this story, the new owners detailed the quarters where the former slaves and masters lived, how the space was used, and by doing so brought the memories of this space to life. This experience left me with an entirely different appreciation for the history of the house than I had when I arrived. Places like this remind us of a past long gone; yet its structure and its story still hold meaning for its visitors today.

In places that clearly tie the old and the new together, history can be more relevant than we may even imagine. *Caff  Lena in Saratoga Springs, New York is such a place.* It connects us, like the New York Thruway that runs through Saratoga and its surrounding area, to voices from the past, making our own lives more vibrant as we tell their stories anew. On the stage of Caff  Lena, storytellers often weave their tales—sometimes between songs and sometimes for the entire length of an evening. So, it is fitting that this thesis on Caff  Lena should begin with a story.

\* \* \*

### *The Story*

*“First, I write down all I know about the story, at length and in detail.  
Then I sink the iceberg and let some of it float up just a little.”*

-Ingmar Bergman



Once upon a time... there was a turn of the century city in upstate New York called *Saratoga Springs*. A city known for “health, history and horses” the city boasts the oldest continuously operating Thoroughbred track in the United States. Saratoga in the 19th century became famous as a spa, its water known for its powerful, magical healing qualities. In its beginnings, Saratoga was home to the colossal Grand Union Hotel – in its day the largest hotel in the world. At Yaddo, an artists’ colony on the east side of town, writers from the likes of Edgar Allen Poe and Sylvia Plath to Eudora Welty came to create their masterpieces. It is also believed that the potato chip was invented in Saratoga Springs.

It is the late 1950s. New York built a State Thruway, a limited-access toll highway, to connect the major cities of New York. It became the longest toll road in the United States, with its 496-mile mainline extending from the Pennsylvania/New York State border in the west to the Bronx in the east. In 1958 the Thruway incorporated into the Interstate Highway System as portions of Interstate 87, Interstate 287, Interstate 90, Interstate 84, and Interstate 190 were built to connect the road to turnpikes in the neighboring states of Connecticut and Massachusetts.

This same year, Bill Spencer, a sculpting instructor at the Boston School of Fine Arts married Lena Nargi, an actress. One weekend, Bill visited the city of Saratoga Springs with one of his students, where he stumbled onto nearby Skidmore College. He

returned to Boston to tell his wife of his discovery, knowing that the powerful era of the American folk revival when college students were seeking out traditional music and gathering together could enable them to open a business venture vision to capitalize on this phenomenon. Bill came up with a plan to create a coffeehouse that would present the kind of folk music that appealed to these American college students, as well as an artistic gathering space for the couple to realize their own dreams of creating visual and performance art. It was a financial dream not unlike gamblers in Saratoga placing their bets at the track. Bill believed this gamble would make he and Lena enough money to retire in Europe. The sculptor and the actress decided to move to the spa city, like Eudora Welty and others years before them, to realize their creative vision. They decided to call the new folk coffeehouse *Caff  Lena*, adopting the Italian spelling for coffee.

*“Saratoga Springs is like Denny’s, It’s not a place you go,  
It’s a place you end up.”- Utah Phillips<sup>3</sup>*

In May of 1960 the two artists from Boston made their way to Saratoga to set up shop on 47 Phila Street. Formerly a woodworking shop where the intricately carved wooden details for local buildings in the city were created, the building with the hand crafted wooden sign out front soon began to turn out of its doors a new kind of creative expression, no longer made of oak and maple, though still honed with as much craftsmanship and care. Up the creaking stairs one could hear the sounds of guitars and smell the sweet scent of Italian coffee and pastries. If one was to amble up those stairs and glance into the dimly lit room hidden away from the outside world only by a wooden sign on the door they might see a young Bob Dylan or Ani Difranco sitting on stage, playing

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<sup>3</sup> Interview: Utah Phillips. Caff  Lena. Saratoga Springs, New York. May, 2005.

songs that would one day make them famous. In the words of Ani DiFranco, it was the sound “...of history happening, of democracy brewing.”

When Bill Spencer left Lena and the Caff  in 1963, he took with him hands and faces made of porcelain and clay. His departure marked the exodus of one type of art for another, as the woodworking shop in the previous era gave way to the guitars and banjos of the Caff ’s folk performers. Lena Spencer, the former actress and newly appointed sole coffeehouse proprietress began to run the coffeehouse on her terms. She created a loving home environment for herself and, generations of artists. She slept, ate, sang, acted, enjoyed years of artistic companionship and suffered years of financial hardship, ultimately passing away after a fall on the Caff ’s stairs in 1989. The Caff , in turn, essentially “became” her. Today, her extended family keeps her spirit alive through real faces and hardworking hands. This family embodies her character and resonates with the familial vision she lived and shared. It continues to provide a critical space for those seeking to craft their art and find solidarity in the company and companionship of friends.

\* \* \*

Let us fast-forward our story to the year 2000. It is now nearly half a century since the Thruway led Lena and Bill to Saratoga Springs. No longer are potato chips the only widespread hometown tale of original creation in the spa city. There is now a story widely told that Don McLean wrote “American Pie” in a local bar. In another story, protest singer Bob Dylan stopped over here in the 1960s. Yet another tells the story of a young Bernice Johnson Reagon, the Freedom Singer and Doctor of American history, washing dishes and singing for Hattie Austin, owner of Lena’s next door neighbor,

Hattie's Chicken Shack. The stories go on, and the origin of each can be found at a little coffeehouse that still stands on Phila Street. But what is important is not that these stories exist, but that they are still told. It is in the way they say something about the history of a place, and the need for that history to be shared.

In 2000 I arrive as a first year student at Skidmore College. For the first time in my life, I am living many miles away from home, learning to play guitar and starting to write songs in my dorm room between classes. Someone in the know tells me about a small folk coffeehouse on Phila Street where "Bob Dylan played." At a Thursday open mic night, I head up the stairs of the "famous" Caff  Lena and find myself in the musty, dimly lit green room. Musicians of all ages tune their guitars. The Caff  immediately feels familiar in its warm, homey atmosphere, characterized by the homemade chocolate chip cookies I eat and the waitresses and staff members who I notice seem to treat each other more like family than as coworkers.

In this room I meet an older folk musician – by day, a chemistry professor at Skidmore, by night when he dons his guitar, a local folk music performer. This musician asks me if I have heard the song "Candyman." I haven't, and he begins to play. Little do I know then, but this song is being passed down in the same way folk music has been disseminated for ages, by just plain old listening to someone play. In this space, like so many before me, my understanding of the vastness of America's cultural history forever changes.

Within the world of this coffeehouse, teacher and student engage in a moment of intergenerational interaction outside of the university that testifies to the lasting power of this Caff . Through the spreading of folk tradition in this space, Saratoga and the outside world are, also forever changed.

Like the New York Thruway, roads continue to lead in new directions. Yet folk music itself is essentially defined by its ability to acclimate to new times by reviving old traditions, bringing them into the light of new days, and setting the stage for new stories to unfold. And in the case of Caffé Lena, when a singer strums a guitar and croons a song on a stage, hints of yesterday are evident not only in the songs they sing but on the very stage where they sing them. History in this way is able to flow from one weary guitar into the ears of many, who go on their way humming its tune.

In this space where folk music brings lives together, the Caffé serves as an intergenerational vehicle where a chemistry professor and a college student can both try on this accessible form of music. So sets the stage for the continued story of the Caffé and its unique space. Through their craft, artists show us who we are, who we have been, and who we could be.

Two artists created Caffé Lena, and the Caffé became their consummate work of art. The Caffé began as a business venture, became home for its matriarch founder and a generation of artists, and exists now as a space where the legacy of familial ideals born in the 1960s continues to shape its existence. The Caffé's story is an affirmation of how notions of "home" became embodied in a folk coffeehouse and continue to evolve today into a place that serves the community as it did when Lena was alive but without her warm presence to guide it. It exists today as a third place.

\* \* \*

### *Thesis*

My thesis asks us to look at the Caffé not just as a space reminiscent of a moment in time, or a time capsule into another world, but as an evolving connector between

worlds. Caff  Lena began as a business venture, became a *radical homespace* when Lena took over as sole proprietress, and became a third place after Lena’s passing. Caff  Lena is a successfully paradoxical manifestation of two identities: the re-signification of a mythic past and the emergence of an adaptive present in the form of a folk coffeehouse.

As Thomas R. Gruning writes in his ethnography, “Millenium Folk,” “For the folk, neither the past nor the present is free from a deep sense of paradox that pervades multiple levels of what has become an increasingly active community of musicians, fans, and entrepreneurs.”<sup>4</sup> At the center of this paradox lies a sense of belonging that transcends time and exists in the continuation of a shared space, highlighted by the interaction and negotiation of aesthetic practice, local and national cultural tradition and a sense of place. In studying the evolution of Caff  Lena’s greater meaning and its function over time, there is a need for an entirely new theory to describe it, built on the shoulders of Michael Ann Williams’ and bell hooks’ theories of homeplace and Ray Oldenburg’s concept of the third place.

In “Homeplace,” Michael Ann Williams discusses a mental conception of home that arises from the oral narrative surrounding a place. Williams writes, “While many times I crossed snaky fields in high boots, and crept gingerly across rotting porches to inspect old structures, the entrance of the homeplace, I found, was through these oral narratives.”<sup>5</sup> In her essay, “Homeplace: a Site of Resistance,” bell hooks is not interested

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<sup>4</sup> Gruning, Thomas R., *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties*. University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia. 2006. xii.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, Michael Ann. *Homeplace: The Social Use and Meaning of the Folk Dwelling in Southwestern North Carolina*. University of Georgia Press. Athens and London. 1991. 36.

in further conceptualizing home as politically neutral space.<sup>6</sup> Rather, she uses her own theory of “homeplace” to examine home as a space she defines as a “site of resistance and liberation struggle.”<sup>7</sup> In her work, hooks argues that women in particular use home as a place from which to enact their political ideas and create change in the face of an oppressive dominant culture.

I build on Williams’ and hooks’ homeplace with my own concept of a “radical homespace.” By “radical homespace” what I suggest is not what Williams sees as the emotional, remembered context of a place that acts, feels, or seems like a home, or what hooks believes is simply a site of struggle against oppressive forces, but an actual, alternative, physical substitute for home, whose function as a “space” (continuous or expansive) and not a “place” (a particular position already identified) gives it the capacity to expand in order to accept contrary opinions and provide a platform for complex viewpoints. This paradoxical quality makes radical homespaces like Caff  Lena complex sites not defined by or limited to a politics of resistance, but by a politics of nurturing identity-making and survival in the face of changing times. The formation and defense of identity then becomes a radical act.

Along these lines, I define “radical” in the dual meanings of both “of or relating to the root of something,” and “characterized by departure from tradition, innovative, or progressive.” A radical homespace is a place that physically recreates the theoretical construct of the ideal “home” environment and substitutes for an absent home. In many cases it is found in a completely different venue, environment, or location than one’s

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<sup>6</sup> hooks, bell. Essay: *Homeplace. The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color*. Edited by D. Soyini Madison. Martin’s Press, Inc. New York, New York. 1994. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 43.



native home. It is warm, nurturing, and comforting. Its familial atmosphere is characterized by support for the personal growth of its “members” or patrons by encouraging unlimited freedom of expression and non-conformity, and by the expressed values of a matriarch and/or patriarch. Caff  Lena is not a mental construct of home but an actual place that, because of Lena’s personality, produced during her era the same comfort that Williams' "home-place" does.

Another example of a radical homespace is Jane Addams’ Hull House. The Hull House, an 1889 fixture in Chicago, served as an institution (house) that provided educational, recreational, and other social services to the community through Addams’ role as caregiver and the home-like atmosphere she created. The Hull House for many was an actual, alternative, physical substitute for home. Although many suffragists used Hull House to advance their own progressive viewpoints, many immigrants used its facilities not to foster resistance but to nurture their identities and learn to survive in a new world, in the face of changing times. Similar to Lena Spencer, Jane Addams describes the Hull House’s "first resident" as an older lady who read to listeners. She reported that she wanted to live in a place where "idealism ran high"<sup>8</sup> and where, like Caff  Lena, volunteers seemed plentiful.

Lena Spencer fused the deep traditions of her Italian upbringing, (the characteristics of her native home) with the idealistic principles of the 1960s into Caff  Lena’s physical space. From 1960-1989, the Caff  as radical homespace was a nurturing, alternative home-environment for generations of artists and community members in need of a place to embody, hone and display both their identities and political leanings. Lena

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<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane\\_Addams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Addams). Accessed on March 22, 2008.

provided a place of residence, a place where her community's domestic affections were centered, an institution for many who were both figuratively or literally homeless, a place of refuge, a principal base of operations, a place for guests to feel at ease, well-informed about local and regional cultural events, and a place where artists could become proficient at their craft. She nurtured a feeling of a "safe place" where artists and audience members alike could be free to express their thoughts without fear of being put down or alienated in any way. This environment allowed many artists to express themselves in ways that they could not or did not feel safe doing to this same extent in other venues.

The effect of this nurturing environment is profound. During the 1960s, the Caff  helped to cultivate the political messages that a generation of young performers needed to express, and in this way uniquely aided the growth of the 1960s counterculture that was developing all around it. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Caff  continued to provide a safe space for politics to be reflected in the art of artists and performers, even as the political landscape shifted. With a growing disillusionment of government, advances in civil rights, increased influence of the women's movement, and a heightened concern for the environment, the Caff  remained available as a vehicle for the airing of cultural and political ideas and beliefs. Many of the radical ideas of the 60's gained wider acceptance in these new decade, and were mainstreamed into American life and culture. With this social realignment came greater acceptance of the Caff  itself.

When Lena Spencer passed away in 1989, Caff  Lena changed forever. No longer would her personality fill the space as it had before; yet, her lasting influence infused the Caff  with an eye towards helping the community, a goal that helped to sustain it as it became a non-profit venue. From 1989 through today as of this writing, the Caff  exists

as a “third place,” what sociologist Ray Oldenburg defines in “The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You Through the Day” as “...a dependable place of refuge...a space that functions as neither home nor work ...that exists on neural ground and serves to level [its] guests to a condition of social equality...”<sup>9</sup> The concept of “the third place” didn’t exist in Lena’s lifetime. It was not formalized until 1990, coincidentally the same year the Caff  changed hands from Lena as its maternal proprietress figure to a new, non-profit managing system.

Caff  Lena can no longer be a radical homespace because it is no longer an actual, alternative, physical substitute for home, although it still maintains the supporting and comforting atmosphere that lends itself to providing a politically emergent environment. As Oldenburg writes, “...though a radically different kind of setting than the home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends.”<sup>10</sup> While it lacks the influence of Lena’s strong personality that made it a home, its boards of directors functions in this third place to carry on Lena’s sense of purpose by supporting and fostering the needs of the community.

*“I make all my decisions on intuition. But then, I must know why I made that decision.  
I throw a spear into the darkness. That is intuition.  
Then I must send an army into the darkness to find the spear. That is intellect.”  
-Ingmar Bergman*

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<sup>9</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Da Capo Press; Florida, 1999. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 42.

When I began writing my Masters thesis in 2007, the Caff  celebrated its 47<sup>th</sup> year on 47 Phila Street in Saratoga Springs. My intent then was to produce an ethnographic account of its 47-year history, broken down into various areas of the Caff 's community-oriented space. For a number of reasons I chose not to discuss every aspect of the Caff 's history in this particular work. My goal is to instead envision four areas that serve as a window through which I address the conceptual issue of space. I examine the Caff 's changing quality and function as essentially linked to the past and bound emergently to the present and future. By exploring the evolution of Caff  Lena from a radical homespace during Lena Spencer's lifetime into a third place today, I show the Caff 's changing function over time and its importance to both the history of folk music and folk music in its present day incarnation.

### *Methodology*

In my thesis I interweave two threads: a narrative voice and the scholarship on folk music I have acquired intuitively through six years of experience researching the history of Caff  Lena, and my perspective gained from my educational experience at UNC Chapel Hill. In my undergraduate thesis on Caff  Lena, "*The Early Days of Caff  Lena: The Socio-Historical Identity of an American Music Venue—An Ethnography—Oral History Account*" I examine the Caff 's story chronologically, beginning in 1960 and ending my account in 1972 with the start of Lively Lucy's Coffeehouse at Skidmore College. In my Masters thesis, I examine the Caff 's evolution from radical homespace to third place in four thematic sections: 1. Lena's story; 2. the Caff 's sense of place; 3. the historical context of the 1960s; and 4. today's coffeehouse culture.

I draw from scholarship on the folk revival, its music, venues, festivals, and events to demonstrate the revival's necessary relationship to the Caff . Utilizing the body of work on the folk revival movement developed by Bob Cantwell as a theoretical/historical basis for my examination, I place Caff  Lena within the realm of American folk music cultural production. In the style of Cantwell's *When We Were Good*, each chapter will serve to enrich the reader's understanding of the context surrounding contemporary folk musical production. Employing the methodology of Bill Ferris, I weave together photos of the Caff  and its performers, staff, patrons and volunteers with maps of Saratoga Springs and the Caff 's building, showing how the space is used. As in Ferris' *Blues from the Delta*, I hope that written correspondence between my consultants and me will shed light on my interactions with the Caff  board and other people in the community. Finally, drawing on Della Pollock's work, *Exceptional Spaces*, I employ an interdisciplinary, ethnographic, multi-vocal, layered approach, drawing from many sources while engaging with stories that span a broad time period. I can only hope to come close to the successes of these respective books as they explore issues of cultural representation, and as they lend a voice to stories that would have remained untold.

As an ethnographer who is also an artist, I believe in an approach to writing about Caff  Lena that engages analytic inquiry while reflecting the creative aesthetic and artistic sensibility employed at the Caff . As a vehicle to tell this tale, I suggest the construction of a new kind of narrative that connects the tale of Caff  Lena's history with its present day activities through, as Grunning says, the "...complicated and sometimes convoluted ways in which today's folk communities negotiate the paradoxical terrain of modernity and the

past.”<sup>11</sup> When she was alive, Lena Spencer, the Caffé’s founder introduced every performance at the Caffé. As musician Terry Leonino remembers,

She had the kind of personality that filled a room, and a presence. She had a tremendous amount of grace as an MC. She would love to introduce you. She would introduce you in a personal way, and was very graceful and very elegant. She carried herself beautifully when she was coming up to introduce the artists on stage.<sup>12</sup>

Nowadays, the Caffé’s manager Sarah Craig introduces the shows. I begin each chapter with an introduction that presents Lena and Sarah’s voices as a kind of “musical counterpoint” to one another. Of course, in every musical chord there must be a bass note, giving the chord its foundation. I duly narrate this thesis in my own voice, rooting Sarah and Lena’s voices and guiding the story. I hope this framing will allow Lena, who passed away in 1989, to find companionship in Sarah’s voice, who now literally runs the show in Lena’s place, and in my voice, the voice of an artist/student struggling to make sense of Lena and the Caffé’s story.

There are many versions of the Caffé’s story, many angles to understanding the Caffé’s significance and this thesis represents just one. It is an attempt to look at what I believe to be some of the deeper meanings of the Caffé. I trust there are many other stories, and I hope they will all be told. I undertook this writing under the constraints of school responsibilities and life events with the knowledge that there will always be more to tell, many more voices left to be heard. I know I cannot tell every story in this thesis. I understand that I can only do the best I can in the time that I have allotted to do this work, just as Lena did when she ran the Caffé. I invite others to tell their stories in their

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<sup>11</sup> Gruning, Thomas R., *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties*. University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia. 2006. xii.

<sup>12</sup> Interview: Terry Leonino, Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007.

own ways, in their own words. This is the reason I initiated a history project website that can be updated, changed, and added to accordingly.

In the 2005 exhibit that I planned and curated at Caff  Lena in celebration of its 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I invited the Caff  community – a multigenerational group of people – to re-create “bathroom graffiti” that once existed on the bathroom walls of the Caff  from oral history interviews I recorded from a selection of Caff  Lena interviewees. Handing out a selection of interview quotes and magic markers, I watched a collaborative piece unfold in front of my eyes as the quotes were marked on the walls, illustrated and sketched out in ways I could not have imagined. When it was complete, it exceeded my expectations of what a creative, collaborative process could be.

From this example, I employ in my thesis what I call a textual *ethnographic graffiti* – a written collection of voices that enliven the history of the Caff ’s community just as the written interpretations of the oral histories I collected came alive on the Caff ’s walls. As Janice Rahn writes in her ethnography, “Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture,” “I became interested in graffiti...when I began to understand it as a microcosm of how people communicate, participate, and learn within a community.” Rahn continues, “As in any folk art, graffiti has its roots in community, collaboration, and dialogue. It is still largely by and for its own community, but interaction with the environment brings in new influences, which cause it to continually evolve.”<sup>13</sup> Caff  Lena’s interaction with new performers, patrons and Board Members allows it to continue a dialogue Lena and Bill started with the community in 1960.

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<sup>13</sup> Rahn, Janice. *Painting Without Permission: Hip Hop Graffiti Subculture*. Bergin and Garvey, Westport, Connecticut. London. 2002. 38.

I joked to Sarah Craig, the Caff  's manager that the bathroom could be seen as the "fourth space" because it is neither home, work, nor community gathering place, but a kind of "other" space where one is both with the community and without it. In this space made private with each use but shared by all, the phrase "personal is political" takes on new meaning. Bathroom graffiti often expresses the views of the masses in subjective terms accessible by all. Sarah Craig points out, "...yet people will bring it up themselves, they'll write it on the bathroom walls....the heart of what we do."<sup>14</sup> In the style of *Baby Let Me Follow You Down: An Illustrated History of the Cambridge Folk Scene*, each chapter weaves together edited stories from select interview sources with additional archival materials and ethnographic descriptions. The Caff   community, based on social gathering, familial bonding, musical and theatrical creativity, and social activism is sustained through the Caff  . The Caff   in turn, is sustained through its place in their lives.

Before I launch into the following chapters, a word on the rocky terrain of ethnographic inquiry. In an interview with folklorist, activist, and labor historian Archie Green, "Shipwrights and Salmonbellies: How Archie Green Discovered Laborlore," Southern Oral History Program Associate Director Kieran Taylor asks Green about his decision to leave the shipwright trade, return to school and resume his formal education. Green's response is, "That was the most dramatic thing in my life. I felt like a traitor" Taylor proceeds to ask, "Is that the angst of a shipwright or the angst of an intellectual who became a shipwright?"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Interview: Sarah Craig. Caff   Lena, Saratoga Springs, New York. March 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, Kieran. *Shipwrights and Salmonbellies: How Archie Green Discovered Laborlore*. North Carolina. Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas, Volume 4, Issue 3. Labor and Working-Class History Association. 2007. 52.



Although we are at different stages of life, in reading this interview I found myself relating to Archie Green's dilemma. The question struck me: how do we as ethnographers both work a trade and study its meaning on a deeper level? How do we reconcile our positions both inside and outside of the communities with which we study and work? Thomas Gruning writes, "In some ways I have been (and continue to be) considered an insider within the folk community. However, as an academic and a composer, a somewhat tenacious and common anti- intellectualism occasionally drives a wedge between the "folk" and me."<sup>16</sup>

As Green said, "But ultimately...the thought of being in a union forever, and always smelling the cinnamon rolls but never getting past the plate glass window, that was devastating. You know, to be a perpetual outsider."<sup>17</sup> Are ethnographers who seek to practice the art or labor we study destined to be perpetual outsiders? Can exploring these ideas in a thesis bring us any close to understanding our roles in relation to the communities with which we work? I hope to find out.

In another section of this interview, Green recalls his thesis work as the culmination of his interests in laborlore and a way to see through the plate glass window. Green said, "I understood the thesis as a stepping stone. I already knew I was into laborlore and folk music, and you know, the thesis put the cherry on the cake. It certified that I was kosher."<sup>18</sup> If we as ethnographers can see our writing as exercises or as

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<sup>16</sup> Gruning, Thomas R., *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties*. University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia. 2006. xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, Kieran. *Shipwrights and Salmonbellies: How Archie Green Discovered Laborlore*. North Carolina. Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas, Volume 4, Issue 3. Labor and Working-Class History Association. 2007. 52.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 53.

stepping-stones to coming to terms with a subject's deeper meaning, perhaps we can begin to better understand the worlds in which we study and participate.

*“To discard the unnecessary requires courage and also extra hard work, as exemplified by Pascal’s effort to explain an idea to a friend in a letter which rambled on for pages and ended, ‘I am sorry to have wearied you with so long a letter but I did not have time to write you a short one.’”*  
*-Barbara Tuchman, historian and author*

On February 14, 2008 at the onset of my beginning to write this thesis, my advisors encouraged me to write a letter to Lena. In it, I described my feelings of needing to bring the enormous scope of my project under the control of a single frame, in order to find a way to try and understand the many threads tying her story together. I told her that, just like musicians and actors who must hone their craft one step at a time, so must I complete this exercise by focusing in and looking at specific things critically in order to better understand the bigger picture. What follows is an attempt to show her how what she created is a vital space that reflects a community and a time in history as well as the future of folk music today.

**CHAPTER ONE.** *Writing home:* Lena Spencer Creates a Radical Homespace  
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*“So now, at this point in my life it is time I write a history of the Caff , my memoirs, my autobiography, what should it be? One or another or a combination of all three? Where to begin?” –Lena Spencer<sup>19</sup>*

As Lena writes in the autobiography she began in 1989 (the year she passed away) but never finished, her life story is inextricably tied to the story of her Caff . To begin writing about the any aspect of the Caff , particularly its beginnings as a radical homespace, we must begin with Lena.

*Welcome to Caff  Lena*



*Lena Spencer: Portrait. Photo by Joe Alper*

As Lena would say, I would wish you all to know that you are soon to be addressed by the “effervescent, irrepressible toast of Caff  Lena society.” In this chapter, the grand proprietress of Caff  Lena society herself gives us a glimpse into the factors in her life

that shaped her progressive attitude and her “personal touch” that laid the groundwork for the radical homespace she created at her Caff . It’s so nice of you all to be here.

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<sup>19</sup> Lena Spencer, Written reflection, January 8, 1989. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum

Without further adieu, I now turn the microphone over to Lena Spencer. And won't you please welcome, Lena Spencer:

I feel that the personal touch is the most important thing, not only with the performers but with the audience as well...I'm here every weekend, right there at the top of the stairs, meeting, greeting, and seating people, and trying to make them feel that this is not a place where they are going to get ripped off or spend money, but a place where both the performer and the audience are treated with a great amount of respect...I have a big house [in Saratoga], and a [Caff  Lena] performer doesn't come and spend his spare time in a hotel. A performer comes and stays with me for the weekend and eats with me and that sort of thing. It's all on a very, very personal level. And that's the way it should be.<sup>20</sup>

\* \* \*

*"The desire for home, to belong, and to become part of something larger than oneself is a central theme that recurs throughout all the chapters."<sup>21</sup>*

Lena's words, "I'm here every weekend, right there at the top of the stairs, meeting, greeting, and seating people..." illustrate the kind of "mama" figure she was for generations of artists. Her words echo in the lyrics of Pierce Pettis, a Caff  performer who in 1973 recorded the following lines in his song, "This is for Lena's Caf :"

Lena knows something  
Lena shows nothing  
Except for the look in her eye  
She still walks up those stairs  
She still sets up those chairs  
Night after night after night<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Baggelaar, Kristin and Milton, Donald. *Folk Music, More Than A Song*. Crowell Publishing, 1976. 367.

<sup>21</sup> Rahn, Janice. *Painting Without Permission: Hip Hop Graffiti Subculture*. Bergin and Garvey, Westport, Connecticut. London. 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Pierce Pettis, "This is For Lena's Caf ," March 4, 1992.

What events in her life influenced Lena to produce the loving, nurturing qualities of her home community in a Caff  setting and caused Pettis to eulogize Lena and her Caff  in his music? Why did Lena want or need to create an actual, alternative, physical substitute for home, one that supported and fostered both the explicit politics of a changing cultural context and nurtured the identity politics of an extended community? To answer these questions, we visit Lena’s early life and home in Milford, Massachusetts, thirty-seven years before the Caff  was even a whisper on the streets of Saratoga Springs.

\* \* \*

*“You don’t really get to know someone  
until you spend time with them in their space,  
in their home.”- Terry Leonino<sup>23</sup>*

The transformation of Caff  Lena from a business into a *radical* homespace lie in the undertones of defiance and survival that Lena brought to the Caff  from her own background in Milford. Lena grew up as the perpetually non-conforming daughter of traditionally-minded Italian immigrants. From this environment Lena learned early on the radical meaning of defending one’s own roots, or identity, and the power and lasting impact of a nurturing home environment. While the context for her creative drive began in 1960, these undertones laid the groundwork for Lena’s creation of a radical homespace. Her upbringing influenced why Lena started the Caff , how she ran it, and why she was so determined to keep it open in Saratoga Springs.

*“Nessun posto   come casa” (There’s no place like home)*

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<sup>23</sup> Interview: Terry Leonino. Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007

In Lena's words:

"I was born on January 4th, 1923 in Milford, Massachusetts, daughter of Antonio and Vincenza (Moccia) Nargi. My parents were emigrants from Italy. I was born a twin, I never did find out if I was the first to emerge from my mother's womb- but my twin died at the age of two weeks. She was given the name Celestina (heavenly one) and I was called Pasqualina (Little Easter- little Pasquale?) [Rosa] so what. I was the first female child of the union. There were three older brothers Luigi (Louis) Vincenzo (James) and Eduardo (Edward). I was born at home." <sup>24</sup>

In 1923 commercial radio overtook the airwaves and introduced Americans to early jazz, the first baseball game was played in Yankee Stadium, Time Magazine was launched and prohibition outlawed the drinking and possession of alcohol. During these formative years in her country's history, Lena grew up a small community where events in her immediate surroundings proved much more influential in the early years of her life. In 1926 when Lena was three years old, her mother committed suicide following the birth of a daughter. Her mother's death was later described as a response to "post partum depression" known in this era as "puerperal mania." Lena's father later remarried the widow of a family friend. Losing her biological mother at such an early age seems poignant given the fact that later in life, Lena's maternal position in her community and her efforts to create a home-like environment at the Caff  earned her the self-described title "mother of folk music." In a song she wrote about her esteemed role in Saratoga Springs, "Lena the Queen of Saratoga," Lena sings:

She's called princess of folk  
And mister that's no joke  
She proudly wears the cloak  
A folksong mother there's no other

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<sup>24</sup> Lena Spencer: Interview with Harriet Sobel, January 24, 1983. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum

Like Lena in all the land  
And Lena really is grand<sup>25</sup>

Lena sings, “there’s no other Like Lena in all the land” revealing her unique role in the community of Saratoga Springs. This stemmed from her unique role in her Italian American family in the community of Milford, Massachusetts. As immigrants to the United States from Italy, Lena’s parents had to prove they could make their way in a new world. Lena inherited from her parents a deep second-generation immigrant identity, one fraught with the ingrained need to adapt, survive and make one’s own way in a new place.

*Milford, Massachusetts*

Lena was born and raised in Milford, an industrial town famous for its granite quarries. Antonio Nargi, a member of the I.W.W., worked in the neighboring town of Hopedale at the Draper Corporation manufacturing looms and shuttles. According to Lena, “It was a true community set up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was a true example of the communist ideal...[My father] was somewhat of a radical”<sup>26</sup> When Antonio Nargi and other workers attempted to unionize the plant, he lost his job and the family was blacklisted. He then began work in the granite factory of Milford where he joined the granite cutters’ union. Lena remembers, “It was hard during the Depression, but I don’t think my father was ever out of work.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lena Spencer, “Lena the Queen of Saratoga” 1989

<sup>26</sup> Sobel, Harriet. Interview With Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 5.

Lena describes her childhood environment as a “true community” and her father as “somewhat of a radical.” Her father expressed his radicalism through his explicit advocacy for social reform *and* his search for the fundamental nature of something—namely a community of his own where he could define his own social and political identity. Her father’s experience begs comparison to the community Lena created at her Caff  (which I will detail in a later chapter) and her role as the radical matriarch of that community. Lena, like her father before her, was radical in the sense that she fought against all odds to produce a community environment where she and others could form their own identities in the face of changing times. Fighting and surviving in the face of constraining forces (Lena survived where her twin sister did not) shaped Lena’s character as it did her father’s.

Ironically, Lena fought the constraining forces her own father imposed upon her later in life by running away from home. Lena embraced a radical identity by becoming her own advocate, living the life of an outlaw to follow her own dream of becoming an artist. Lena wanted to be a journalist after finishing high school, but her father made her stay at home. In a 1983 interview Lena commented, “...My father said no, you can’t go out and get a job...you’re needed at home. So that was it. The one consolation was that I read every chance that I got.”<sup>28</sup> An avid reader and lover of the creative arts, Lena found it difficult to fit into the domestic home life to which she was expected by her family and her community to become accustomed. In her youth, the “radical” desire to pursue her own creative drives outside of her home environment always remained with Lena. She found an outlet in visits to the theater, and added pleasure in involving her family in this

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<sup>28</sup> Sobel, Harriet. Interview With Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum. 9.



activity, “Every chance I got, I went to the theater in Boston. I’d take a bus and go to Boston and see a matinee. I’d take my mother with me. That was neat.”<sup>29</sup>

However, there would always be a limit to the creative outlets Lena could find as a woman living within the confines of her father’s traditional Italian American household. For Lena, occasional trips to the theater were not enough. That is why the importance of the black box theater at Lena’s own Caff  cannot be underestimated. In her own theater, within the radical homespace she created at her Caff , Lena would find a kind of resolve to her early frustrations with not having a space within which to exercise her full creative potential. As hooks writes, “We can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole.”<sup>30</sup> Lena’s on-screen debut as an actress came in 1987 when she played “a slatternly woman” opposite Meryl Streep in *Ironweed*, a feature film based on the book by William Kennedy.<sup>31</sup> Lena’s theater allowed her to realize an ambition that had gone unfulfilled since childhood. This great love gave her another role at Caff  Lena besides that of mother, caregiver and provider, that of Lena: the actress.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>30</sup> hooks, bell. Essay: *Homeplace. The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color*. Edited by D. Soyini Madison. Martin’s Press, Inc. New York, New York. 1994. 454.

<sup>31</sup> Arem, Jocelyn. *The Early Days of Caff  Lena: The Socio-Historical Identity of an American Music Venue—An Ethnography—Oral History Account*.   Jocelyn Arem 2005.

Terry Leonino, a performer and longtime friend of Lena who shares her Italian-American heritage, remembered talking to Lena about their similar upbringing and the reasons why the Caff  provided Lena with the ability to recover that which was lost in her home environment growing up:

I remember having a conversation with her about how difficult it is for a woman being Italian in that culture, because the women are supposed to... my father was second generation, believed that women should only have babies and wait on men. That's what they're here for. That's their job. He was ashamed of me when I graduated from college. We would have these conversations, Lena and I, about how difficult it was for women to be anything, and here she was being the entrepreneur of this wonderful Caff . And she would talk about what for her were her struggles.<sup>32</sup>

Lena details this feeling:

"I wouldn't say [my parents] wanted me to be different. They didn't like me to waste my time reading either. That was a waste of time. In an Italian family... my father was very strict. He was a pretty neat guy, but he was very strict, too. And the girls in the family had to do all the chores...I was the only girl in the house. And I used to have to iron my brothers' shirts...When I graduated from high school in 1940, they were all still at home. I wanted to go to college in the worst way. But my folks didn't believe in college."<sup>33</sup>

Lena remembers her father in an admiring but fearful tone, "He was a pretty neat guy, but he was very strict, too." That she would later run away from home, from the imposing, patriarchal influence of her father highlights Lena's daring personality. It shows a departure from tradition that for Lena was both socially radical and emotionally difficult. As her words show, Lena had mixed feelings about a home environment that both limited and defined her.

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<sup>32</sup> Interview: Greg Artner and Terry Leonino. Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007

<sup>33</sup> Sobel, Harriet. Interview With Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum. 7.

Until the onset of World War II not only were Lena's creative outlets limited, but her work options were restricted as she was only allowed to help her stepmother at home. During the war, when Lena was allowed to get a job because of a shifting of men in the wartime economy, she worked in a rubber factory making army ponchos, and later in her father's restaurant *The Sorrento Room*. A creative partnership with the Thomas English Muffin Company enabled the Nargis to make perhaps America's first English-muffin pizzas. It was here in the restaurant that Lena learned the art of Italian hospitality that became a critical influence for the home-like environment at Caff  Lena, and which fueled her power as a woman entrepreneur and coffeehouse proprietress in the 1960s.

#### *Food and hospitality*

Terry Leonino remembered how, in her own Italian family, food was paramount. She recalled Lena's hospitality stemming from her Italian upbringing, and Lena priding herself in her ability to feed and nourish her guests with homemade offerings:

My background, we had all these Italian bakers. My grandmother was a fantastic desert maker, and my sister learned all this stuff from her before my grandmother died. And my grandmother was that kind of a cook and Lena was that kind of a cook. She thrived on that.<sup>34</sup>

A sense of the power of food and hospitality to define her identity and bring people together into a "homemade" community enabled Lena to later assert herself as a socially radical, powerful matriarch in her Caff . bell hooks writes of women using their traditional roles as caretakers to create sites for care, comfort and resistance, "It does not matter that sexism assigned them this role. It is more important that they took this

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<sup>34</sup> Interview: Greg Artzner and Terry Leonino. Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2005.

conventional role and expanded it to include caring for one another...in ways that elevated our spirits, that kept us from despair, that taught some of us to be revolutionaries...”<sup>35</sup> Lena built the concept of care, comfort, resistance and survival into the fabric of her Caff . Because of her unwavering ability to hold on tightly to these qualities as she had done all her life, she became for many a radical idealist with the power to inspire others, as Arlo Guthrie wrote:

I came stompin’ up to the place, got took care of, got a place to sleep, got fed and got a place to work. Lena’s one of my oldest friends. It wasn’t just that she let me play there. She took care of me. I felt she loved me. I hope I can hold onto my ideals as long as she has. Like Caesar Chavez and Pete Seeger.<sup>36</sup>

Pete Seeger himself recalled Lena’s contribution to her community as a headstrong matriarch with a never-ending desire to help others. He wrote of her spirit, “The human race needs more persevering people like Lena.”<sup>37</sup>

Lena utilized her role as an Italian American woman, one who prided herself on the “art of hospitality” and as the daughter of immigrants with an instilled sense of defiance to expand her options rather than let the rules of her native culture and family dictate her life. In this way Lena was a social revolutionary, armed with a cannoli as her weapon of choice. However, it was also here in the space of her native culture, in her father’s restaurant, that she met a man who inadvertently led her to her future Caff  where she could realize her full artistic potential.

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<sup>35</sup> hooks, bell. Essay: *Homeplace. The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color*. Edited by D. Soyini Madison. Martin’s Press, Inc. New York, New York. 1994. 450.

<sup>36</sup> Arlo Guthrie: Written Remembrance: 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum

<sup>37</sup> Pete Seeger: Written Remembrance: 1987. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga History Museum

### *Lena's Defiance*

In the late 1940s, while working at her father's restaurant, Lena developed a furtive relationship with a married man who was the first to introduce her to jazz and gambling, interests she would develop further years later in Saratoga Springs. She remembered, "He had this funny little car, one of those early wooden station wagons. And we'd go to the races in Boston or Providence, R.I. Anyway that was my secret life for a few years. I was still under my father's thumb."<sup>38</sup> Often Lena defied her controlling father by staying out with this man until late at night to hear music in Boston, and return home to her father's hot temper.

On one such evening the couple went to hear Count Basie at a Boston Jazz club. The big band era looked to be over after the war, and many of its musicians played smaller clubs where jazz fans like Lena could see them in a smaller setting. (In later years, Lena would present the well-known jazz violist and fellow Italian American Joe Venuti at the small setting of her Caff , a thrill for her and a throwback to this awakening and formative era of her life.) On this night, Lena lost track of the time and realized finally at 5:00 a.m. that to go home would mean a rough encounter with her father, one she hoped to avoid. An argument with her lover ensued – he criticized Lena for allowing herself to be ruled by her family, provoking the dimly lit flame of defiance that had burned in Lena for years. At this point, she decided to run away from home and relocate in New York City. "So I said, okay, I'm going to run away. The hell with it! I went to the bank. I took

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<sup>38</sup> Sobel, Harriet. Lena Spencer Interview. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga History Museum. 13.

all my money out ...I got on a train and I went to New York City. I was 28 years old.”<sup>39</sup>

At 28, when many women her age had been living away from home for many years, Lena finally asserted her independence.

For months Lena rented a room at the Madison Square Hotel and worked various waitressing jobs. An aspiring actress, she planned to eventually enroll in drama school. “I wanted to go off and do something on my own, but what could I do on my own? What experience? Working in a rubber factory? And as I said, my father was very strict... I wanted to be an actress, I wanted to do something creative.”<sup>40</sup> While in New York City, in a covert, creative and characteristically theatrical move, Lena adopted the name “Lane Garin,” an anagram for Lena Nargi.

She did not reveal to anyone where she was for fear they would bring her back to Milford. Ironically, after deciding to run away from her Italian community in Milford where she worked at her father’s Italian restaurant, Lena worked in an Italian restaurant in New York City called *Joey’s*. However, here, unlike at home in Milford, she had agency as an independent female employee. Here, she could both defy her father but also be reminded of him in the cultural and paternal familiarity of her new boss, “I liked working there... Joey was kind of a rough and tumble old Italian”<sup>41</sup>

Her Italian heritage may have limited Lena, but as her return to her own culture even in this foreign setting shows, it also defined her— to her great discontent when it forbade her from achieving her goals and to her great comfort when it allowed her kinship with a community in which she would always need to feel rooted. In an ethnic

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 16.

culture that held on tightly to its members, characteristic of many second-generation immigrant communities in the new world, Lena could leave but never fully run away. As the saying goes, “You can take the girl out of Milford, but you can’t take the Milford out of the girl.” Her awareness of this connection to her community stayed with her even in Saratoga Springs years later where she again “found” her Italian roots by recreating for herself and others a home-like, Italian atmosphere in the nurturing ambiance of her Caff , complete with cannolis, espressos, and the spelling “Caff ”—Italian for coffee.

Caff  Lena would thus become more than just a place that *felt* like home, it was a real home where Lena’s adoptive extended “family” lived sometimes for weeks on end, with a kitchen, bathroom, home cooked meals, cats, children, and, in Lena, a mother. Lena attracted people looking for comfort and a solid home base just as she had searched for comfort at *Joey’s* years earlier in New York City. Rosalie Sorrels, Lena’s friend and a frequent performer who often resided at the Caff  for periods of time along with her five recalled:

[Lena] had a real deep Italian streak in her. I think she would find a small intimate place where people gathered to be more valuable than a big place. She was making an intimate small, welcoming place, a place where you could have music and theater. And she made it. She made it and it was unique. There’s nothing like it.<sup>42</sup>

Like her Caff , Lena herself was a unique combination of social forces at work; She was a socially radical entrepreneur continually defying the traditional structure of a home she could never fully forget, and an Italian American woman always looking to return to the structural roots of a home that shaped her into the woman she would become.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview: Rosalie Sorrels, New York, New York, January 31, 2004

## *Identity*

As a woman growing up in a patriarchal Italian American household Lena was alienated from artistic outlets and career opportunities because of her gender. As an Italian American daughter of a union worker in the postwar era of the 1940s, her community kept a close watch on her out of a deeply ingrained fear of ethnic prejudice exacerbated by her father's political persuasion. As a Jewish person in the American postwar era when anti-Semitic sentiment ran high, schools had "Jewish quotas" and movies such as "A Gentleman's Agreement" examining anti-Semitism in New York City had only ten years earlier been a success in the theater, Lena had one more layer of marginalization with which to contend. This ethnic identifier made her triply alienated from mainstream culture. It may not be surprising then that Lena only publicly celebrated Christian holidays at the Caff  and that she sought out not Jewish but Italian communities in Saratoga Springs, revealing her religious identity to other Italian Americans only when they took the time to ask. Terry Leonino remembered:

I didn't know she was a Jewish Italian, which I thought was fascinating. She told us all about it, and told us what it was like to be an Italian Jew. Well I think sometimes if you bother to talk to somebody about that, we always had those kinds of conversations, either around the Scrabble board, or afterwards, after our concerts. We would hang around, and sit with her for hours. Before the concert, after the concert, at her apartment, and you just get to know the person a little bit better.<sup>43</sup>

Terry and her husband and music partner Greg Artzner became close to Lena by spending time with her during their visits to perform at the Caff . Greg Artzner's take on Lena's Jewish heritage may explain why Lena's religious identity could have been another

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<sup>43</sup> Interview: Greg Artzner and Terry Leonino, Takoma Park, MD. July 2005.



reason for her need to build a radical homespace that would encourage the growth of a likeminded, tolerant community of friends and artists:

She told us that she was a Jewish Italian, and how that was kind of a difficult thing to be, because Italy is such a Catholic country. The fact is that during the Spanish Inquisition, which was late 15<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Spain expelled all the Jews, and Italy had done the same thing at one point in time. Virtually every nation in Europe at one point or another did what Adolf Hitler did in the 1930s and '40s and tried to completely eliminate the Jews from their population. This of course created a tremendous amount of bigotry. So that even in her own life experience as a Jewish person, she had experienced that being Italian, and nobody would even think of her not being not a Catholic, let alone a Jew.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps because of these sentiments, her Italian experience remained the ethnic identifier she would return to through her involvement in local activities in Saratoga Springs. By appealing to Lena's interest in remaining close to her Italian community, and given Terry's similar background, the couple fondly remembers learning about Lena through activities relating to her ethnic heritage. In this letter to Lena dated 1981, Terry recalled one such visit:

“Dear Lena,  
I just wanted the Saratoga folks to know how much we enjoyed this past weekend. Especially our trip to Albany with you and Doreathea. Even though the Italian festival was as Doreathea put it, “fiesta fiasco”, it sure was a nice jaunt into Albany... the whole weekend was really great as far as getting to spend a little time with Bruce, not to mention our afternoon scrabble games.”<sup>45</sup>

In a 2007 interview, Terry Leonino remembered this trip, and how she came to ask questions about her own musicianship through spending time learning with Lena about their shared heritage. She remembered:

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Written Correspondence: Terry Leonino, April 8, 1981. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

We talked about our Italian heritage. And every time I would be fascinated by something I didn't know. I was in my family considered a half blood because I was only half Italian. But in my family, there was always this controversy about it. Where did the music come from? Did it come from the Italians? Of course my mother had a very musical family. My Italian grandfather played accordion. And I would talk to Lena about this. And she said if you want to know more about your Italian background there's an exhibit down in Albany this week, and she would tell you what was happening, in the state capital. We went with her to part of it. There was a weekend long Italian festival that happened to be during the weekend we were at the Caff .<sup>46</sup>

As a young woman in New York City during the 1950s, away from her family, Lena also had a sense of what was happening in the local Italian community and how she could reaffirm her identity by "returning home." Even by returning to her ethnic culture in this foreign setting however, she could not quite affirm the same ties that she had to her family and her Italian American community in Milford unless she returned home.

### *Returning home*

In the early 1950s, Jews represented a quarter of New York City's population. The city was home to the largest Jewish population outside of Israel and the largest Italian community in the U.S. While Lena lived as an outlaw theoretically in anonymity away from her home community in Milford, clearly those who shared her ethnic background surrounded her. However, despite her discovery of this ethnic enclave, Lena began to feel badly about leaving home in Milford, as the familial ties that would always bind her to her home community had grown stronger with time and distance, perhaps magnified by the ethnic familiarity of a city that could never substitute for her own.

Eventually, her family discovered where she was working but after a taste of independent life in the big city, Lena finally asserted herself, "I said, I'll come back home

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<sup>46</sup> Interview: Terry Leonino. Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007

but I don't want to be at the restaurant any more, I want to be allowed to go out and see what I can make for myself"<sup>47</sup> Lena again lived at home with her family, rooting herself in her home community, but began to take jobs outside of the family business.

As time progressed, Antonio Nargi was diagnosed with diabetes and Lena, finding a renewed interest in her role as the dutiful Italian daughter perhaps in an effort to make up to her father her time spent away from him in New York, remained at home to take care him. Lena's time with her father at this point in her life shows that although their relationship was fraught with conflict, it was also bound together with love. At this same time, while working in nearby Framingham she had her first chance to participate in a theater company and a radio program. During her time at the radio station in the mid '50s Lena began connecting even more to the world outside her family life and to a cultural environment that would soon shape the creation of a space that would one day carry her legacy. She described a memorable meeting with future president John F. Kennedy, a fellow Massachusetts resident, himself alienated from dominant American culture by his own religious and ethnic heritage:

"One of the highlights of my being at the radio station was meeting John F. Kennedy. This was when he was running for Senator from Massachusetts. And he came to Milford on one of his campaign trips. The square where he spoke was right outside, right next to the radio station. And he came to the radio station. I didn't really get to talk to him but I met him. He was very charismatic, really exciting."<sup>48</sup>

Subsequent events during this time also began to lay the groundwork for Lena's

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<sup>47</sup> Sobel, Harriet: Interview with Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 20.

later life in Saratoga. Now in her early thirties, Lena began working at P. Lorillard Company, the country's 4th-largest cigarette maker, commuting to Boston from Milford every day. On occasion, Lena would stay over in Boston to go to the theater or to see jazz concerts, staying at a hotel, much to her father's chagrin. Even at age *thirty*, though she exhibited what physical independence she could, her father had an emotional and psychological hold on her. He remained a reminder that she should remain dedicated first to her family and not to her artistic exploits. Lena, through her later creation of a radical homespace in Saratoga Springs, would prove that she could do both.

One fateful night, Lena went out to a bar after a show in Boston where she met and talked with a group of art students. It was here that she met her future husband and the other half of the endeavor to start Caff  Lena, Bill Spencer. She remembered this meeting:

There was one man who wasn't as young as most of them. He had a Siamese cat on his shoulder. He comes over to the table and says, 'I'd like to draw your face.' So he drew my face. He said, 'what are you doing with these people...they're not the right kind of people for you to be hanging out with...they're dopies.' That was one thing I'd never gotten into was drugs. I didn't want to... He was a part time instructor and a part-time student at the Boston Museum School. He was a sculptor. He said, 'I'll drive you home in the morning.' So that's the way it all began...This was May of 1958.<sup>49</sup>

Since 1958, the terms *Beat Generation* and *beatnik* have been used to describe the anti-materialistic, anti-establishment countercultural literary movement widely associated with poetry, drugs, and jazz that began with Jack Kerouac in the 1940s and continued on into the 1960s. In this period, the word "beat" indicated the culture, the attitude and the literature, while "beatnik" was used as a stereotype commonly found in media portrayals

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 24.

of this group and its activities.<sup>50</sup> The beat movement influenced 1960s musicians such as Bob Dylan who would later play at Caff  Lena. Bill Spencer—and exotic and dramatic artist represented to Lena, who was already subversive in her home community, a window into a dissident culture whose proclivity towards poetry and jazz were traits she already exhibited. Bill introduced Lena firsthand to this world and captivated her interest immediately.

Spencer had been in the service and was going to school on the GI Bill. When he met Lena he was in his last year at the Museum School; government support was going to end, and he did not have set future plans. After what Lena described as a “whirlwind courtship,” the couple married in August 1958. Soon after, the idea for Caff  Lena emerged. Lena remembered:

This was ’59. It was right at the beginning of the big coffeehouse era. Bill had been to Europe and he’d been to the coffeehouses in Europe. He thought a coffeehouse would be a nice thing to get started, but not a beatnik coffeehouse; something with a little more class to it.<sup>51</sup>

In 1959 Lena and Bill Spencer began to make plans for their future business. They decided to call it, “Caff  Lena” taking the Italian spelling “Caff ” for coffee. Lena recalled:

“There was much that went on before-many things happened that led up to the state of my life in the fall of 1959, but that is another story, to be written at another time. In the fall of 1959 I found myself entering into yet another phase of life- one of many that had been and of others that were yet to be. In the fall of 1959 I was married, the wife of an artist and student. An artist-a sculptor of promise whose dedication to work had become my dedication. I worked at an ordinary 9 to 5 office job that paid the rent-paid for the groceries- helped pay the

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<sup>50</sup> Website: Coffee Shop Studies Course Syllabus by Daniel Elam—UNC Chapel Hill <http://www.unc.edu/~jdelam/spcl390/>

<sup>51</sup> Sobel, Harriet: Interview with Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum. 20.

tuition and the artist worked and attended classes. It was not a life devoid of intellectual pursuits for there were many friends. Young students—young artists—exchange of ideas. And there was a happy rapport between Bill and myself....<sup>52</sup>

Although he would not stay to see the Caff  grow into a nationally recognized venue, to his credit, Bill’s background helped shape the Caff  into a business that embodied the artistically conscious, countercultural, community minded characteristics of the beat generation without the negative aspects (drugs) of the stereotypical beatnik moniker and gave Lena the opportunity to become the artist she wanted to be. In these ways, Bill helped to lay the groundwork for the Caff  to grow into a radical homespace when Lena took over sole proprietorship in 1962.

A “cafe” in Bill and Lena’s cosmopolitan eyes would draw from French and Italian influence, be part restaurant, part caf  chantant (in French, a ‘singing caf ’ in which the customers are entertained by singers or other music) and as Lena’s words show, would strive to align itself with these characteristics and not the negative connotations the media associated with beatnik coffeehouses. At the center of Caff  Lena lay a larger world of expressive forms of tradition, romantic notions of the past, a space for the enacting of democratic ideals, and familial bonding. These ideas found their roots in European coffeehouses of the eighteenth century.<sup>53</sup>

How did Caff  Lena fit into the paradigm of social and political connectedness that defined the “big coffeehouse era” of the late 1950s/early 1960s? In what ways did this context help Lena lay the groundwork for a radical homespace, and how did her

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<sup>52</sup> Lena’s personal book: Transcribed by Jocelyn Arem November 20, 2003. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>53</sup> Oxford English Dictionary/caf , Second Edition 1989. Website: [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/cafe?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/cafe?view=uk) Accessed March 13, 2008

radical homespace in turn influence the rise of coffeehouse culture? In order to answer these questions we must look first to the history of coffeehouses as spaces for social interaction.

*Coffeehouses: a history of spaces for social interaction*

The social traditions of coffeehouses date back centuries ago—from the Middle East during the fifteenth century as social gathering places, to eighteenth century Europe where they became centers of political activity where people could talk over coffee and exchange ideas. Given Lena Spencer’s Italian name —Pasqualina Rosa—and her Italian heritage, it is interesting to note that the first coffeehouse proprietor in 1652 London (who also started the first coffeehouse in Paris twenty years later in 1672) was named Pasqua Rosée and was a native of Ragusa, Italy. Rosée, the servant of a Turkish merchant, had been brought to London to open the city’s first coffeeshop. Built on Rosée’s example, the London coffeeshop provided a place where *men* could gather together, read newspapers to find out about the current events of the day, spoke pipes, drink coffee and abide by strict rules of social conduct that promoted equality among all men, and forbid quarreling and swearing.

Though the early coffeehouse promoted equality among all met, it is important to note that they also excluded women. Ray Oldenburg notes domestic responsibility as another reason why perhaps women did not initially find the coffeehouse a welcome setting, “...Women’s gatherings have not afforded the abandonment of men’s. Being eternally “on duty,” women have been far less inclined to drink alcoholic beverages, get

rowdy, or stray far from the domestic setting and its responsibilities.”<sup>54</sup> However, coffeehouses during the American folk revival allowed women such as Lena to not only become part of coffeehouse culture but to run it themselves. Lena was especially radical in the fact that she did not stray from the domestic sphere, she simply brought it with her.

In 1935, an Italian named Dominick Parisi opened the first Italian-American style coffeehouse in New York City. In her *Encyclopedia of folk music*, former Caff  Lena patron Kristin Baggelaar’s entry on the term “coffeehouse” reads:

“The concept of the coffeehouse is British in origin. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the coffeehouse functioned as a club in which clientele of the same occupation or professional interests congregated with bankers, sailors, and writers enjoying their own exclusive establishments. The coffeehouse was introduced to the United States in the eighteenth century, but it was not until Dominick Parisi opened the Caff  Reggio in Greenwich Village in 1935 that the American venture was firmly established. His imported espresso machine was a novelty which lured customers to gather, play Checkers, and chat in a warm and friendly atmosphere.”<sup>55</sup>



Article: Dominic Parisi. From Caff  Reggio Website

Lena was well aware of the social history into which her Caff  fit. She reiterated Kristin Baggelaar’s explanation of the coffeehouse as a place where people gathered and which featured the espresso that Dominick Parisi<sup>56</sup> had introduced as an inviting element

<sup>54</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Caf s, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Da Capo Press; Florida, 1999. 232.

<sup>55</sup> Baggelaar, Kristin and Milton, Donald. *Folk Music, More Than A Song*. Crowell Publishing, 1976.79.



of this space in the early 1930s. From her Italian American roots Lena was already familiar with espresso (she later swapped Checkers for her personal favorite, Scrabble) and offered other Italian drinks, deserts and pastries in her coffeehouse. She wrote:

“Of course the term coffeehouse should be defined in terms pertinent to the past 35 years or so. If you mean coffeehouse as a place where you go to have coffee and donuts maybe a pie of pie or a hamburger or a ham and cheese sandwich or the like, a place that might have a counter with stools, a grill behind it for hamburgers or hot dogs, a girl or guy behind doubling as server and short order cook, a place that some people refer to as a "greasy spoon", that's not what we mean. As a matter of fact even those places have joined the ranks of endangered species. Actually what coffeehouse means in this context is the places that sprang up in the late fifties what were meant to be patterned after the coffeehouses of the 18th (?) century in England, known as penny universities where the literati of the day gathered to exchange ideas, talk about their work, meet with their peers; A nice concept that worked in some places. They became places where bohemians (later referred to as "beatniks") gathered to recite their abstract poetry, some good, some pure schlock, to the accompaniment of jazz. The early coffeehouses were dark and exhibited abstract art and served espresso coffees and were hangouts for the bohemian intelligentsia. They sprang up on various parts of the county: San Francisco's North Beach, L.A.'s suburb of Venice, Chicago's Old Town, N.Y.C.'s Greenwich Village and other major cities.”<sup>57</sup>

By describing coffeehouses as hangouts for the “bohemian intelligentsia,” Lena returns to her earlier fascination with those aspects of the beat movement—an acceptance of and lenience for those with untraditional lifestyles and marginalized identities including all walks of artists, writers, musicians and actors—that she identified with and that speak to much larger issues of the 1950s coffeehouse evolving as a space that catered to those with unorthodox or antiestablishment political viewpoints.

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<sup>56</sup> For more information on Caff  Reggio visit: <http://www.cafereggio.com>

<sup>57</sup> Lena Spencer: Written reflection, January 8, 1989. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum

In the coffeehouse setting, and in Lena's Caff  in particular, those viewpoints would be expressed in the dress, sexual practices, song choices, and political beliefs of performers and audience, and in Lena's own role as a female business owner. Lena was radical, considering the fact that women were often banned from coffeeshops in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and that she took over the Caff  in 1962 when the women's movement had only begun to gain headway in America. Unlike her father or Pasqua Ros e, Pasqualina Rosa, (better known as Lena Spencer) represented as a woman a radically new kind of Italian American head of household and coffeehouse owner. Lena's life is a story about one woman's defiant struggle for acceptance and search for a space to create a radically new home in a place that found itself caught in the changing tides of cultural tastes and political ties.

For one whose ethnic history alienated women and at a time when women rarely ran businesses to begin with, Lena found not only refuge but a home in her Caff . How did the Caff 's physical location allow it to play a critical role in its emergence as a radical homespace? In the following chapter, I explore the building where Lena and Bill created Caff  Lena, and the town in which it was born and still exists today.

**CHAPTER TWO:** “*Sense of Place:*” Saratoga Springs and 47 Phila Street  
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*Caffé Lena postcard, drawing of building. Illustrator unknown.*

Welcome to Caffé Lena. As Lena would say, “I would wish you all to know that you are being addressed by the effervescent, irrepressible toast of Caffé Lena society.”

This evening, we join Lena Spencer as she remembers the Caffé’s beginnings as a radical homespace in the context of its physical location on 47 Phila Street in Saratoga Springs, New York, the city of health, history, and horses. It’s so nice of you all to be here. And it’s so nice of Lena Spencer to be here. And won’t you please welcome, Lena Spencer:

*On her house in Massachusetts:*

The house [where I was born] was on Hayward Street and was the equivalent at that time of an apartment house. There were seven apartments but it was not a high rise. It was a long two-story building that took up one whole block and was called a seven-chimney house.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Sobel, Harriet. Interview with Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum. 14.

*On Caff  Lena's building:*

[The Caff 's story is] the story of a vision and hope for dream fulfillment shared by Bill, trips from Boston to Saratoga, chugging along in the recalcitrant Morris Minor, to spend the weekend with hammer and nails, mops and brooms, then back to Boston to jobs to make a little money to buy the chairs and tables, the sputtering espresso machine, the cups and saucers and all the paraphernalia needed to open the doors on a venture with an uncertain future. We had a projected opening date of May 20th and, despite problems in completing the plumbing work, we opened on May 21, 1960 with Jackie Washington.<sup>59</sup>

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In the previous chapter I take a look at Lena's life and upbringing, and the forces that shaped her into a woman perfectly poised to create a home atmosphere for a generation of likeminded artists. In this chapter, I show how the Caff 's sense of place mattered in its becoming radical homespace.

Where we live, eat, sleep, play and congregate as a community matters. Our sense of place shapes both individual and group experience and influences our memories of events. Caff  Lena's place in Saratoga Springs, New York played a unique role in its development as a radical homespace in Lena's day and as a third place after her passing. With its unique ability to survive amid the political conservatism of its native city, break down these conservative barriers and lay claim to new kinds of artistic freedom, the Caff  radically changed the landscape of which it became a part.

Situating the Caff  in its location on 47 Phila Street, I show its connections to the history, local area and community that both formed it and formed around it. I examine how the changing relationship between the city and Caff  transformed from one of opposing forces to one of forces united to link the past and future together.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 23.

I frame the Caffé's building as a crucial backdrop for the life of the Caffé, noting how the neighborhood and city were integral in shaping the Caffé, and analyzing it within the broader narrative of marginalized spaces located "downstairs," in the "back room" and generally away from the dominant culture. I conclude by revealing how physical space helped the Caffé begin to influence the social movements of the 1960s through its relation to the world beyond its doors.

*Lena the Queen of Saratoga*

*"After I left that final time, I didn't come back except as a traveler, a traveling musician. Yes, but I always felt very at home in Saratoga, still do."—Rosalie Sorrels<sup>60</sup>*

Rosalie Sorrels' shared with me her impressions of Saratoga Springs:

[There were some that thought Saratoga Springs was going to be the next Haight-Ashbury, that it had that vibe, that community.] But [Saratoga] was a town. Haight-Ashbury was in a city, and there was a huge radical university there. There is no radical university around Saratoga. They didn't have that capability. I mean that's a misconception. I always thought that Boston and New York and Ann Arbor, Michigan, and to some extent Chicago just because it's on the way, and Berkeley were joined at the hip because of the radical politics that were available, and the diversity of people. You can't get that in a town the size of Saratoga. It's not on the way to anything, either.<sup>61</sup>

Pierce Petis echoes Sorrels' opinion that Saratoga was not a center for radical politics or a social haven for a folk coffeeshouse such as Caffé Lena in his song, "This is for Lena's Café:"

Saratoga Springs is full of castles and kings  
All displayed in Victorian pride  
There are things on this earth more than title or birth  
There are riches that money can't buy

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<sup>60</sup> Interview: Rosalie Sorrels. New York, New York. January 2004.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Saratoga Springs  
The horserace it brings  
Money, power and fame  
They hang garlands and wreaths  
On those four legged beasts  
And just ignore that old backstreet Caff <sup>62</sup>

While Sorrels reflects on Saratoga's small size in comparison with other cities and what she perceives as a lack of a large radical university, Petis draws attention to Saratoga's Victorian atmosphere and reveals his belief that a popular attitude revolving around fashionable society in the form of money, power, and fame marginalized the Caff . Petis' disappointment in what he sees as the city's lack of appreciation for Caff  Lena paints a picture of the Caff 's relationship to the elite society of Saratoga. However, this relationship was fraught with complexity that would later reveal Lena to be more a part of the Saratoga Springs landscape than many would have believed.

Long before Lena and Bill started their backstreet Caff  in Saratoga Springs, the city underwent vast changes. After the American Revolution, colonization began to accelerate, and the great forest then covering a large part of Saratoga County was cleared and lumbered for timber. Many streams to the Hudson River carried the lumber and by-products to distant markets. Because of the density of the forest, the pine trees grew tall and straight and were in great demand for ship masts. Clearing of the land led to the establishment of mills. The tanning industry and other types of mills developed as use was made of the abundant waterpower within the County. The mineral springs in Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs became a Mecca for fashionable society; the two villages vied

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<sup>62</sup> Pierce Pettis, March 4, 1992

for the title of “Queen of the Spas.”<sup>63</sup> Ironically, though Petis argued in his song that fashionable society did not welcome Lena, it was Lena in her radical throwing out of this conventional perception, who vied for a royal title. She unabashedly sings in her song “Lena The Queen of Saratoga:”

Lena is the queen of Saratoga  
Though she doesn't practice Hatha yoga  
She's called princess of folk  
And mister that's no joke  
She proudly wears the cloak  
A folksong mother there's no other  
Like Lena in all the land  
And Lena really is grand  
Folks from Boston to Gallinas  
They all love her Caff  Lena  
Down all Saratoga way  
Da da da da da!<sup>64</sup>

Lena ultimately proved that despite Sorrels' and Petis' views that the city and college were not radical enough to support her coffeehouse, she viewed herself in close enough relation to Victorian society to acclimate to and merge with Saratoga's deep sense of history and culture. Her belief would eventually pave the way for true acceptance of the Caff  in the city. In 1960, the *Schenectady Gazette* wrote of the Caff 's opening, “[Lena and Bill Spencer] have selected Saratoga Springs as a focal point for their venture because ‘they feel the area is rich in tradition, somewhat dormant, and has great potentiality for development.’”<sup>65</sup> Although that development would come after some

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<sup>63</sup> Website: History of Saratoga County, New York by Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester 1878. [http://209.85.207.104/search?q=cache:WweNrcm49QJ:www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ny\\_sarato/Sylvester/chap28.html+putnam,+history,+saratoga+springs&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=7&gl=us](http://209.85.207.104/search?q=cache:WweNrcm49QJ:www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ny_sarato/Sylvester/chap28.html+putnam,+history,+saratoga+springs&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=7&gl=us) Accessed April 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Spencer, Lena. “Lena The Queen of Saratoga,” 1989.

<sup>65</sup> The *Schenectady Gazette*, May 20, 1960. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum





“The children of Gideon Putnam and his wife, Doanda Risley, were five sons and four daughters. The sons were Benjamin, Lewis, Rockwell, Washington, and Lorin; the daughters were Betsey, Nancy, Aurelia, and Phila... Phila Street was named in her honor.”<sup>66</sup> Although the street received its name from the founder of the area, it is interesting to note that the word “Phila” was not only the name of Putnam’s beloved daughter but derived from the Greek meaning “love.” This fact is poignant given Lena’s maternal devotion to her extended family of folk musicians. As she once said, “I don’t have a formula, I couldn’t sit down and write a book on how to run a coffeehouse or to conduct a workshop. All I can say is just do it with a bunch of love, not with the attitude that you’re in it to make money, but that you’re in it to serve.”<sup>67</sup> John DeMargo, echoing Lena’s description of how she strived to run her Caff  on Phila Street, described Phila Street’s physical location in terms of a heart saying, “The fact that Phila Street is an artery of Broadway, the city’s heart, plays an important role in defining the character of the street.”<sup>68</sup>

*“It could be argued that Friendships are of practical value to the Community... others again would say that Friendship is extremely useful, perhaps necessary for survival, to the individual.”*  
*—C.S Lewis*

Love and friendship in fact  
characterized the Caff  from the onset

and is its underlying feature of a radical homespace. In “The Four Loves” C. S. Lewis explores the nature of love from a Christian perspective, dividing the term into four categories based in part on the four Greek words for love: affection, friendship, eros, and charity. Friendship (“philia”) according to Lewis is a strong bond existing between people who share a common interest or activity. Friendship in this sense only exists if there is



<sup>66</sup> Website: History of Saratoga County, New York by Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester 1878. Accessed April 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Lena Spencer: Autobiography. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>68</sup> Historical Society Publication for Phila Street History Fair, March 11-12, 1995

something for the friendship to be "about," and it is not biologically necessary to progeny like either affection<sup>69</sup> (e.g., rearing a child), eros (e.g., creating a child), or charity (e.g., providing for a child) Greg Artzner recalled:

For me to have a friendship with somebody like Lena was just... You know, when you do what we do for a living, and we are of that generation that sort of came of age during that time when the folk revival had already been going strong, so we came of age being really inspired by (it) the folk performers who are ten years older than us, those are the people we wanted to emulate. For somebody who came of age during the '60s, knowing Lena was really important to me. It was really significant, because she was legendary. She was a person who was there. 1960 was the BEGINNING of the whole folk revival of the 60s, so she was right there on the cutting edge. It was important to us to have that relationship with her. Being a friend to Lena made our music and our lives richer.<sup>70</sup>

Lewis believes philia to be the most admirable of loves because it has, argues Lewis, civilization value. He writes:

"Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believe to be his own unique treasure (or burden)."<sup>71</sup>

The Saratogian could be counted as a friend then, as staff writer Jennifer Pruden wrote: "While some businesses and residents come and go in the city's lower East Side, others flourish for decades in a neighborhood that contains some wonderful treasures."<sup>72</sup> The friendships Lena fostered and supported at her Caff  on Phila Street, especially the ones between she and each member of her extended family of folk musicians, had in

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<sup>69</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*, Harcourt Brace and Company, San Diego, New York, London.1960. 64.

<sup>70</sup> Interview: Greg Artzner. Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007.

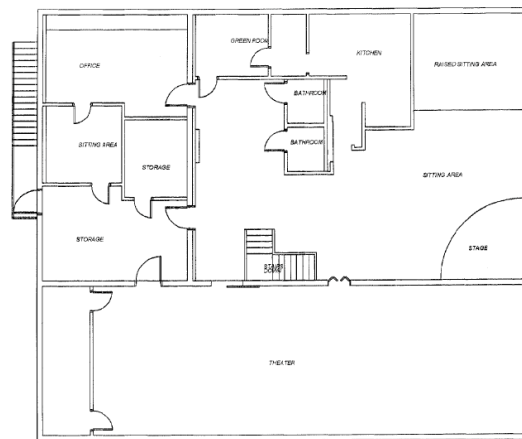
<sup>71</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*, Harcourt Brace and Company, San Diego, New York, London.1960. 65.

<sup>72</sup> Neighborhoods: The Saratogian, 1991, Courtesy of the Saratoga Springs Public Library

common an insight into a countercultural experience foreign to many in Saratoga who saw the Caff  in terms of the negative aspects associated with beatnik culture. To Lena and her Caff , the bond they shared over what many saw as the burden of marginalized people became, as Lewis writes, their treasured experience.

*47 Phila: A building with an uncertain future*

*“Caff  Lena put that building on the map” -Marjorie King Martin<sup>73</sup>*



*Spatial layout of Caff  Lena. Courtesy of George Yesencheck and Engineering America, 2008*

Philip V. Bohlman in his “Study of Folk Music in the Modern World” writes in his chapter “The Social Basis of Folk Music: A Sense of Community. A Sense of Place:”

“Nineteenth century Europe came to accept and insist upon more complex models of society. The nation more fully resembled society in its ultimate form, and nationalism epitomized the cultural core. Burgeoning nationalism was nothing short of a primary impetus to the development of full-blown theories of folk music. It is hardly surprising, then, that folk music quickly came to symbolize another cultural core, that of the nation. If the Enlightenment model applied to all human society, the nineteenth century model had geographic and political

<sup>73</sup> Acting Director of the Saratoga Preservation Foundation

boundaries. Folk music found a place on the map...suggesting a powerful sense of place.”<sup>74</sup>

Folk music according to Bohlman served in the nineteenth century as a social leveler and a true representation of a nation. The building at 47 Phila Street allowed for this kind of representation to take place in Saratoga Springs.

According to the Saratoga Preservation Foundation’s records for the building at 47 Phila Street, the date of the building’s initial construction was also mid to late nineteenth century, and it is representative of post civil war Italianate commercial architecture. First developed in England in the early 1800s, motifs drawn from the Italianate style were incorporated into the commercial builders' vocabulary, and appear in Victorian architecture dating from the mid to late 1800s.<sup>75</sup> Like her Caff , 47 Phila’s outside appearance reflects her Italian heritage. And like her Caff , its popularity stems from its ability to appeal to different types of individuals and offer them a homespace unlike any other. The building’s popularity, like the folk music which would soon be brought to its space, owed itself its being a versatile space—suitable for many different building materials and budgets.

47 Phila Street is listed in the Preservation Foundation’s archive as a boarding house in 1890 under the name “George Golden,” and in 1900 as a flower, feed, and grains shop under the name “William McCrac.” Finally, the records show that

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<sup>74</sup> Bohlman, Philip V. *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*. Indiana University Press. Bloomington and Indianapolis. 1988. 54.

<sup>75</sup> Website: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italianate>. Accessed March 12, 2008.

“significant to the history of the building” is William Case, a contractor who in the early 1900s took over the building as a woodworking shop.<sup>76</sup>

1910 in Saratoga Springs brought three years of despair with the prohibition of gambling. Along with the 1920's (the formative years of Lena's childhood in Milford) came a resurgence slightly tinged with a more exuberant and flamboyant style. Survivors of the Depression maintained the grandeur and energy until the 1930's when natives began to complain about the influx of gamblers, gangsters, bookies, pimps and prostitutes. Life in Saratoga began to ebb. The years during WWII brought with them the stark realization that a glorious century had ended. Racing was suspended for three years, and great hotels suffered and declined. Through these tumultuous years, the Caffé's building remained a woodworking shop. In the late 1900s The CR Parmateer Company purchased the building and ran it until Hugh Germanetti's father took over in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Former building owner Germanetti remembered:

My father acquired the building when I was growing up and in my teens and in high school in I would say in probably close to the end of World War II. It may even have been earlier than that. It had been there a long time before that. My father acquired the building and the business from the estate of the CR Parmateer building. They built the building initially, a long time ago. He changed it to Parmateer Company. It was initially built to be their central area where they built parts for real fancy buildings around Saratoga Springs. All of these buildings were built in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and they all had real fancy moldings and hardware. They were really palaces.<sup>77</sup>

Germanetti goes on to describe the function of the building as a woodworking shop that created radically unique moldings for buildings and homes in Saratoga, in the years prior to the existence of a radical homespace called Caffé Lena:

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<sup>76</sup> Phone Interview: Marjorie King Martin, March 11, 2008.

<sup>77</sup> Interview: Paul Germanetti, Saratoga Springs, New York. May, 2005.

When we acquired the building there were thick pieces of walnut, pieces of wood you can't find nowadays. It had a thing called a 'molding room' where all the shapes they would make they'd store in racks. It was a construction company's millwork house. Apparently it was operated somewhat after [Mr. Palmateer's] death by his estate. My father who was a homebuilder at the time had an opportunity to buy it. He had a commitment from some of the people at the shop to stay on for a while and they did. In any case, that stuff wasn't available in lumberyards. There weren't things like Home Depot in those days. They had to manufacture that.

So that building originally had all of these molding machines, where you would run a stick of rough wood in one end and it would come out a fancy shape of molding. They made all kinds of what is commonly called in the industry, "mill work." They had a large drying room upstairs, where they would dry the fancy wood out. It certainly was the most extensive woodworking shop in the area by a long shot. I'm not sure if there's anything even like it there nowadays because now everything is done in large factories and you just buy it off the shelf. Those days you actually made it all in that woodworking shop. For the molding machine, the architects would design these big buildings with all different kinds of molding in them, so they had to design special knives to cut those shapes in the molding. So when we had the building, there not only were the molding machines were there, the machines that made the molding, but there were stacks and stacks and stacks of these metal knives that would fit into the molding machine, of all different shapes, for all different kinds of moldings. And of course that would have been a record of all the different kinds of moldings that had been made and installed around here, I'm sure that is all long gone.

Within half a century of its opening, the Caff  became a record of the space where many well-known American artists got their start. Both literally and figuratively, it was a home for those looking for an environment that would nurture their talents and allow them to grow. Before the Caff  opened its doors and began to "mold" and churn out folk musicians of all kinds however, its building made a similar impact on the surrounding area; As a woodworking shop, it served as "home-base" for the various moldings around the city that shaped Saratoga's buildings into what they are today. When asked how he felt about the many musical prodigies, aficionados *and* versatile wooden moldings that

originated in the building at 47 Phila Street, Germanetti replied, “It was a creative spot for a long time! I hadn’t thought about that!”<sup>78</sup>



*Caffè Lena and its neighbor, Hattie's Chicken Shack. Photo Credit Unknown*

In the 1940s and ‘50s a young Germanetti took over the building on 47 Phila, but soon sold it when he realized that a woodworking shop in a postwar America where nonessentials were eliminated, uniformity was encouraged, and the average home was a one-level ranch house, would not flourish. He recalled:

My father died when I was in college. I came back from college and used it for about a year because I had a small construction building myself for a while, before we moved to the Canadian border. At that time I was trying to build a homebuilding business, but there wasn’t much demand. I know it’s hard to believe when you drive around and take a look at things now. We left here because we didn’t think there was any opportunity. Of course it turned out to be an error!<sup>79</sup>

In 1959 Saul Goldman purchased the building from Hugh Germanetti and the Caffè’s building changed hands for the last time until The Silverharts (former landlords to

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Lena and Bill Spencer) sold it to the Caff . Phila Street had always been primarily commercial, full of small businesses, which in the 1960s included a liquor store, a gas station and many bars. Incidentally, or coincidentally considering Lena’s ethnic and religious heritage, it was also then known as a primarily Jewish neighborhood. John DeMarco writes, “The street continued to adapt itself to serve a changing city. Rooming houses catered to a burgeoning summer, Jewish population, and Phila Street increasingly became a place for food: grocery stores, Jewish delis, restaurants, and liquor stores.”<sup>80</sup>

The Caff  gave the street a newfound vitality that it needed after the slump Germanetti describes in the 1950s when it seemed there was “no opportunity.” The idealistic Spencers saw opportunity in a little building on Phila Street and literally knocked at its door. Musician Michael Cooney picked out specific details to paint a picture of how the town of Saratoga Springs would be a good fit for the new Caff . His description shows how the Caff ’s humble beginnings in Saratoga party because of the college nearby:

Saratoga Springs is now noted for its racetracks, Skidmore College (a fancy Eastern girls’ School), and the Performing Arts Center, a great indoor-outdoor pavilion for the presentation of huge amounts of Culture to huge numbers of people (for huge sums of money) during The Season. Spring and Fall are quiet and beautiful, Summer is noisy with tourists and their cars, Winter with happy-go-lucky students. Saratoga is beautiful and serene through it all. So is Lena’s. Sometimes I think the Caff  Lena was there first, for it certainly seems as though it has been there forever...One good (though over-used) word is intimate. Homey might be better.... I’m sure the town of Saratoga Springs contributes to the flavor of the Caff . There are so many feelings and ghosts of years long past, bygone eras, gentle and more sedate times. They must contribute to that old-timey somewhat wistful, romance of the place.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> DeMarco, John. *The Saratogian*, 1983.

<sup>81</sup> Cooney, Michael: *Welcome to Caff  Lena* Album, Biograph Records, 1972.



Sixteen years later, a reporter named Doug McKnight commented on a similar feeling when he wrote, “Walking into Caffè Lena on Phila Street in Saratoga Springs is like walking into a slice of folk-music history. The ghost sounds of singers and poets and acoustic guitars and harmonicas hang heavy like dust”<sup>82</sup> Skidmore College gave the Spencers reason to settle in Saratoga Springs. In her interview with Harriet Sobel, Lena describes her life in 1959, when Bill Spencer taught at the Museum School in Boston and had a student who lived in Saratoga Springs. Another student of Spencer’s had a brother who intended to study forestry and needed someone to drive him to the Adirondacks. The two students and their teacher decided to make Saratoga the stopover point, and arrived there on a “big college weekend.” Lena remembered, “So when [Bill] saw how the town was jumping and swinging, he said, ‘this would be the really ideal place to start a coffeehouse.’”<sup>83</sup>

Bill Spencer’s student who lived in Saratoga Springs invited the couple up for a weekend to check out the town. In November of 1959, Bill and Lena Spencer found the site of what was to become the oldest continuously running coffeehouse in the United States. Lena remembered, “I remember, there was this much snow or maybe more...we were walking around, walking a plowed street, and Bill looked up at this building [on Phila Street]. He said, ‘that’s it!’ ...Bill got a lot of good perception. He was a very clever,

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<sup>82</sup> “Folk Group Writes Song About Lena,” *The Saratogian*, Friday May 13, 1988. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum

<sup>83</sup> Sobel, Harriet: Interview with Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum. 26.

creative person.”<sup>84</sup> Sandra Silverhart, Goldman’s daughter, remembers the day Lena and Bill came to town:

As I remember quite vividly, it was a Friday afternoon in the fall of 1959. My dad whose name was Saul Goldman had just purchased the building. And his intent was to open a wash-laundry; coin-operated laundries were becoming all the rage. At that time Skidmore was on the top of the hill, so a laundry down here seemed to be a pretty good idea. So he bought the building and he had the space available on the second floor. We happened to be over at my mom and dad’s that afternoon and my father said to me that he was going over to show the space on Phila Street to a young couple from Boston and would I like to come over with him. So I came over and we met Bill and Lena Spencer. So fortunately, it’s a very vivid memory for me. They were very excited, they had this dream; they wanted to open this coffeehouse. They were explaining to us the vision they had for the space. The more they looked around, (there really was not much here) but they had a vision of what to do with it. But it’s history, because they did rent the space and then they started working on renovating it to suit their needs. It probably was several months later; it was actually in the summertime they had the first concert. She was a workaholic, Bill had other interests...”<sup>85</sup>

Lena also vividly recalled this fateful day:

So we found out who owned the building and we got in touch with him so that we could go inside and look at it. The building was originally built by a man named William Case who was an architect and a builder, and this was his headquarters. The room downstairs was his showroom, and this room [The Caffé] was used for offices, drawing rooms, storage and workshop areas. Well, the building's ownership changed hands two or three times and my present landlord put in a Laundromat on the first floor, but he didn't do anything upstairs. We made a deal with him that, in exchange for having it rent-free for six months; we would assume the whole expense of getting the place in shape. So we came up to Saratoga every weekend from Boston and worked on it.<sup>86</sup>

David Silverhart remembered nuances of Lena’s attempts to build a radical homespace with Bill in the early days of the Caffé:

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>85</sup> Interview: Sandra and David Silverhart, Saratoga Springs, New York: May, 2004.

<sup>86</sup> Sobel, Harriet: Interview with Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum. 22.

[At the Caff ] Bill built a brick oven and was going to make pizzas. They fixed it up. The space was actually a storage area for the millwork that was made downstairs. [Lena and Bill] did a lot of work.<sup>87</sup>

Lena and Bill began refurnishing the building, paying no rent in the first few months in exchange for doing most of the work themselves. In essence, they made the Caff  “homemade” by shaping it together with their own hands.

### *“The Gut”*



*Caff  Sign. Photo by Jocelyn Arem c) 2008*

According to Teri Blasko, Local History

Librarian at the Saratoga Springs Public Library, the area where the Caff  sits on Phila Street is widely known in Saratoga as “the gut.” This space “between” other part of town and physically located out of the way of the main businesses in Saratoga gave way for an already underground culture to situate itself out of the light of day, behind closed

doors, and upstairs. Joseph Deuel

remembered being drawn in, as a young boy, to the unexplainable “mystery” in the far off reaches off the Caff :

I always wanted to go there, I didn’t really know what it was. It was kind of this...as with a lot of places you never know, it was kind of this mysterious door that led upstairs, and had kind of a hippie reputation, those were definitely different days then they are today. I was always intrigued by the place, and I don’t think my parents would have let me go if I was too much younger.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Interview: Joseph Deuel, Saratoga Springs Interview. 2003.

Eva Nagel recalled the physical feeling of the doors that both protected and sequestered the Caff  from the outside world and the possibilities that lay inside those doors:



What is it about shouldering through those infamous swinging doors? Then trudging up the narrow stairs until emerging into whatever is happening at the Caff . It is a birth as you are spewed forth into the warm welcome surrounded by music and warmth and the smells of coffee and cinnamon. It is as if all is right with the world. It seemed that way in the 60's when I entered as a teenager and it still has that same effect today. It is more than the great music, the acceptance and the chocolate chip cookies. It is the way the songs lead you out of despair and give you the strength to do what is right. You leave with a little glow of optimism that carries you through the week.<sup>89</sup>

*Caff  stairs. Photo by Jocelyn Arem c) 2008*

The healing waters of possibility that drew settlers to Saratoga in its formative years drew them again to the doors of the Caff , though they may not have known it. These waters, with their powerful properties, were not discovered in all the years of the building's existence, until the Caff 's existence. The "water issue" then became a symbol for the power of the Caff  to draw people in, and its contestation with those who sought to divert its path elsewhere. As Terry at the Saratoga Springs Library recalled, "We always had water issues here... the city was always trying to deal with water issues."<sup>90</sup> Germanetti remembered the water underneath the building:

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<sup>89</sup> Interview: Eva Nagel, Saratoga Springs. July 2005.

<sup>90</sup> Phone Interview: Terry Blasko, Saratoga Springs Library. April 2008.

When we were there, there used to be a creek that ran right underneath the building. I think that has changed. I was talking to Sandra yesterday about this. She said, or her husband David mentioned that when they put the new library in, they apparently ran a line which picked up the spring and diverted the spring and in the process, a creek that ran down the center of the building all of a sudden had a lot more water in it and they had an actual flood, and they had to figure out a way to divert that water.<sup>91</sup>

When the Saratoga Springs Library was built on nearby Henry Street in September 1993, the plumbing underneath the building reflected this change. David Silverhart remembered:

All of a sudden there's water running out of the crawl space! We sprouted a spring! A spring! [This was] probably in the '80s. This woman at the library did research about the spring. It was just a freshwater spring. When they started building they library they disrupted the strata or something. It's piped out now. I don't know if the spring dried up. That was fun, the water was running down Putnam Street!<sup>92</sup>

Optimism in the face of difficulty was in fact what kept Lena and Bill going in the formative years of the Caff .

### *Struggle*

What were the difficulties that Lena and Bill faced in Saratoga? The Spencer's determination to make the Caff  appealing to Saratoga while keeping an upstanding and sophisticated appearance in the face of adversity was deeply connected to the social and political identity of the city in 1960. While the town may have *seemed* primed for the new folk venue from the perspective of the Caff 's founders, many conservatives in the Saratoga Springs community were in fact not as eager to accept the burgeoning venue, based solely on their preconceived notions of "Beatnik" hangouts which they believed to

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<sup>91</sup> Interview: Paul Germanetti, Saratoga Springs, New York: May, 2005.

<sup>92</sup> Interview: David Silverhart. Saratoga Springs, New York: May, 2004.

be disruptive and anti-authoritarian. In anticipation of the arrival of Caff  Lena, the Saratoga Springs press began documenting the event. Lena recalled:

There was a lot of opposition to our opening [by] the town, the people in the town. Our intentions were right, but they had no way of knowing that. They had their own preconceived notions of what it was going to be. There was a little cutesy editorial in the paper about a month before we opened to the effect, get out your guitars, grow your beards, a beatnik coffee house is coming to Saratoga...And that really did it for us, as far as the people in the town were concerned.<sup>93</sup>

Rosalie Sorrels remembers this common stereotype and the actual reality of things at Caff  Lena:

The audience was a pretty normal bunch of people. Actually it's hard to characterize the audience. Skidmore College is there. Most of the places that had forums like that have a good university somewhere close by, and most of them have people who are willing to have open minds and listen. It's a listening room! And there was the added presence of the track, and the particular people that came there. There was a sense of eccentricity. There were people who were hungry for artistic definition and maybe were looking for something that seemed off the beat and track, but well-crafted, well-made.

They were nothing (laughing) like the beatniks! See, the beat generation was really revolutionary. It had a kind of a high profile radical... not radical but *revolutionary* feel. I mean they wanted to make trouble. Lena didn't want to make trouble. (Laughing) She really didn't want a scene. She didn't want happenings going on all the time. She liked things to be energetic and vital, but she didn't want craziness. She wanted a listening room with a sensibility that was directed towards art.

I think it took her a long time to make the people in the town trust her. And I don't know that that's any different than it is for anyone. It's the same with the people where I live. I literally felt that I was run out of that town [in Idaho] because they didn't understand me or like the way I did things. They thought I was too flamboyant and didn't take good care of my children. I had a whole lot of criticisms. They thought I should stay home and go on welfare, and take care of my children. I didn't want to do that. (Laughs) So I went away! (Laughs) I felt like they drove me out, they didn't like my politics. When I came back I was not readily welcomed, but there were more people who knew who I was and what I

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<sup>93</sup> Sobel, Harriet. Interview with Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum. 31.

was up to, and there were more people who were sympathetic to that and worked hard to help me get integrated quickly. It took a long time. I mean, I've always been interested in the abortion issue, I believe abortion should be available to anyone who needs it and that's not a popular position to take. I mean it's really *unpopular*! My father supported Henry Wallace, and he lost his job at the state because of that. They were died-in the wool democrats, and we didn't fit with the mainstream population.

I think Lena went through all that process. There were a lot of people who didn't like her, they just thought she was really strange, and some of them were in charge of stuff and they made it hard for her. But there were a lot of people who *did* like her and they engaged in sort of, ongoing battles, and they clearly won. It just took a long time.

I just think there's always people who are gonna take exception to the way you do things, particularly if you're really stubborn and centered. There were occasionally those people around, but most of the people she dealt with really liked her very much. I think she surrounded herself with people she could deal with, so if there was anything that interfered it usually had to do with licensing, fire regulations, and things like that. As far as the people around her, like I said there's a good university there and a whole lot of very eccentric people, so I think she found people to shelter her. She had a good support system.<sup>94</sup>

Sandra Silverhart, the Caffé's former landlord remembered Lena's struggle. She and David Silverhart played a major role in aiding Lena not only by giving her a physical space within which to create a radical homespace, but supporting her in other ways in her quest to become accepted into Saratoga Springs. Sandra Silverhart recalled:

I'm sure people are aware of the struggles she had, because she never had much money. But she always made a place, she always made a home for all these traveling musicians who were out there. Arlo [Guthrie] was telling his wife, "these are the Silverharts, they owned the [Caffé's] building for all those years." He was so supportive and he was telling us that if it wasn't for Lena all those many years ago, he never would be where he is today. He had no money, and Lena always had bedrolls for someone, she would put the scraps of food she had together, she always had food for these struggling musicians. She just was such a very special person. We're just so thrilled that we had that bit of history with her. I don't think people realized how much she struggled.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Interview: Rosalie Sorrels. New York, New York. January 2004.

<sup>95</sup> Interview: Sandra Silverhart. Saratoga Springs, New York. May, 2004.

Lena was just an amazing person. There are a lot of musicians that are out there today that have nothing to say but just kindnesses and thank yous to Lena. We wanted [the Caff  ] to continue and to grow; [It was] a wonderful, healthy, musical environment. For years, the rent was very low, \$200 a month for this whole space. We never raised it. We figured that was our contribution to the arts. We just tried to work with her as best we could. There was no question. I think a lot of people in this community just quietly helped. She had to have help from people, and friendship, with food and casseroles and cakes and breads and coffees... so I'm sure people were very helpful in that aspect, because she never wanted to take charity. She never turned anybody away. Anybody who was passing through town who needed some help, they knew to come to Lena.<sup>96</sup>

She would have trouble, and said can I pay you in the summer, and she did. The Caff   became a landmark and we weren't about to do away with it. It was a safe place.<sup>97</sup>

On April 16, 1959, Lena moved to Saratoga to oversee the renovation of the space that would become the Caff  . Bill stayed in Boston to finish school. The date set to open was May 15, 1960 with the performer Jackie Washington.

### *Opening Night*

Jack Landron (Jackie Washington) recalled opening night at Caff   Lena on May 21, 1960, meeting Bill and Lena Spencer and the events that led up to his booking:

So one day, I think it was at the Club 47, or the Salamander, some place in Boston this man came up to me, very lively man who spoke to me as though he knew me, and I smiled back. He said his name was Bill I think, Bill Spencer. And he had this club he was doing and I'd fit right in. They were just going to open it up and oh boy they had wonderful pastries they were going to have and it was going to be wonderful bla bla bla. So I said sure I'll do it. And then true to his word he called and arranged a date. I did it through my booking agent at the time, and he volunteered to drive me and lodge me in his place here he had rented. He came to pick me up on the agreed time, and we drove from my house to I think I was on Symphony Road, where Lena was there, and it was a very interesting thing because Bill was a very wired kind of guy, very forceful...and Lena was painfully shy, a lot more attractive and good looking than she allowed herself to be...she seemed to be very painfully shy. She had a weak chin and

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



always eyes cast down and any questions that were asked of her on our trip to Saratoga, Bill would answer, and she just couldn't talk, couldn't do anything, and he was the whole show.

It was the first absolutely the first weekend. So, true to his word, Lena didn't speak much, she cooked incredible things, much more than they needed. And I remember one time also, she is Italian and spoke Italian, there was some situation. The dynamics were kind of strange and uncomfortable to be around, but [Bill] after the Friday performance, where everything went well, he dragged her out of the kitchen and sat her on the stage in a bentwood chair and said she knew a song, sing it. And she sat there extremely uncomfortable and said she couldn't and he said no, sing it, and she started it but couldn't finish it. So I started making jokes because I was very uncomfortable.

I never saw Bill *abusive*... but he was...domineering. Running right over. I can't say using her either because I don't know who had the money to get the joint, but it seemed that their marriage was part of a scheme he had going. And she was being taken along with it, and his all-permeating presence at the beginning of this thing, and then when he was gone, he was gone. We didn't really talk about him. But, it seemed that whatever went down, and I never pried, whatever went down, and whatever reasons he had for starting the club, he gave her a legacy either wittingly or unwittingly which really had a positive effect I thought on her personality because she was Lena of Caff  Lena and began to assume that role.<sup>98</sup>

In a 1980 interview about the beginnings of Caff  Lena, Lena noted, “[Bill] was the inspiration, and I was the perspiration.”<sup>99</sup> Lena saw Bill as the motivation behind what she later inherited as her establishment, but also recognized that after his disappearance, it was in fact built on her own dedication and perseverance. Like her departure from Milford years earlier, Bill's sudden abandonment of Lena and her Caff  forced Lena to care for herself in a way she had not before that point. Alone again in a new city, Lena again “returned” to her home community by finding its safe, nurturing elements in a new context. This time, she not only found these elements, she created them herself. Lena provided the energy to sustain their joint dream after he no longer

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<sup>98</sup> Interview: Jack Landron, New York, New York. June 2006.

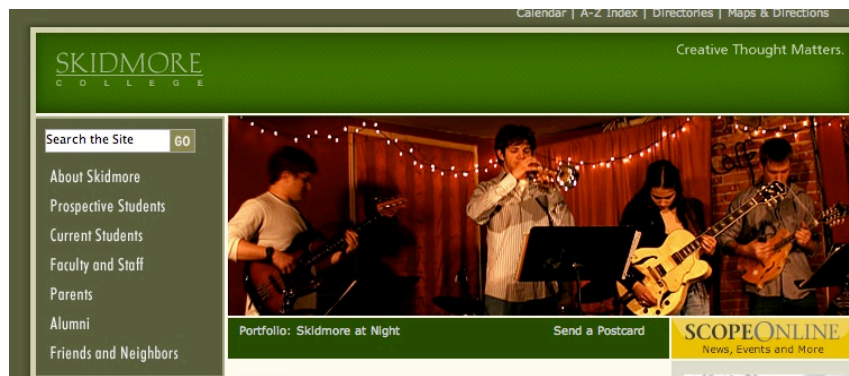
<sup>99</sup> Snook, Debbi, “Caff  Lena— Good Folk for 20 Years” Sunday Times Union, May 11, 1980. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum

remained in Saratoga Springs to help her.<sup>100</sup> She found help from a new network of performers including college students from Skidmore.

*Skidmore College*

*“...[Coffeehouses] were springing up like dragon’s teeth  
near colleges and universities everywhere on the American Continent...”*

*-Kristin Baggelaar<sup>101</sup>*



*Skidmore Website homepage with image of Skidmore Students at Caff  Lena [www.skidmore.edu](http://www.skidmore.edu)<sup>102</sup>*

Saratoga Springs in 1960 seemed a good location for the Caff  Lena to both Bill and Lena Spencer *primarily* because of its college scene. In 1960 Skidmore College’s campus was just a block away from Phila Street. The Spencers and Skidmore College made an instant connection, exactly what Bill Spencer had anticipated. In 1990, looking back at the thirty-year relationship between the Caff  and the academic institution, Mae Banner, a writer for Skidmore’s alumni magazine “Scope” and longtime patron of the Caff  remarked,

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<sup>100</sup> Arem, 2004.

<sup>101</sup> Baggelaar, Kristin and Milton, Donald. *Folk Music, More Than A Song*. Crowell Publishing, 1976. 79.

<sup>102</sup> Accessed April 24, 2008.

Lena's connections to Skidmore reach back to the founding of the café in 1960, when she and her then-husband Bill Spencer chose Saratoga Springs for their coffeehouse venture. They believed Skidmore students would be a natural clientele for the intimate room with its no-alcohol policy. In fact, the combination of all forms of acoustic music-folk, bluegrass, ethnic, and jazz-with Lena's menu...proved more attractive to the wider community. Parents and young children were regular customers, while the tide of college students ebbed and flowed with shifting tastes in popular music. Nevertheless, Lena left a lasting impression on college life.<sup>103</sup>

The Caffè touched the lives of Skidmore students in many ways during the 1960s, and in turn these Skidmore students touched Lena's life by promoting her legacy long after her passing. Martha Smith Tuchscherer '67 recalled her first live model art classes at Skidmore. She wrote:

"Lena Spencer, from Saratoga's Caffè Lena, was another model for the class. She told us that she had once modeled for Giacometti, and she was pleased to tell us how much he liked the shape of her neck. We were very impressed with her relationship with an artist so famous, but I'm sure we didn't appreciate her significance in the burgeoning folk-music world"<sup>104</sup>

It is clear that the students at Skidmore in the 1960s were well aware of the Caffè's importance and cultural significance, even if they only later realized it. Deborah Frankel Reese collected written memories of the Caffè from her 1965 Skidmore class for their 2008 Skidmore reunion that reveal this appreciation for the kind of place Lena and Bill created and which Lena made into a radical homespace with the college in mind:

Another part of the early sixties scene in colleges throughout the nation was the folk music revolution. Skidmore was no exception. A big part of that at Skidmore was the Caffè Lena, which opened when we were in school. I thought about the Caffè Lena recently when the still very active venue was mentioned on NPR as the oldest continuously running coffee house in the U.S. *That* ages one. In 1998,

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<sup>103</sup> Banner, Mae "Lena Spencer, Founder of Caffè Lena, Touched Many Lives at Skidmore," *Skidmore Scope Magazine*, 1990.

<sup>104</sup> Smith, Martha Tuchscherer "From Last Time," Feature in 2000 Skidmore Scope.

the Mayor of Saratoga declared a Caffè Lena Day, and said that when Lena Spencer opened the doors to the small second-floor Caffè on Phila Street in May 1960, she also opened her heart, and laid the foundation for “a national treasure.”

Laura Young says it brings tears to her eyes to remember being at the Caffè standing in a circle, holding hands, and singing *We Shall Overcome*. Laura, along with Wendy Mann Roberts and Jane Monell (the mad, mad Weston, MA, duo!) took me there for the first time after hearing the Flatt and Scruggs music I was playing in my Wilmarth room one day. It was a heady place, and made some of us feel as if there was an alternative to the 150 bars in town, and a touch of Greenwich Village in old, pre-gentrified Saratoga. Hedy Bergida White remembers loving the folk-singers at Lena's, and says in retrospect, “I'm guessing that I also felt like a real bohemian going there.”

Sabre (Lynda Sable) Gilmartin saw a great film on Caffè Lena on British TV about 10 years ago, and says, “I absolutely loved the place and thought Lena herself was great. I have met English folk artists, who idolized her. I remember meeting Dave Van Ronk (who, sadly, passed away last February) and seeing quite a few folk legends at Lena's. It really was a special place.” Susan Hand Shetterly also met Van Ronk there She remembers when this famous poet Galway Kinnell came to read at Skidmore: “After he read, he invited me to Caffè Lena's. I spent two days picking out the right black turtleneck and jeans. I was excited and terrified. He had read some of my stuff - had asked to see it - and it was not good, but he was gracious, and we talked, and he wrote out one of his poems for me.

Dave Van Ronk was singing there, and sat down with us and was rather too forward. Kinnell, who I found out some years later is/was a terrible lady's man, was protective ... I was so young. Terrified and eager. And that is all that happened. Except for the fact that I was reading *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* during that time and between Kinnell and Hardy, I cried for three days. And the more important fact - perhaps - is that I can still hear Kinnell reading “Freedom, New Hampshire.” One of my favorite poems. I read the last part of it at my beloved mother-in-law's funeral. Great poem.”

In fact, Joyce Weinstein Ozier who remembers the darkness and the candles, recalls that her next-door neighbor in French House, who was a class below us, had a short relationship with Tom Paxton, whom she met there. She laughs “Over the years, every time I see Tom Paxton's name in print, or on tour, I think of her!”

While Lena was still alive (until 13 or 14 years ago), the Caffè was also a place for poetry readings, and staged readings of drama. Karen Levin Coburn and I went there one night Junior year to see a wonderful dramatic reading of Sartre's *No Exit*, which we then discussed late into the night. The Caffè website has a place for reminiscences, and one guy wrote about the early sixties “I remember Skidmore girls coming to Lena's when the campus was still in town and hanging out or

waiting on tables, and having to rush back to their dorms, Cinderella style, at curfew time.”

Joyce DiBona says the Dean called her on the carpet for spending too much time with “townies,” including the bass player at Caffè Lena, whose son she used to babysit for on Sunday afternoons while his wife worked at the hospital. “It didn’t prevent me from going, however!” says Joyce. “I spent most of our sophomore year there and it’s a miracle I made it through that year; but it was a retreat for me during those troubled years and I felt close to Bill and Lena who were trying to make a go of their new venture in those days.”

Anne Beaman also remembered Caffè Lena (and the erotic appeal of some unknown, dark-browed, shaggy-haired guitarist perched on a stool under the spotlight, cigarette smoke curling up, the rest of the room in darkness)! I still hear the name of Caffè Lena mentioned on VPR broadcasts (primarily because of performances there). And I listen to VPR because I now live on the New Hampshire side of the Upper Valley.<sup>105</sup>

The Caffè’s presence on Phila Street opened up a new forum for communication with Skidmore students who at that time lived a few streets over. (The new campus down the road on Broadway was not built until the 1970s.) George Ward, an early patron at the Caffè remembered, “The atmosphere here- what I remember more about it was that everybody was young! And that changed the energy radically. You tended to have mostly like-minded people. People came to Lena’s because they were brought by friends, or heard of it and thought it was something that they would be in tune with.”<sup>106</sup> The atmosphere at Caffè Lena proved ideal for this type of interchange. For one, Lena’s refusal to obtain a liquor license allowed any age group to attend concerts at the Caffè, making Caffè Lena accessible to everyone. As Ray Oldenburg writes:

“Coffee spurs the intellect; alcohol the emotions and the soma. Those drinking coffee are content to listen contemplatively to music, while those drinking alcohol are inclined to make music of their own. Dancing is commonly associated with the consumption of alcoholic beverages but not at all with sipping coffee. Reading

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<sup>105</sup> Written Correspondence: Deborah Frankel Reese, March 22, 2008.

<sup>106</sup> Interview: George Ward, November 1, 2003.

material is widely digested in the world's coffeehouses but not in bars. The dart player drinks ale inasmuch as deep thought is not the essence of his game, but the chess player's drink is coffee."<sup>107</sup>

Lena and Bill offered a second home to young people where the focus was on music and not alcohol, which would also presumably eliminate the chance of having alcohol or drug-related trouble at a place already faced with the challenge of being accepted into a new, unfamiliar city. As Terry Leonino recalled:

She did not want the focus to be on alcohol. I actually admired that. You can, when you have a club like that, have problems with drugs and people can be abusive. And I think her choice was why deal with it.<sup>108</sup>

Providing a space for the interchange of ideas especially close to a college setting during a time of social and political fervor ultimately proved financially and socially viable during the 1960s. This concept was the first and went on to become the most longstanding ideal the Caff  would hold throughout its existence to present day. Al McKenney, Saratoga Springs resident, music historian and longtime patron of the Caff  commented, "[Lena] insists that young people have a forum, a stage on which to build an audience from...it's a brave, some say foolish policy but a good one."<sup>109</sup>

This same statement might have applied to Lena and Bill's idea that they could open a coffeehouse on Phila Street, which in 1959 offered only a dilapidated ex-Laundromat filled to the brim with old woodworking materials. However, they soon

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<sup>107</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Caf s, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Da Capo Press; Florida, 1999. 184.

<sup>108</sup> Interview: Terry Leonino, Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007

<sup>109</sup> Carola, Chris. "Lena Lives Near Where Young Dylan Sang," March 5, 1989. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga History Museum.

transformed this space into the Caff  that still exists there today, thanks to their joint efforts to overcome physical obstacles in the building and Lena’s creation of a radical homespace making her a fixture in the Phila Street neighborhood. Hugh Germanetti remembered hearing of Lena’s arrival and later of the Caff ’s presence “up there” at his old woodworking shop:

Apparently Lena arrived...I had two children who went to Skidmore. Of course I had a pretty good connection with Saratoga Springs having grown up here. We’d periodically come back and drive by what we used to call “the old shop.” We saw the Caff  Lena take place. Though that kind of activity was going on there, we were a little bit beyond that, too old for it at that point. You did hear snippets of things that were happening there. It did sound interesting.<sup>110</sup>

Just what was “happening there” not only tells us the history of a Caff  and gives us insight into the kind of space it was in this era, but speaks also to the birthplace and early adolescence of that place in American history during the 1960s, a time of great social and political change. What follows is an examination of that era, Lena’s unique role in creating a radical homespace that served to foster the countercultural movement of the day, and how the movement continued to shape and define her Caff .

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<sup>110</sup> Interview: Paul Germanetti, Saratoga Springs, New York. May, 2005.

**CHAPTER THREE:** “Come Gather Round People Wherever You Roam:”  
The 1960s Folk Revival and Lena’s Extended Family  
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Welcome to Caff  Lena. As Lena would say, “I would wish you all to know that you are being addressed by the effervescent, irrepressible toast of Caff  Lena society.”

Our program this evening takes us into the world of the 1960s, during the folk revival period in American history. We’ll hear from the Caff ’s first proprietresses once more, musing on the Caff ’s role as a radical homespace in the context of this larger movement. It’s so nice of you all to be here. And it’s so nice of Lena Spencer to be here. And won’t you please welcome, Lena Spencer:

As far as folk music was concerned, I had had no exposure to it at all. My interests were mainly jazz and pop standards, and my husband's background was mostly in classical music. Most of our contacts were made from people in the Boston Folk scene. It was, of course, the peak of the folk music revival, and in those first weeks, we presented many young artists [Tom Paley, Dave Van Ronk, Logan English, Dick Weissman] who were embarking on new careers in a brand new field of musical entertainment.

What memories there are! — The young hopefuls seeking a stage to further their hopes and dreams; the heartbreak when they were shattered; the joy when they were realized. Ian Buchanan giving up his weekend gig to Reverend Gary Davis because he needed the money more; Gary's subsequent visits. And Annie Davis making sure he didn't get her into the "holy ghost." And the all-night talk with Mississippi John Hurt after the show and a late night meal at Hatties. And the wonderful sessions with Joe Venuti and the afternoon concert when Maxine Sullivan joined him. And the magical evening that went on until 5 am when Bob and Evelyn Beers brought their Thanksgiving guests by and we sang and sang. And Sonny Matthews with his gnarled, arthritic fingers playing Scott Joplin rags like a virtuoso. And Pasha, that great old Siamese who stood at the top of the stairs to help me greet the guests and most of the time meowed in perfect pitch. And



loving and devoted Tom Gregory who sat at the back table doing his crosswords and who despite his impaired hearing, knew when the music was good or bad and tuned his hearing aid up or down accordingly. And John Wynne-Evans who brought such good theater to the Cafe and gave me the opportunity to realize my acting ambitions.

How do you single out any one person, any one event? You don't. Every single person who graced our tiny stage, the great, the near-great, the not-so-great, they are all, in their own way, responsible for my still being here. I've lasted for some twenty-five years. I've done some things right, I've done some things wrong, but right or wrong, I've always tried to do the best I could. And I couldn't have done it without the help of God and a lot of love from a lot of wonderful people. Thank you and God Bless You All. Love, Lena"<sup>111</sup>

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*"For when a people no longer have the space to construct homeplace,  
we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance."- bell hooks<sup>112</sup>*

In the previous chapter I consider how the Caff  's physical space influenced its role as a radical homespace. In this chapter, I examine the historical context for the liberation of Lena's creative drive in that space—the socio-political context of the 1950s/1960s coffeehouse era that gave rise to the possibility that a space like hers would be fruitful and influential for a generation of likeminded artists in this era. I explore how this context helped Lena lay the groundwork for a radical homespace, how she in turn influenced the rise of coffeehouse culture, and how the many people in the 1960s generation who sought out a radical homespace in Lena's coffeehouse kept her dream alive in today's world after her passing.

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<sup>111</sup> Written by Lena Spencer to introduce the program for the Caff   Lena, Silver Anniversary Celebration. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>112</sup> hooks, bell. Essay: *Homeplace. The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color*. Edited by D. Soyini Madison. Martin's Press, Inc. New York, New York. 1994. 452.

Modeling their coffeehouse after Parisi's example, the Spencer's capitalized on the trend of coffeehouses in the wake of the burgeoning folk revival quickly becoming a facet of American lifestyle by providing a space for countercultural communities to gather. In late 1959 when Lena and Bill moved to Saratoga Springs to start their Caff , larger events had already set the stage for this steadily developing counterculture. The Cold War festered at the heart of post-war America, driving fear of a foreign power deep into the American psyche, McCarthyism marginalized "potential Communists" including many prominent artists of the era, and the escalating Civil Rights movement gained public attention, challenging deeply held assumptions about the nature of American society.

In addition, a growing uncertainty arose among the youth generation about the values epitomized in the media-induced concept of a white, suburban "nuclear family." Restless in the roles society made for them and with ample time and resources at their demand, the baby boom generation began to test the boundaries of their environment. Their shared past became the catalyst for the reactions of the 1960s, the spark that ignited the fire of the youth rebellion. The youth rebellion found its voice in folk music, which found its venues in coffeehouses. As coffeehouses provided a space for those in eighteenth century England to hear the latest trade news, those looking to hear the latest news about the 1960s social movement needed only find themselves a chair at Caff  Lena.

### *The 1950s: Setting the stage*

In *Takin' it to the Streets: A Sixties Reader*, the authors assert, "None of us who were a part of those beginnings in the Fifties could have then predicted the Sixties. The Sixties represent one of the most fantastic compressions of political ideas and action of any

decade in American history....”<sup>113</sup> This statement creates the impression that life in the 1950s was pacific and suddenly exploded into anarchy in the year 1960. However, such an abrupt transition was not the case. These “rumblings beneath the surface complacency of fifties culture”<sup>114</sup> were widespread and multifaceted.

The folk and pop music revolutions of the 1960s in fact stood on the shoulders of the much larger artistic and cultural revolutions beginning to emerge in the ‘50s. As Rosalie Sorrels said:

“There was all kinds of stuff going on in the ‘50s. People think nothing happened in the ‘50s, but jazz happened in the ‘50s. Lenny Bruce happened in the ‘50s. Jack Kerouac happened. The beat generation poets and all of those people were coming through there right and left.”<sup>115</sup>

As Lena recounted in her history of coffeehouse culture, the ‘60s coffeehouse culture found its cultural antecedents in the Beat movement. The Beats embraced feelings of immediate experience and argued that life did not consist of the balance in your bank account but in the values by which you lived.<sup>116</sup> The “folkies” of the 1960s also sang and created to express their feelings not to feed a commercial market.<sup>117</sup>

The music being played in coffeehouses during the 1960s differed from but was also closely related to the performances of the Beatniks of the 1950s. While the Beatnik generation showcased jazz music and “beat poets” such as Jack Kerouac and Allan

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<sup>113</sup> Bloom, Alexander and Breines, Wini, *Takin’ it to the Streets: A Sixties Reader, The Port Huron Statement, by Tom Hayden*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003. 530.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>115</sup> Interview: Rosalie Sorrels. New York, New York. January 2004.

<sup>116</sup> Arem, 2004

<sup>117</sup> Wicker, Tom, *Great Songs...Of the Sixties*, Times Books, 1970. 7.

Ginsberg, the folk revival in the 1960s showcased traditional musicians such as Pete Seeger, Tom Paxton, and Arlo Guthrie, and also provided a forum for a new wave of political singers including Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Paul Simon.

As her contemporaries swung Right or Left on the political spectrum, Lena stayed Lena, motivated first and foremost by her own desire to create a familial environment, and secondly by her desire to support the generations of performers for whom she cared, as the maternal figure presiding over this homespace. Lena's personal values represented a political belief system of her own, which simply played out in the 1960s because of a welcoming context. Terry Leonino recalled Lena's particular take on the idea of providing a place open to political viewpoints of all kinds. She recalled:

She definitely, personally espoused a liberal political viewpoint. She didn't shy away from people who played political music...she was for the working people. She was for the working class. She was for the poor. She was for all the things that make a human being. She was for women's rights...That's what made Lena's such a neat place, because you weren't just getting what was happening on the stage, you were getting this whole atmosphere that she created in this place that was full of art. She had art on the walls, she had her theater going, she was into poetry, she was political, she was not political, she was everything. Her personality filled the room.<sup>118</sup>

This fundamental belief system made her a radical figure whose politics resided in her survival attitude and "mindful" way of living rather than in a slogan she carried with her, or sang or wrote explicitly. Lena lived her life in accordance with her belief in the power of community, which was a statement in itself and resounded widely. As Rosalie Sorrels said:

I would never describe Lena as being political although she certainly had what I consider to be good instincts. She was very generous and cared very much. She gave away damn near everything she had and she was always doing things for

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<sup>118</sup> Interview: Terry Leonino, Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007

people who needed things. I mean she was really incredibly generous with people and she cared about the poor, and she fed people who didn't have enough to eat. I think of that as political in a general kind of way. She was mindful. Her sense of values were very human.<sup>119</sup>

What made her homespace radical was her defiance in the face of oppression, which she had been known for even in her life before the Caff . She simply translated this attitude to a shared space. Lena blurred the line between the stereotypical image of the 1950s homemaker and the 1960s-era feminist. This made her uniquely radical; she could use her background in this new context and make it work, and not be seen as either feminist or not feminist. She was just Lena. As in Terry Leonino's description of Lena, she didn't fit into the idea of the traditional Italian woman, nor did she fit into the idea of the typical feminist businesswoman.

Neither did Lena's friend Rosalie Sorrels fit easily into the idea of a feminist in the 1960s, although she was certainly a strong, independent woman then and in the 1950s. Her words shed light on how Lena both defied and utilized stereotypical images of a maternal homemaker and a radical businesswoman to forge her own path in the world:

You know, I think if you really check up on the '50s you find there were a whole lot more independent women than you'd be led to believe. It wasn't an ideal, certainly. Independent women were often despised, generally put down. But *The Feminine Mystique* came out of somewhere and that's where it came out of. You know it didn't just appear full-blown all of a sudden. I read more than most people, and I read everything. I had read Simone D'Beauvoire's *The Second Sex* before that, which I think is probably a better book (laughs) and more interesting to me. But you know, I read everything that had to do with [the feminist movement] and I sympathize with it. I have to say, I got married and I expected to get married, have children, stay in my house. But I took that on- it wasn't like it was my ideal. It wasn't what I wanted to do, even. I just took it on and that's what I expected myself to do, live up to what I took on. So if you have children, *The Feminist Mystique* kind of left that out. That really isn't how most women live. You become a board director and a strong woman. I felt very left out of that. I mean I was on my own and I don't think I got a whole lot of help from that section of the

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<sup>119</sup> Rosalie Sorrels: Interview, New York, New York. January 2004.

population. I'd have gone to a union first before I'd have gone to the feminist movement.

They weren't fighting for my rights. They weren't getting me any child support or anything! (Laughs) I mean they did eventually; they really became more interested, the women from the work force. The average feminist radical at that time, they were fighting to get away from home and family. I didn't necessarily want to do that. I wanted to take them with me, and I did! And it was very inconvenient. I think that Lena's perspective all had to do with making a thing happen, it was very internal. I don't think it was related to the feminist movement. But, Lena was very sympathetic with it, and so was I. Lena actually went and left and lived in New York on her own for a while. I'm not in any way saying I wasn't sympathetic with it. I just didn't feel I was part of it until later, until it began to include the things that were in my life. In maybe the mid '70s, the political stance of the feminists began to really be more practical for women in the workforce with children.<sup>120</sup>

Sorrels' stance that the average feminist radical was fighting to get away from home and family and that she didn't necessarily want to do that. ("I wanted to take them with me, and I did!") seems similar to Lena's, in that Lena incorporated a strong sense of home and family, in essence, "taking home with her" as she also embodied the radical identity of a woman business owner and proponent of folk music. Folk music was the perfect cultural tool for Lena to present in a Caff  setting, in order to fulfill her goal of "making a thing happen;" folk music, combined with Lena's "open door policy" allowed for all political ideologies and identities to emerge in one central space. For Rosalie Sorrels and others, Lena provided an environment conducive to helping people reach their full potential. From the cultural context of the 1950s emerged a generation that needed the Caff  to exist as much as Lena did.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

*The 1960s: “Casa dolce casa” (Home sweet home) and the folk revival movement*

As Lena mentions, Bill had been to Europe and seen firsthand the authentic cafes that American coffeehouses of this era tried to emulate in their food and ambiance. Lena’s Italian American heritage enabled her to emulate these very aspects from the standpoint of one who experienced the authentic, familial transmission of this culture growing up.

Caff  Lena took these qualities, and arose as an integral part of the movement of folk revivalism that was growing in many cities across the country in the early 1960s. Isolated in its unique setting, yet intricately connected to this movement (its first performer Jackie Washington/Jack Landron served as an assistant to Martin Luther King and Lena met John F. Kennedy on his inaugural tour) Caff  Lena was at once infused with the rhetoric and flavor of Saratoga Springs and was also part of a community of resistance much larger than itself.

By nurturing her own inherent tastes and ideals, such as treating customers like family and valuing art over commercialism, she provided a platform for the performers poets, singers, songwriters, and storytellers whose ideas and works were at the forefront of the social movements during the 1960s.<sup>121</sup> Lena was keenly attuned to the factors that made specific performers *popular* in her coffeehouse, most importantly their interaction with an audience. In this way, Lena anticipated and nurtured those performers whose music shaped artistic and social changes during her life such as Bob Dylan, new to the folk scene, who performed at Caff  Lena in June 1961 and January 14-15, 1962.

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<sup>121</sup> Arem, 2004.



*Bob Dylan, Suze Rotolo and Lena Spencer. Caff  Lena 1961.  
Photo by Joe Alper*

The Caff  thus became a magnet for the “movers and shakers” in the early days of the folk boom in 1960s America, and was a powerful vehicle in bringing their voices and ideas to a

welcoming public. Lena’s Caff  provided a stage for the major voices of major 1960s trends including the rise of feminism, the anti-war movement, student radicalism, and hippie culture. The Caff  was an idealistic venture in idealistic times. Lena’s attitude mixed with the ‘60s countercultural movement was like throwing gasoline on a fire; for a generation turning to folk music as the most direct and simple route to acceptance and a reaffirmed identity, Lena’s provided a nurturing environment that drew a generation together. This radical homespace reinforced their beliefs and ideas. That is her legacy, and the Caff ’s lasting impact on the folk revival and future generations of artists.

America during the 1960s was a time of great social and political change. Lena’s unique role in, and contribution to this era was to provide a special, unique place where those who were alienated from other spaces in society could be automatically accepted and express themselves and their ideas without fear. Like Lena, many of these folks came from backgrounds that did not particularly support their countercultural ideas. Beyond her role as the defiant daughter, Lena soon discovered a community of people who like her, longed for a radical homespace to call their own. This environment allowed many artists to express themselves in ways that they could not or did not feel safe doing to this



same extent in other venues. Unable to assert herself as an actress in Milford, Lena “performed” on stage at her Caff  each time she introduced a musician.

When Lena and Bill created the Caff , they were well aware of the social and political implications of starting a coffeehouse in this period. In their minds, a “folk coffeehouse” would capitalize on the countercultural movement of folk musicians that was growing out of the beat generation and engaging with the intellectual atmosphere of a college town; their Caff  provided this movement a platform to share its ideas with the public. In her encyclopedia, Kristin Baggelaar cites Oscar Brand’s description of how the coffeehouse as a space evolved as a folk music enterprise and why perhaps, beyond their own artistic need for a space to create art, the Spencers saw the late 1950s “folk boom” as the perfect time to embark on a commercial coffeehouse enterprise:

“At first, the proprietors of the coffee shops prohibited any singing or playing... but a folk singer is usually compelled by nature to sing folk songs, and one did... a new audience had been born...the word spread among the folk singing fraternity that a perfect platform for new songs and new singers had been discovered. In Sausalito, Pasadena, San Francisco, and Los Angeles new establishments appeared bearing such names as the Unicorn, the Garret, the Ash Grove and the Troubadour. In Philadelphia the Second Fret; the Exodus... they were springing up like dragon’s teeth near colleges and universities everywhere on the American Continent, each complete with appended folk singers and their audiences...The folk boom was the heyday of coffeehouses, which were scattered throughout the country...”<sup>122</sup>

Skidmore College alum Deborah Frankel Reese, in an email to me recounting her own memories of Caff  Lena, recalled hearing Brand on the radio speaking again on the role of coffeehouses. According to Reese, he described one coffeehouse in particular that

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<sup>122</sup> Baggelaar, Kristin and Milton, Donald. *Folk Music, More Than A Song*. Crowell Publishing, 1976. 79.

served as a beacon to him and others searching for a “a perfect platform for new songs and new singers.”

Recently, as I was driving up from NY to VT, I heard an interview with Oscar Brand on NPR. He is still performing, and writing songs, and said that his next concert would be at the Caffé Lena in Saratoga! When asked why, at such a small venue, he replied that for 40 years, it has remained a beacon for emerging artists, and for artists with new work, such as the reworked Vietnam era music of his, which he was bringing for a new generation of anti-war folks. He also said the audiences there were the best anywhere, and always had been. And that he had had a close relationship with Lena Spencer.<sup>123</sup>

Lena provided a family atmosphere with the love and support that essentially became a platform and a refuge for many in this generation who both needed and missed a safe space. She thus found herself at the epicenter of a national phenomenon that centered itself on spaces that fostered this spirit and enabled the progressive, radical transformation of young artists and activists into leaders of a countercultural movement. The folk revivalists who flocked to Lena’s doors sought to symbolize an imagined past for political purposes, but to also familiarize recently appropriated performance genres for artistic purposes in order to facilitate their own personal growth, just as Lena did. As Bob Cantwell writes in “When We Were Good:”

“The postwar folk revival...was... a series of transformations: when the carriers of a superannuated ideological minority found themselves celebrated as the leaders of a mass movement; when an esoteric and anti-commercial enthusiasm turned into a commercial bonanza, when an alienated, jazz-driven, literary bohemia turned to the simple songs of an old rural America...”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Written correspondence: Deborah Frankel Reese, March 22, 2008

<sup>124</sup> Cantwell, Robert. *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*, Harvard University Press, 1997. 118.

More than simple songs, this generation was in need of a certain, simple lifestyle—the true antithesis of the postwar era’s overarching fascination with consumerism and capitalist power. This lifestyle, geared towards simplicity and valuing community and art over commercialism, resisted the larger culture. Without the crucial, radical homespace of places like Lena’s Caff , the countercultural folk revival whose values set it apart from mainstream culture would not have had critical locations from which to foster and build its community in quite the same way. As bell hooks writes, “For when a people no longer have the space to construct homeplace, we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance.”<sup>125</sup>

*Coffeeshouses and festivals of the folk revival*

As Kristin Baggelaar contended, “The recent folk revival in the United States generated a need for meeting places where young singers could perform and perfect their art.”<sup>126</sup> Rosalie and many others had the need, and Lena provided the place where these young singers could perform and perfect their art. Lena’s Caff  augmented the familial feel of a larger movement in an intimate way, fostering it in a safe place that allowed it to grow in a network of other such places. As Sorrels recounted:

The Caff  really was directly connected into that [network]. It was a real important place to play because [Lena] was a real connector. She would make people listen to the people she thought were good. She thought Arlo was good, and she was the first person who put him on in a cafe setting, I think, or a small

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<sup>125</sup> hooks, bell. Essay: *Homeplace. The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color*. Edited by D. Soyini Madison. Martin’s Press, Inc. New York, New York. 1994. 24.

<sup>126</sup> Baggelaar, Kristin and Milton, Donald. *Folk Music, More Than A Song*. Crowell Publishing, 1976. 79.

intimate setting. She was the first person who put on Don McLean and any number of other people. She always knew how good they were gonna be, and she would find people and make them listen to you. She would also send along the right people. It was a real conduit to the community of people you needed to get involved with, if you wanted to participate in that. In the '60s I felt a kind of sense that there were certain people that were determined that people like me would have a place to play and find their voice. That was one of the things that Lena did that was really absolute. She felt like there were certain people who needed someone like her to look after them. She was really great, and she would really encourage, instead of telling you that you should get a day job.<sup>127</sup>

Echoing Rosalie's words, Larry Dudley sought to uncover the connections between the folk revival of the 1960s and the larger cultural period.

"Folk music was important then as a bridge between the idealism of the '60s; the civil rights, student protests and anti-war movements and the radicalism of the past; the songs of striking coal miners and auto workers in the '30s or the radical farmers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. New ideas abounded; a young new President called the nation to idealism while Martin Luther King challenged the nation's conscience. The folk music scene was a place where new ideas were tried out and tested. It was one of the intellectual engines that helped remake America in the '60s."<sup>128</sup>

In fact there were many such "intellectual engines" during this time besides the coffeehouses where youth went to hear up-and-coming performers. The Caff  both played a part in and influenced these gathering places. Festivals, and the educational institutions where youth went to school and protested served the purpose of disseminating information about the decade to an eager young audience. Lena recalled traveling to Boston, her birthplace, to stay connected to the circuit developing within the folk music world:

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<sup>127</sup> Interview: Rosalie Sorrels. New York, New York. January 2004.

<sup>128</sup> Dudley, Larry, *The Saratogian*, "Bridging the Years at Caff  Lena: Specials to Mark 28<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration," 1988

And the early folksingers, strangers to us at first, but soon to become close and devoted friends: Dave Van Ronk and Dick Weissman and Logan English and Molly Scott who recommended and introduced us to their fellow artists and the list was started. The weekly Monday night trips to New York and the Hoots at Gerde's, the visits to Izzy Young at the Folklore Center on McDougal, the Gaslight and the Bitter End, the Feenjon and in Boston, the Golden Vanity and the Yana and all those places where we met and heard so many more and the list grew and grew.<sup>129</sup>

In upstate New York, two touring musicians, Bob and Evelyn Beers fantasized about putting on a music concert in their backyard and started The Fox Hollow Music Festival in 1966. This festival acted as a lesson in the current folk music scene for local presenters including Lena Spencer, who set up a “Caff  Lena tent” in order to further her venue and attract a larger audience. Rosalie Sorrels remembers Lena’s involvement in these networks and the radical homespace presence she brought with her to Fox Hollow:

People brought people to her, and she would go to different places, festivals. She went to the Fox Hollow Festival and had a cooking booth there. I don’t know how long that was running, but she was doing that when I was there. She cooked soup, set up a Caff  Lena tent; it was great.<sup>130</sup>

Presenters at this concert were privy to information that would inform them on how to run their own festivals and events, as well as cultural information about the tastes and trends of the era. Likely, Lena gained a newfound awareness of her audience, its impulses, and its political mindset from the Fox Hollow Festival.

Gathering points across the country such as these provided a network of information sites at which young activists were informed of current events and from where they often initiated change. Bob Cantwell writes:

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<sup>129</sup> Lena Spencer: Written reflection: January 8, 1989, Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>130</sup> Interview: Rosalie Sorrels, New York, New York. January 2004.

“When we consider the map of American culture as it organized itself around the folk revival, an unaccustomed picture emerges, one in which an intricate circulatory system of cultural ideas, often entangled with but essentially independent of the official and visible system, works through informal networks of people and communities to shape the collective experience in ways that are significantly more than a simple reiteration of social power. Above all, it is a cultural process, one in which the imagination proves more powerful than either the sword or the dollar, and in its moment capable of a permanent in-flight course correction.”<sup>131</sup>

As Cantwell argues, the folk revival’s power lay in the imaginations of those who wielded culture as a tool to inform and forever alter the course of history. Caff  Lena was a critical space in which culture was wielded in an intimate setting. During the folk revival, radio and television played important roles in disseminating culture, but in the movement’s adherence to an ideology of communal gathering there also had to be immediate, informal spaces where culture could be shared and exchanged. However, places that provided a *home*-like intimacy outlasted those that provided *only* the intimacy of a small space. Caff  Lena stands out as a place that nurtured and cared for its performers in a close-knit, familial, Italian-American style setting among other venues that did not have such a mother figure as Lena.

Caff  Lena could not keep roots music alive all on its own. A nationwide network of strong, excellent venues where people can share their art paralleled and grew with the musical tastes of the folk revival movement.<sup>132</sup> When Club 47 in Cambridge, Massachusetts first opened as a jazz venue, Lena’s own predilection for jazz inspired her to hire pioneer jazz violinist Joe Venutti to perform. Their common Italian American

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<sup>131</sup> Cantwell, Robert. *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*, Harvard University Press, 1997. 19.

<sup>132</sup> Interview Craig: Sarah. Saratoga Springs, New York: March 2008.

background, rooted in the hospitality of food enabled Lena to form a unique kind of bond with this performer in a way that may not have happened at Club 47 (now Club Passim) or elsewhere in quite the same way. Lena recalled:

“When [Venuti] walked in and saw all the young people who had come to hear him, he was overwhelmed. He was always upset that cover charges in New York prevented young people from hearing him. Well, I got him for a second booking only by promising to duplicated the Italian meal I had fixed after his first performance.”<sup>133</sup>

In my previous chapter Terry Leonino argues that it was also her Italian American background that enabled her to bond with Lena on a different level than most club owners. This quality is unique to Lena’s Caff  and makes it a particular place with an identity rooted in an ethnic culture that enabled it to foster relationships not possible in other places.

The first few months were rocky for both Club Passim and Caff  Lena as the local police shut them down, citing fire codes violations which many attributed to a popular fear of “beanik culture.” However, growing groups of performers and supporters in each respective city rallied and held their own hootenannies to keep the music going. The strong communities such activities built around these respective clubs remains to this day. For over four decades, these legendary East Coast non-profit venues have been known as premier places where new and established musical performers are showcased. Both clubs claim to have produced a generation of performers, festival organizers, and managers. Both were enormously influential during the 1960s folk boom, and both claim important roles in America's musical and cultural history.

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<sup>133</sup> *Eye on Saratoga*, Holiday Issue. 1985. The article goes on to mention that “Some of Lena’s famed recipes will appear next month.”

Yet Caff  Lena was and is a radical homespace among coffeehouses. It stood out from other locations because of the unique way Lena ran it; nurtured by her maternal nature, infused with a defiant attitude based on her own life experience that helped it to survive, stay magnetic for performers through the years, and remain a neutral ground as the world around it changed. Lena’s radical homespace did not *fundamentally* change over time; It remained consistent and steadfast, always providing a source of support for artists who needed a place to perform and feel “at home.” Yet the Caff  adapted to change by shifting from a two person business to a one-woman proprietorship and later into a non-profit whose programming adapted Lena’s principles to a new generation, which I will touch on in the following chapter. When Lena became sole proprietress, her Caff  began to embody her spirit in a way that lasted well after her passing.

*She didn’t need him she had her Caff *

In 1963, Bill left Lena. In Lena’s words, from her song “Lena the Queen of Saratoga:”

She had a husband named Bill  
She really loved him until  
Billy boy he took a fancy to a college girl named Nancy  
Down old Saratoga way

Then she met another fella  
He told Lena she was bella  
Laid it on real thick  
But although he called her honey  
All he wanted was her money  
That made Lena sick

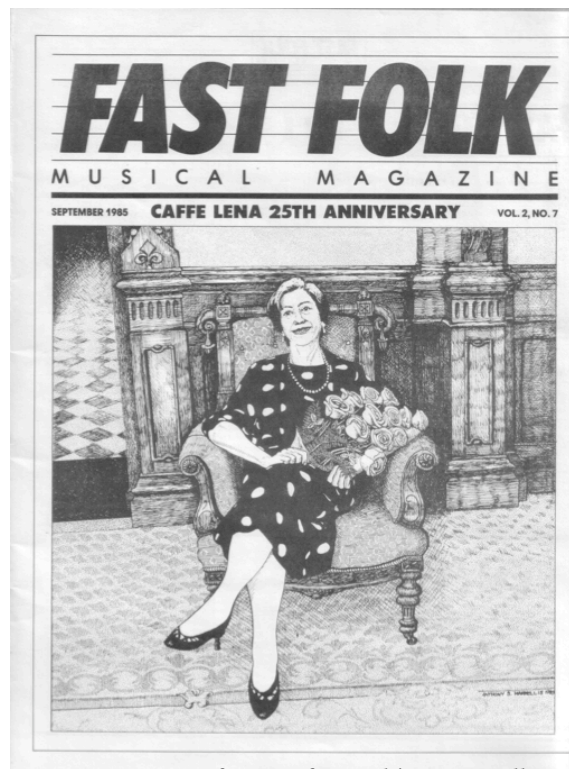
She gave him the old heave ho  
And not once did she grieve oh  
She didn’t need him she had her caf   
She gave it her devotion  
It’s known across the ocean



From coast to coast and you hear people say...<sup>134</sup>

For Lena, the Caff  from the mid-’60s until her passing would always serve as a reminder of, and a solace from the pain of Bill’s departure. As hooks writes, “We can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole.”<sup>135</sup> In this way, Lena’s struggle to create a radical homeplace as a means to cope with Bill’s absence and as a method for survival became the Caff ’s struggle. With a “fist in the air” attitude embedded in it, the Caff  maintained struggle as an underlying aspect. It was and continues to be a fundamental part of how the Caff  operates. As Lena wrote in her 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary program, looking back on her experience defying the odds with the help of others,

“...Then after two years the heartbreak of Bill's leaving and the determination to go it alone, come hell or high water. And although the heat became intense at times and the water rose to waist level more often than not, always there were loving friends to cool things down and dry things out and give me the incentive and inspiration to go on.”<sup>136</sup>



*Lena Spencer featured in Fast Folk Magazine*

<sup>134</sup> Lena Spencer, “Lena the Queen of Saratoga,” 1989.

<sup>135</sup> hooks, bell. Essay: *Homeplace. The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color*. Edited by D. Soyini Madison. Martin’s Press, Inc. New York, New York. 1994. 454.

<sup>136</sup> Lena Spencer: 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration program. 1985. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

Lena persevered when Bill left the Caff . She struggled to run the Caff  on her own, and on her own terms as a site for care, comfort, and resistance against the oppressive, increasing lure of commercialism for the remainder of her life. Creating a radical homespace inspired meaning for herself and by extension those around her. hooks goes on to write, "When we renew our concern with homeplace, we can address political issues that most affect our daily lives...with this foundation, we can regain lost perspective, give life new meaning."<sup>137</sup>

*A renewed concern with making a radical homespace: The sights, sounds and smells at Caff  Lena*

*"A home usually acts as a place to sleep and store personal property, and contains sanitary facilities and a means of preparing food...broader than a physical dwelling. Home is often a place of refuge and safety, where worldly cares fade and the things and people that one loves become the focus."<sup>138</sup>*

How did Caff  Lena look, sound, smell and feel as a radical homespace? For one thing, Lena appeared to always be on the premises. After Bill's exit, Lena's renewed concern with the radical homespace she built manifested itself in her increasing attachment to her Caff ; at certain points she even lived in its building. David Silverhart recalled:

She did live here for a while. We kept waiting to get eviction notices from the city. But they were good; they looked the other way. Legally the space was not supposed to be lived in, and I think the city fathers and zoning people moved of

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Website: Random House Dictionary, "home:"  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/home>  
Accessed on March 11, 2008

At her Caff , the sounds of Lena's espresso machine lured customers in as Parisi's  
fore her. Her menu, a mixture of traditional Italian pastries and homemade Italian  
inks gave the space a sense of comfort that Don McLean, one of the Caff 's early  
mers, remembers fondly:

[illegible]

<b>Hot Drinks</b>	
Regular and Decaf Coffee (Free rolls)	\$2.00
<i>"We serve Organic Fair Trade coffee prepared for us by Java Hot Roasters."</i>	
<b>Coffee Lena</b>	
Dark roast coffee blended with chocolate & hot milk, topped with whipped cream & nutmeg	see \$9.00 / \$4.00 lg
<b>Hot Hala</b>	
A shot of Turkish coffee blended with hot milk, topped with whipped cream & cinnamon	see \$9.00 / \$4.00 lg
<b>Latte</b>	
A shot of Turkish coffee blended with hot milk	see \$2.75 / \$1.75
<b>Hot Chocolate</b>	see \$2.50 / \$3.50 lg
Cocoa Menthé - Hot chocolate with a shot of mint	see \$2.50 / \$3.50 lg
<b>Iced Drinks</b>	
<b>Coffee Lena</b>	
Iced coffee blended with milk & chocolate, topped with whipped cream & nutmeg	see \$9.00 / \$4.00 lg
<b>Iced Hala</b>	
An iced shot of Turkish coffee blended with milk & topped with whipped cream and cinnamon	see \$9.00 / \$4.00 lg
<b>Iced Chocolate</b>	
A tall glass of rich chocolate milk topped with whipped cream & cocoa	see \$2.75 / \$3.75 lg
<b>Iced Tea - Unsweetened and fresh brewed</b>	\$1.50
Iced Lemon Tea - Half tea and half lemonade	\$1.75
Lemonade	\$1.50
Cola	\$1.25
Seltzer	\$1.25

House Favorites		
<i>See back cover for "This Weekend's Specials"</i>		
<b>Cheese and Crackers</b>		
Large plate of Cheddar, Monstero, Swiss & Pepper duck with an assortment of crackers		\$5.90
Chocolate Chip Cookies		
Three generous Tollhouse cookies warm from the oven		\$3.90
<b>Turkish Coffee</b>		
Flan, or sweet, or with cardamom.		
Available in decaf.		\$2.50
<b>Italian Sodas</b>		
Refreshing & not too sweet. Choose one flavor, or try mixing.		\$2.25
Available flavors		
Almond • Raspberry • Chocolate-Iced • Vanilla • Caramel		
<b>Hot Teas</b>		
Black Tea • Earl Grey • English Breakfast • Daringdeal • Constant Comment		\$3.90
Herbal & Decaf blends		
Lemon Zinger • Chamomile • Almond Sunset • Raspberry Zinger		
Peppermint • Decaf Earl Grey • Decaf Black Tea		
<p><i>"I came straight up to the phone, got took care of, got a place to sleep, got fed and got a place to work. Even one of my oldest friends. I won't just like she be my play there, she took care of me. I'll be like loved me. I hope I can hold onto my chicks as long as she has."</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ayla Galtier</p>		

*Caff  Lena Menu: 2008*

<sup>139</sup> Interview: Sandra and David Silverhart, Saratoga Springs, New York. May, 2004.

<sup>140</sup> Phone Interview: Don McLean. August 2006.

I don't really know, but I have a feeling that the first place she'd go is into the kitchen to see what they're putting out. And see how they're making it, and is there enough sugar in this or enough, you know. Because that was where she was absolutely the authority.<sup>141</sup>

Another arena in which Lena was the absolute authority in her Caff   was when it came to drugs and alcohol. Although Lena, and by extension, the Caff   stayed away from alcohol, a practice that would continue through present day to keep the attention on the music, cigarette smoking seemed more "bohemian" to Lena and she tolerated it. So much so, that Joseph Deuel remembers Lena smoking Pall Mall cigarettes, its slogan "wherever particular people congregate" highlighting the communal aspect of her Caff  . (Pall Malls were the number one cigarette in America in 1960, the year Lena and Bill founded Caff   Lena.) Joe recalled:

Up until '87...this is something that nobody mentions...everyone smoked. You'd go up there and there was smoke all the time. Lena's doctor had made her quit smoking— she was always smoking Pall Malls I think. She was good; she never smoked again. But after a couple of months of not smoking she said, "Well, maybe this would be a good time for the Caff   to go smoke-free" (laughs) That's one of those little things that you don't really think about, but you can try to paint a picture of what the place was like, all the smoke was there up until the time Lena died. It's nice that there's no smoke in there now.<sup>142</sup>

She was also the utmost authority on the Scrabble board. While the early coffeehouses in the 1960s were famous for being spaces that "lured customers to gather, play Checkers, and chat in a warm and friendly atmosphere," Scrabble was another way that Lena personalized her Caff   and in doing so, became a radical even in the folk world by veering from the norm, making herself a niche that was both unique and memorable.

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<sup>141</sup> Interview: Jack Landron. New York, New York. June 2006.

<sup>142</sup> Interview: Joseph Deuel, Joseph. Saratoga Springs, New York. October 2003.

From a young age, Lena sought out spaces to be creative and explore her love of words.

She recalled:

[Growing up] I was a loner and I liked to read and I didn't like to play games with kids....whenever my mother would go visiting and take me along, I remember there was one lady we used to go and visit. She had a lot of books...I'd just stick myself in a corner and read.<sup>143</sup>

Earlier in life when her father prohibited her from getting a job, Lena reacted by retreating into her love of literature. She remembered, "I read every chance I got. I'd take books out of the library and I'd buy books..."<sup>144</sup> According to those who knew her well, Lena's love of Scrabble stemmed from her love of words and in fact manifested in her choice of performers she would hire while it earned her a widespread reputation among the artists at her Caff . Terry and Greg remembered Lena's connection to Scrabble and her "house rules" that extended even to this game:

We would come down in the afternoon just to play a game of scrabble with her. We became Scrabble addicts because of her. We started carrying Scrabble boards on the road with us. She was the cutthroat Scrabble player. And of course it was Lena's house rules. Lena could put down a hundred-point word without even thinking of it...She was a person of words. Not just because of Scrabble. She loved words. She would pick you as a musician because of your writing as well as because of your musicianship. So the words meant a lot to her. She was so well read.<sup>145</sup>

Utah Phillips, at a live performance on the stage of Caff  Lena while strumming his guitar, recalled how Lena's Scrabble games permeated the ambiance at Caff  Lena:

I always thought someday I'd get back here. Always thought I would. Thirty-Six years ago I stuck my head up that stairway there. I was late. Roma Baron was on the stage. It was December 1969. On the lamb in Utah. Year after year, it was

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<sup>143</sup> Sobel, Harriet. Interview with Lena Spencer. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>145</sup> Interview: Greg Artzner and Terry Leonino, Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007.

kind of a zoo. There was old Tom and Lena at that back table, remember old Tom who used to work at the track eight years before he retired. They'd play Scrabble during the performance. You'd be singing some nice sensitive song and suddenly somebody would yell, 'that's not a word!'<sup>146</sup>

Of course the most common sound at the Caff  would be the folk music that emanated from the stage each night. One "nice, sensitive song" written in tribute to Lena and the welcoming, radical homespace ambiance at her Caff  is Pierce Petis' eulogy, "This is For Lena's Caf :"

Lena is older and the winters are colder  
Than they've been for quite a long time  
But a room full of smoke, music, laughter and hope  
Sure make that old place come alive

Stan Rodgers, Harry Chapin and Steve Goodman too  
They've all stood right here on this stage  
And the love that they left it still lives in this room  
Time cannot take it away<sup>147</sup>

Phillips' story and Petis' song capture a key element of the ambiance at the Caff : Lena's presence and the love she inspired permeated the feeling in the space she created. Caff  Lena was a radical homespace that acted as a place where Lena and others could work, sleep, eat, prepare food, and store their personal property in addition to singing, playing and presenting folk music, art, and theater. Much more than a music venue and much broader than a physical dwelling, the Caff  served as a place of refuge and safety. The Caff  allowed Lena to have a voice, and she in turn enabled others to have a voice. Their voices then rang out even on the bathroom walls, which, covered in graffiti, spoke of performers, political sentiments about the times, and feelings about the Caff  itself. Caff  patron Chuck Winans remembers this "wonderful graffiti:"

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<sup>146</sup> Transcribed by Jocelyn Arem, 2005.

<sup>147</sup> Pierce Petis, "This is For Lena's Caf " March 4, 1992.

With the paint job in the late 1970s went a whole lot of wonderful graffiti, including the comment "Don McLean Is A Twirp", written in bold black magic marker above the sink in the men's room. I bet there's a whole lot more wonderful graffiti now, but the stuff on the walls in the men's room up until 1979 or so was amazing. It likely dated back to the opening of the place. What an amazing time.<sup>148</sup>

As time passed, these voices became louder and echoed off the bathroom walls into the far reaches of the Caff  and finally, in 1989 when Lena passed away, they entered the pages of a memorial book. In this book, worldly cares fade and of the things and people that one loves became the focus of written reminiscences about the meaning of Lena's Caff  as a radical homespace and the nurturing effect it had on generations of artists and performers.

*Caff  Lena's Musical Family: Testimonial*

*"The story of the revival is, like other good stories, not finally about ballads or banjos but about real men and women and the movements in which they found their distinctive voices." -Bob Cantwell<sup>149</sup>*

The sign-in book from Lena's memorial contains pages of stories about the importance of Lena in the lives of those who miss her dearly. On the stage of Caff  Lena, storytelling acts as a form of history making, education, entertainment, social protest, self-expression, and community building. In the sign-in book, stories act in much the same way. The story embedded in the history of the Caff  is the social history of an extended family, long winding branches on a family tree.

In the expressive history that emerges, there exists a sense of communal identification. Caff  Lena serves as a multigenerational site for artists to gather and

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<sup>148</sup> Written Interview: Chuck Winans, May 20, 2002.

<sup>149</sup> Cantwell, Robert. *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*, Harvard University Press, 1997.

create. It connects generations of musicians, links them through time, and shows their lineage through the stratification of the local and national artistic community. Stories about the Caff  and Lena show how its importance to America’s folk musicians is grounded in its sense of community.

The Caff  not only served as a unique, radical homespace for Lena’s self-made family, but for generations of biological families. It served as this same space for self-made groups and family offshoots as well, including The Pick'n & Sing'n Gather'n who met regularly there and the Wildflowers folk music collective, a booking co-op of Saratoga Musicians that from 1971-1973 produced and played music in the local area. Their “home base” was Caff  Lena and meetings were held there where Lena would often cook for the gang.

*How do you condense in a few short paragraphs the memories, the experiences, the love that spans two and a half decades? They'd fill a book and someday they will.*  
–Lena Spencer

The following memories stem from Lena’s Memorial sign-in book, oral history accounts, letters, and other musings. They reveal Lena’s character as the mother of folk music for generations of artists, patrons, community members, and volunteers, and the meaning and place of her Caff  as a radical homespace:

*“Those stories went, they went into the minds and the heads and the memories of all of us. And that’s oral history! That’s folk music for you; Oral folk tradition.”*  
–Greg Artzner<sup>150</sup>

“Lena, we’ve never met formally, but I feel I know you from meeting all the staff, volunteers and patrons of your Caff . They are all very different, but have one common cause- keeping your dream alive. Oh, and the folk music is heavenly. Your family grows bigger every day.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Interview: Greg Artzner, Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007

<sup>151</sup> Karen A Marion, Ballston Spa, New York. October 6, 1996. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum



“In 1969 I met my Arthur...on March 15, 1970 we were married on the stage of the Caff  Lena! We wrote our own ceremony...there were 100 invited guests...they crossed all social and life style lines...FAA and county workers, “hippies,” a couple of bikers (one in top hat and tails) musicians- everyone...one guest hitch hiked from Bennington College on a milk truck. Dave Bromberg did a set for us and Lena “auditioned” some kids for more music. Lena made the cookies and coffee and sort of “glued” the whole affair together. What a beautiful day! 20 years, but it seems like yesterday.”<sup>152</sup>

“In this world, as it is, it is very difficult to grow, because to grow sometimes mean you can find someone you can trust. As a young man I met just a few people who I felt I could trust. And sometimes I was fooled. When I first met Lena Spencer, it must have been over twenty years ago, I came to believe that she was someone I could believe, someone I could trust. I stayed with her in those days when I played at her coffeehouse, and she took care of me. I learned that reality was larger than I had imagined, as I began to find myself in a universe of ideas. She was one of my early teachers, and to this day I love her dearly. I believe in Lena yesterday, today and tomorrow. She is someone worthy of your trust. I love you Lena.”<sup>153</sup>

“Lena Spencer and the Caff  are responsible for my career as a songwriter and performer. After many years of writing and singing songs for my family and friends I heard about a place where I could try out my music in public. I walked through the old wooden doors and up the narrow stairs. I asked to put my name on the list of open mike performers for that evening. When I finished my set Lena motioned for me to come speak to her.

‘Come out to my office, dear,’ she said.

I followed her out onto the metal stairs outside the back door.

‘I enjoyed your performance. Tell me, where else have you played?’

‘My living room,’ I answered.

Lena tilted her head back, looked up thoughtfully and said, ‘My living room. I don’t believe I know the club.’

And so another career in folk music began. Lena invited me to come back next week. In time, she gave me my first opener (for Dave Van Ronk), my first showcase, and finally my debut performance. *Through the years Caff  Lena has remained my musical home.* [My emphasis] Thanks to the guidance and encouragement Lena gave to me I have been able to grow as a writer and performer and have had the opportunity to share my music with audiences in many towns...If Caff  Lena had not been there I could still be sitting in my living

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<sup>152</sup> Mary Lea, Glens Falls, NY, November 17, 1989. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>153</sup> Arlo Guthrie, 1987. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

room. Lena created a nurturing environment where new artists are given the opportunity to experiment, learn and grow.”<sup>154</sup>

The Caff  is also responsible for my own career in the folk music world. In 2000, I played an open mic at Caff  Lena. After performing a song I had just written, I sat down at one of the small round tables by the stage and settled back into my seat to listen to the next performer. In the dimly lit room, I could barely make out the figure of a woman, as she made her way towards my table. Crouching down beside me, she said, “see me in my office.” After the open mic ended, I met this woman, the Caff ’s manager Sarah Craig in the Caff  Lena office. In a conversation not unlike the one between Lena and Camille West, Sarah gave me the opportunity to play my debut performance at Caff  Lena.

Thanks to Sarah’s guidance and encouragement, (through the nurturing environment and sensibility I now know to be passed down through Lena) like Camille West and countless others before me, I have grown as a writer and performer and had the opportunity to share my music with audiences in many places. If Caff  Lena had not been there, I too could still be sitting in my living room and more to the point, I may not be writing these words now. From the nurturing environment that Lena created, I was inspired to create my own art, and in turn, to document and preserve the unique heritage from where my inspiration began.

*1970s-80s: “There is now a street that bears my name:” The Caff ’s recognition changes the landscape*

*“That’s the thing about folk music and that’s what Lena provided, a place for all of us just to keep meeting with people and define those little windows of knowledge about the music. You won’t remember the history unless you meet the people and make the connections.” –Terry Leonino<sup>155</sup>*

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<sup>154</sup> Camille West, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Remembrance. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>155</sup> Interview: Terry Leonino, Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007.

The movement away from the conservative fifties continued and eventually resulted in revolutionary ways of thinking and real change in the cultural fabric of American life. Many of the radical ideas of the 60's gained wider acceptance in '70s and '80s and were mainstreamed into American life and culture. The conflict in Vietnam and the growing Civil Rights movement made visible political strains not as evident in past decades as notions of non-violence and equality were mainstreamed into American life and culture.

A growing interest in the hippie subculture took hold of a generation of young Americans. While hippies inherited the countercultural values of the beat generation, their political ideology was unique to the 1960s and 1970s. Hippies rejected established institutions, criticized middle class values, opposed the war, and aimed to create intentional communities. As the "radical" ideas of the 1960's gained wider acceptance, Caff  Lena began to settle into a newly accepted place in Saratoga Springs. American culture flourished and the Caff  found that it too, served an important role in affirming notions of community that had taken root in the American imagination since the earlier decade. With this social realignment came greater acceptance of the Caff  itself. After all, she had created her own "intentional community" well before it became a popular fad. Finally, her Caff  began to become recognized by the city and outside community. While it seemed like a vibrant time for the Caff , this recognition would come as a mixed blessing to Lena.

In the early 1980s the city of Saratoga Springs saw many business come and go, but not many lasted as long as the Caff . To recognize the Caff 's longevity and

contributions to the city, it named nearby Hamilton alley “Lena Lane” after the now-famous proprietress. Terry Leonino recalled:

There was a loud disco place down the street from Lena’s that didn’t make it. And that’s what I want to point out: all these people that didn’t like Lena, and there weren’t that many, it was because they thought she wasn’t hip enough, wasn’t keeping up with the times. But that disco place disappeared before Lena’s disappeared. She had a great relationship with the Chicken Shack, and everybody on her block, and that’s why they wanted to name the block after her. She brought things to that community that they wouldn’t have had. She brought a culture and a community”<sup>156</sup>

Lena is quoted as saying, “The Caff  is my whole existence, the be-all and end-all of my life. My life began almost in 1960.”<sup>157</sup> Her life became so entwined with her Caff  that it defined the spatial and temporal borders of her identity. Lena, who had poured her entire life into a radical homespace that placed the community’s needs before her own including her health and personal life, took the news of her new eponymous alley with a tinge of disappointment. In a phone message to then Board member Dick Kavanaugh Lena shared her bittersweet news:

“Hi, this is Lena. There is now a street that bears my name. Lena- Lane. Howda you like that? Oh brother I don’t know... I’ve got an alley named after me. How do you like that. Wow, I am now an... I don’t know. If you don’t have anything to do come down and talk to me. I need somebody to talk to. Goodbye.”<sup>158</sup>

Judging by the depressed sound of her voice in this phone message, which is nearly impossible to describe, Lena found the news of her recognition by her adopted city

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Carola, Chris, Associated Press writer, “Lena Lives Near Where Young Dylan Sang,” Unknown publication, March 5, 1989. Courtesy of the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>158</sup> Phone message to Dick Kavanaugh.

to be somewhat amusing and deeply disturbing. It must have signified to her that although she had created a radical home away from home environment far from her native city, she would never truly be home. Unable to be accepted by her home community in Milford, abandoned by her husband in a new place and forced to adapt as best she could, Lena's "acceptance" left her with a residual loneliness. Although she could create a radical homespace for others, she would always long for a connection with a past she would never fully reclaim.

Lena's Caff  reshaped the reality of a city and a social movement in a crucial way; first in the sphere of collective consumption and then in the private realm. From, "Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants:" "The public phase of an innovation can be termed *heroic*, in that it changes reality. The subsequent private phase must be termed *conformist*, in that, on its own, it demonstrates no change of dynamic, but functions rather to affirm and stabilize."<sup>159</sup>

In the first phase of her career, Lena's innovativeness as a coffeehouse proprietress established her as a hero among the collective scene of folk performers. In the next phase of the Caff 's life, Lena's steadfast reputation earned her Caff  the opportunity to affirm and stabilize itself within the community, even influencing other venues to adopt the principles that had kept it going since 1960. In 1973 the Lena-influenced Lively Lucys Coffeehouse opened at Skidmore College and the Caff  released its "Welcome To Caff  Lena" album. After decades of presenting folk music on a little street in Saratoga, it seemed to many that Lena had created the idyllic folk coffeehouse

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<sup>159</sup> Schivelbusch and Jacobson, "Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants:" Pantheon Books, New York, 62

she dreamed of with Bill in the 1950s and sang of in her rendition of Nelson Eddie's song,  
"Sweet Little Café in a Square:"

We'll have a sweet little Café  
In a neat little square  
We'll find our fortune  
And our happiness there  
We will thrive on the vane and resplendent  
And contrive to remain independent

We'll have a meek reputation  
And a shiek clientele  
Things will fall under our spell  
We'll be so zealous  
That the world will be jealous  
Of our sweet little Café in a square<sup>160</sup>

*"Once the music started, you felt like you were jamming on the front porch of an old tin shack  
down south" –Harry and Lea Darling<sup>161</sup>*

"I can smell the smells and hear the sounds, and see the light come in faintly through the wooden shutters in the morning and afternoon, and fade into the street-lights of the evening. Or do I imagine remembering this? I don't imagine remembering Lena, with great heart, dignity, truth. Its interesting...I don't remember as much about me in that place, as a performer, person, young woman, as I do about Lena and the size of her presence in that space, with the sound of the coffee machine and the bustle in the kitchen...Lena...your deep, gentle presence resonates in my memories with grace and persistence. Thank you!"<sup>162</sup>

Homespace for Molly Scott recalls the person, the human factor. Caffé Lena in Lena's time was not a mental construct of home but an actual place that, because of Lena's personality, produced during her era the same comfort that Michael Ann

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<sup>160</sup> Eddie, Nelson, "Sweet Little Caffé On a Square" *Welcome to Caffé Lena* Album, 1972.

<sup>161</sup> Written Interview: Harry and Lea Darling, Burnt Hills, NY. Unknown date. Courtesy of the Caffé Lena Collection.

<sup>162</sup> Molly Scott, Written Remembrance for 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration. April 30, 1985. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

Williams' "home-place" does. Its "culture and community" explain why the Caff  survived and why so many other businesses came and went. Lena's determination to bring art and culture to Saratoga, her understanding of Victorian society and her place in relation to it, her courage and defiance in the face of preconceived notions about her intentions and her ability to defend itself in changing times are critical aspects of her personality that remain with the Caff  in its new function as a third space today.

*From Radical Homespace to Third Place*

*"It's kind of an amazing thing, really that that little Caff  on that little street in Saratoga Springs, New York is such an important piece in American musical history."*  
-Greg Artzner<sup>163</sup>

In 1989, Lena passed away following a fall down the Caff 's stairs. She was on her way to hear Spalding Gray at the Egg in Albany. She had just begun to write her autobiography, which she would never finish. From her autobiography:

Today is January 8, 1989, four days after my 66th birthday and into the 29th year of the existence of my cafe. The Caff  Lena in Saratoga Springs, New York. It is purported to be the oldest continuously running coffeehouse in the U.S. and since the claim has never been challenged we'll go along for the time being with that claim...<sup>164</sup>

From the Caff 's website:

"Upon the death of our founder, Lena Spencer, in 1989, Caff  Lena was converted to a non-profit institution which today continues as a living legend: breathing in ideas, dreams, and possibilities --breathing out music, poetry and theater."<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Interview: Greg Artzner, Takoma Park, Maryland. July 2007.

<sup>164</sup> Lena Spencer: Autobiography, Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>165</sup> Caff  Lena Website: [www.caffelena.org](http://www.caffelena.org)

It is clear from the website passage that Caff  Lena maintained Lena’s human quality even after her physical presence was gone. It exists today infused with Lena’s idealistic hope and the radical defiance and progressivism that spurred her forward against all odds. It is the living embodiment of her spirit.

“Today, our sister Lena has gone to be with God forever...as she joins with the angels in singing their folk music to the good Lord.”<sup>166</sup> When she died at age 66 in her adopted town of Saratoga Springs, New York, Lena Spencer had created such a deeply embedded home environment, and relationship between herself and the world of folk music through the existence and survival of her Caff , it seems appropriate that this world followed her to meet the singing angels at the end of her life. *The Times Union* article continues, “Spencer, a seminal force in folk music, was remembered as a gentle woman always ready to lend a generous hand to struggling performers.”

In the early ‘70s, after her Caff  became an established venue for folk music, Lena Spencer’s friends and comrades began to take note of the vicissitudes of the Caff ’s operation. This eventually became a forty-year evaluation period of the reasons for the success and longevity of Caff  Lena. Not one of these evaluations neglects to name Lena herself, and the homey atmosphere she created, as the driving force behind the Caff ’s continued existence. Michael Cooney, known as the “one-man folk festival,” wrote in the liner notes of the 1972 recording “Welcome to Caff  Lena:”

“There are a lot of good reasons why the Caff  Lena is so nice. The first is Lena Spencer. She plays herself, and she created the part. Little and big; great to hug; always in control, but almost out of control (on those busy nights); a big, warm, strong and brave heart’ a smile and a welcome for everyone’ a snap and a ‘keep

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<sup>166</sup> “Lena Spencer Eulogized In Hometown” *The Times Union* Obituaries, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1989. Courtesy of the Saratoga Springs History Museum.



quiet' in the back room!' (on those busy nights); a flair for the dramatic and boundless enthusiasm. She is the Caff , and the Caff  is she.”<sup>167</sup>

“Lena created the part” shows how Lena’s flair for theater became encapsulated in her identity in relation to the Caff . Not only did she form her own blackbox theater but she used her performance skills to further embody the personality that she created for herself in her own radical homespace.

*To say that Lena is the Caf  is to oversimplify her;  
Nevertheless, the caf  does reflect many of Lena’s values, inborn and learned.”*  
-Tony Morano<sup>168</sup>

Who would run the Caff  after Lena’s passing? What would become of the radical homespace that Lena created? Sandra Silverhart discussed the evolution of the Caff :

[When Lena died] there was dissention as to the direction of the Caff  and what would happen to Lena’s things. I think that the board then kept evolving and changing. There were some people that were absolutely totally dedicated to Lena, to remembering Lena, to preserving the Caff  and all the things that were connected to Lena. These people are so committed; it’s really wonderful.<sup>169</sup>

Dawn Crandell remembered how Lena’s extended family banded together after she passed away to make sure the Caff  would continue to evolve:

I wrote a whole page in my journal about Lena’s passing, wondering what was going to happen to the Caff . Already it was an important place to me. When they hired Barb Harris to be the first manager when Lena passed, I started volunteering as a waitress here. I think then I was 15. Barb just became like a big sister to me. We’re really close. At first my mom would just drop me off and then [she] started waiting tables too so I was the head wait staff and my mom was my second waiter! (laughs) It was a family affair. It really became a *family*: me and my mom and Donna and Peter... it was a really wonderful time for me as an artist to

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<sup>167</sup> Cooney, Michael. Album notes, *Welcome to Caff  Lena*. Biograph Records, 1972.

<sup>168</sup> Tony Morano, 1975.

<sup>169</sup> Interview: Sandra Silverhart, Saratoga Springs, New York. May 2004.

sort of develop in this older supportive network of artistic people. It was this very warm environment.<sup>170</sup>

In 1991 the Caff  evolved into a non-profit, run by a Board of Directors. Soon after, Sandra and David gave the Board first option to buy the building, which it purchased in 1998:

[We decided to sell the building because] we were both getting on... We were approached by another businessman in town, as a backup [but] we kept hoping Sally [Harder] would pull it off. We were thrilled that they were able to do it. The Caff  needed to continue; it was great that they persevered. It worked. It was good for them, and we were thrilled. It's great that the Board continues to be involved.<sup>171</sup>

Following Lena's passing, those who loved Lena and her Caff  stayed involved to run it in her absence while the Caff 's space went through a visually subtle, yet fundamentally dramatic shift. While the Caff  was not so different to look at—its walls still looked as they did in 1960, the coffee still brewed in the same kitchen as it always had, the waitresses still bustled around small, round wooden tables carrying pastries made



from Lena's famous recipes to eager guests, and performers still played their folk music on the Caff 's unassuming stage—something was radically different.

No longer would Lena's voice be heard calling out letters over

*Lena Spencer bust, by Sharon Boyd. Photo by Jocelyn Arem 2008*

<sup>170</sup> Interview: Dawn Crandell, Saratoga Springs, New York. May, 2005.

<sup>171</sup> Interview: Sandra and David Silverhart. Saratoga Springs, New York. May, 2004.

a Scrabble board in the back of the room. No longer would she greet guests at the top of the stairs like a mother welcoming her children home as she always had, inquire about their lives, ask why they had been away so long, and show them to their personal table. No longer would performers sleep at her home and/or at the Caffé. Without her there, the Caffé could not be the same “home” it had been to generations of performers who counted on *Lena* to guide and shelter them with her warm presence.

Yet, in her absence arose a new kind of place. Not a space—a business area rented or sold by one such as Lena who could instill her personality within its walls—but a place, an already identified location, a particular point used for a specific purpose that already had the mark of years of Lena’s love and labor in it. Just as folk music by its very nature adapts to new contexts, so too did Lena’s coffeehouse. As Bohlman states:

“Folk music has not, however, diminished in its symbolic role of distilling and representing a community’s social basis; rather, it has responded to a changing social basis by changing itself, absorbing different repertoires, and reflecting a stylistic congeries.”<sup>172</sup>

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Good evening, welcome to Caffé Lena. I would wish you all to know that you are being addressed by the modern-day, enduring toast of Caffé Lena society. Lena now hands the microphone over to Sarah Craig, the Caffé’s manager. Sarah recounts her notion of the Caffé’s residual feelings of radical homespace – the indelible yet esoteric mark that Lena left behind and which lay the groundwork for its evolution into a third

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<sup>172</sup> Bohlman, Philip V. *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*. Indiana University Press. Bloomington and Indianapolis. 1988. 57.

place. It's so nice of you all to be here. And it's so nice of Sarah Craig to be here. And won't you please welcome, Sarah Craig:

[The third place] is the heart of it. It's so hard to talk about that. And almost, you can't talk about it. Because you have to always talk about, we're here for the music and we're a folk club and stuff like that, but people are only here partly because of the music. They're here for that third place. And yet if you start to talk about that, you come across as cultish or religious or overly philosophical or any one of those things that can scare people away if you bring it up in the wrong context, but yet people will bring it up themselves, they'll write it on the bathroom walls. But it's just hard to explain, that that is the heart of what we do. And as a person who doesn't come from an artistic background, but who comes from a community organizing background, that's really what's most important to me about Caff  Lena. I love the music, I really do, and I love that this quasi-religious experiences comes packaged as music. But you know, it's beyond that."<sup>173</sup>

While the Caff  in Lena's absence could longer function as a radical homespace, traces of her sense of community and her defiance in the face of adversity remain as familiar and haunting as the creaks on the Caff 's stairs. These traces are the elusive, hard to explain "beyond" that still exist in the food, music, and the conversation around the Caff 's dimly lit tables. Those who carry Lena's legacy forward as a third place embody these qualities. Just why and how does the Caff  function as a third place? In my final chapter I examine the Caff  as a third place, as described in Ray Oldenburg's "The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community" and its role in today's changing world and contemporary coffeehouse culture

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<sup>173</sup> Interview: Sarah Craig and George Ward, Saratoga Springs, New York. March 7, 2008.

**CHAPTER FOUR:** *A Third Place: Coffeehouse Culture and the Caffé's future*  
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Welcome to Caffé Lena. As Lena would say, "I would wish you all to know that you are being addressed by the effervescent, irrepressible toast of Caffé Lena society." We now join Sarah Craig as she discusses the Caffé's transformation from radical homespace to third place. She cites the elements, or qualities reflective of Lena that remain in the Caffé after her passing. These elements reflect the radical homespace Lena created and now act as a code of conduct by which the Board of Directors and the Caffé's many volunteers run the Caffé as a third place. It's so nice of you all to be here. And it's so nice of Sarah Craig to be here. And won't you please welcome, Sarah Craig:

Elements of Lena's flavor have stayed the same; others have changed, along with folk music culture in general. Personally I don't think Lena would enjoy running the Caffé these days. Her ceramic bust told me so last night actually, when I was working on some e-mails. She would be dismayed by the demands of the performers, who even though they may be newcomers in their 20's, expect hotel rooms and restaurant meals as part of the basic hospitality. They wouldn't accept a pallet on the floor either at the Caffé or on someone's living room floor.

We do still treat the performers more like **friends or family** (my emphasis) rather than as hired help or units to be profited from. That's why most still see our place as a very welcome respite in their travels. And we pay them fairly in a straightforward manner, that is, I think, the way Lena used to pay people. Many clubs craft highly complex financial deals intended to maximize the venue's profits. I think it's our priority to maximize the artist's profits, and just get what we must get for ourselves to stay in business. I'm not sure if that was Lena's goal, but it does keep the Caffé firmly in the folk culture of the "old days" and not in the greedy, commercial "new days."

We've just done what seemed right in the moment, with a sense of what our **family values** (my emphasis) are, in a way and tried to act in accordance with a moral code that you just learn by being on the job. <sup>174</sup>

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Caff  Lena is a space suggestive of years past, when Lena Spencer built herself and others a radical homespace and reflection of the 1960s folk revival movement. It is an evolving connector between past and present because it maintains these elements while it functions as a shared space in today's world.

In this chapter I situate the Caff  as a third place – a place that functions not as a substitute for home as in Lena's radical homespace, but as a "home-like" *other* location that serves as "neither home nor work" but as Sarah Craig's says, as a place that is "...a very welcome respite..." Aside from this significant departure from a radical homespace, its mission to "maximize the artist's profits" (a radical act in a commercially driven business world) and its ability to outlast all other *original* (situated in their original location and with their original name) '60s-era coffeehouses and remain physically unchanged in a culture that demands assimilation reflect Ray Oldenburg's notion of a third place.

The Caff  maintains Lena's "flavor" which encompasses her sense of resistance—even to the passage of time, and her determination to build a home-like atmosphere with "family values." The Caff 's unchanged physical space, its survival in the face of tension and adversity, and its hospitality including the ability to provide a "neutral ground" for the community with an eye towards helping emerging as well as traditional artists are elements that define the Caff  as a third place today. It was not yet a "third place" in Lena's time because the phrase was not coined until her passing in 1989.

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<sup>174</sup> Interview: Sarah Craig. Saratoga Springs, New York. March 2008.

In this chapter I show how Lena's lasting legacy is responsible for the Caff  's ability to evolve and adapt in an increasingly globalized atmosphere, citing additions in programming such as the "On Wednesday Emerging Artist Series" and open mic night. The Caff   now faces such questions as: How much of its identity can/should it give up to survive? What's the tradeoff? When does changing its mission cross a line? What makes it possible to deal with these and other questions is being able to show where the line is that separates the Caff   from other commercial venues. Amid offers from corporate sponsors, and without Lena at the helm of the ship as she once was, the Caff   now struggles to retain its core ideals and aesthetics in a third place environment. Yet, its legacy as a self-conscious relic of her life, this period and the possibility of community enables it to survive in today's world.

*The times they are a'changin*

What was, as Sarah notes, "the folk culture of the "old days" and what constitutes the "greedy, commercial 'new days.'"? When she says, "Elements of Lena's flavor have stayed the same, others have changed, along with folk music culture in general" she refers to the shift in coffeehouse culture following the end of the folk revival period of the 1960s, which I outline in my previous chapter. As Thomas R. Gruning writes in his ethnography "Millenium Folk:"

"By the 1970s the traditional coffeehouse as a venue for contemporary folk music had become somewhat anachronistic. After the "folk scare" of the 1960s, the coffeehouse—the class bohemian artist hangout, owing as much or more to the 1950s beat generation as to the 1960s folkies—ceased to embody the same level of cultural cachet that it did during folk's brief commercial heyday."<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Gruning, Thomas R., *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties*. University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia. 2006. 104.

In his introduction to “Celebrating the Third Place” Oldenburg explains why and how this shift took place during these pivotal years:

“Ever since the solidifying effect of World War II passed into history, Americans have been growing further apart from one another. Lifestyles are increasingly privatized and competitive; residential areas are increasingly devoid of gathering places. To the extent of our affluence, we avoid public parks, public playgrounds, public schools, and public transportation.”<sup>176</sup>

Oldenburg cites postwar migration from cities to more rural environments as a main reason why communal spaces are disappearing and coffeehouse culture is not the same as it once was. I will later discuss how technology from this period onward also affected this shift and influences our communal experience today. The Caff  ’s immediate environment is also shifting. In 1982, Phila Street, in the “gut” of Saratoga Springs became part of the East Side Historic District roughly bounded by George, Henry, East, and North Sts., included on the National Registry of Historic Places. Caff   Lena’s role as a third place in this changing geographical continuum is as a site for affiliation, affirming the value of community gathering places. As Oldenburg states: “we...need third place association to...construct the infrastructures of human relationships”<sup>177</sup> The Caff   remained steadfast in the face of this migration and invasion by urban renewers. George Ward noted the Caff  ’s stable role in this rapidly changing environment as the reason for its survival:

The sociologist [Ray Oldenburg writes about] the importance of the third place of a community, a place that is neither home nor work- [like] Cheers, the place

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<sup>176</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Caf  s, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Da Capo Press; Florida, 1999. 2.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.



where everybody knows your name. The Caff  is such a place. I think that is one of the things that has sustained it all these years. Not without tension...<sup>178</sup>

For George, the concept of a third space involves a certain amount of tension.

Oldenburg writes:

“Victories are achieved as the result of a struggle against the odds and the odds have been increasingly stacked against third places since the end of World War II. The best third places are locally owned, independent, small-scale, steady-state business, and both government and incorporated chains have wreaked havoc upon them.”<sup>179</sup>

In the 1960s this tension was largely driven by a fear of “beatnik” culture. Today the tension that the Caff  fights comes from the co-opting of coffeehouse culture by the dominant society. Just as Lena laid the groundwork for the Caff ’s survival attitude, Sarah Craig recalled her upbringing overcoming obstacles early in life to pursue her own path:

I would say that, you know what, in a way [my experience] is kind of similar [to Lena’s experience] because the arts were definitely not on the radar screen in my upbringing. I played in the school band and we all took piano lessons, it was that kind of art. My mom loved classical music and I loved classical music, but there was an expectation that I had two choices: I could either go into working for some big company, or I could just stay home and raise the kids. You know (laughs) both options were open to me; my parents were very liberated! But those were the options! And you know, I would say that I was a very very good girl, up until I was about 18 and then I wasn’t anymore. And I was still very close with my family and I loved my family a lot, but I was very eager to be part of a whole different world that had nothing to do with the suburbs of Connecticut and live an entirely different lifestyle. And I have. And so being part of Caff  Lena has set me on a very different path than anybody else in my family, involving a lot less resources than anybody else in my family! (laughs)<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Interview: George Ward. Saratoga Springs, New York. March 2008.

<sup>179</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Da Capo Press; Florida, 1999. 4.

<sup>180</sup> Interview: Sarah Craig, Saratoga Springs, New York. March 11, 2008.

A unique lifestyle and surviving against the odds with little resources became qualities of the Caff  s legend and attracted like-minded individuals after Lena’s passing. Caff   Lena has had its share of conflict with both local government and incorporated chains. In the early 1960s the city of Saratoga Springs threatened to shut down the Caff   citing fire code violations. Today chains like Starbucks and McDonald’s co-opt the Caff  s unique home-like qualities to promote their own brand of coffeehouse culture. This tension functions, as Oldenburg suggests, to both define the Caff   as “the best kind” of third place, and serves as a source of pride in that the Caff   continues to survive this contestation. Another source of pride is the continuation of Lena’s hospitality which now defines the Caff   as a third place.

*Lena’s Open Door*

*I do remember the first time that the feeling came over me when walking up the Lena stairs that I  
was in my home.  
It was after I’d worked here for a couple years.  
It was a strong feeling, and it has stuck with me ever since.  
I’m as comfortable and unguarded in this space as I am in my own home.”  
-Sarah Craig<sup>181</sup>*

Although Sarah Craig does not sleep, eat her meals, or keep her possessions in the Caff  , she still identifies it as a home-like atmosphere because of the degree of comfort and acceptance she feels in the space. As Oldenburg writes:

“Though a radically different kind of setting from the home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends.”<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Interview: Sarah Craig, Saratoga Springs, New York, April 18, 2005.

<sup>182</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Caf  s, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Da Capo Press; Florida, 1999. 42.

Emily Farrell, a young Caff  Lena volunteer recalls her own relationship to the Caff  and how its home-like environment bring support and meaning to her life:

Caff  Lena has always been a space where I felt like I belonged and was appreciated. I think that I spent more time here in junior high and high school than I did any place else, save home and school. The folks here are like an extended family and the Caff  is like our living room. I always reflect on how lucky I was to grow up surrounded by so much culture and so much positive energy. When other aspects of my life were shaky or hectic, Caff  Lena was always my constant, my rock. Even though I don't live in Saratoga anymore, I know I can always come back and feel welcome and, of course, be invited to pick up a tray or some dishes and pitch in.<sup>183</sup>

These interrelationships of image and meaning can be found in Daniel Elam's UNC Chapel Hill course, "Coffee Shop Studies." In his course, Elam focuses on globalization and public sphere theory to cite the coffeeshop as an important mode of understanding the function of social spaces in an increasingly globalized society. His course description reads:

"Public spheres and public spaces are very interesting theories, but where can we place them among global and globalizing practices? It may be possible to start with the location Jurgen Habermas described as the foundation for the public sphere: the coffee shop. In this imagined coffee shop of the eighteenth century, men (exclusively men) could gather to discuss important social issues. Using the coffee shop as our starting point, we can examine various discussions of the public, its spheres and spaces, and globalization theories. This course begins with an examination of the basic, practical functions of a coffee shop and then uses this understanding as a jumping point to discuss the broad theoretical implications of the space a coffee shop has become. And what better place to study the coffee shop than in Chapel Hill, a town with the second highest number of coffee shops per capita?"<sup>184</sup>

Much like sociologist Jurgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere, a third

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<sup>183</sup> Emily Farrell, Caff  Lena volunteer, 2005.

<sup>184</sup> Website: [www.unc.edu/~jdelam/spcl390](http://www.unc.edu/~jdelam/spcl390)

place implies a spatial concept—a social site or arena where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated. Not a substitute for home, but with many of the same qualities of acceptance and social equality, the public sphere and third place are neutral grounds that emphasize inclusiveness. Habermas defined the public sphere as an area of social life that had four primary elements. These included: 1. total disregard for class status 2. discussions held presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned 3. decisions made by rational discussion. 4. an inclusive public. (cite) That the Caffé's represents these four elements has vast implications for the space a coffee shop can be in its function as a third place.

Lena once called herself “Queen” to reclaim the perceived separation of her radical coffeehouse from the dominant high class Victorian society of Saratoga Springs. In 1999, ten years after her passing Lena's coffeeshop, the Caffé functioned as a foundation for the problematization of an area that until then had not been questioned when Victorian culture entered its doors. Just as Lena reclaimed Saratoga as her own, her Caffé provided the wider community with a respite in the storm, a shelter even for those in Saratoga's dominant racing culture searching for a safe home-like environment. In his chapter “Music Box, Saturday, August 28, 1999” “Saratoga Days: A Look Inside Saratoga's Greatest Meet” Jockey Sean Clancy wrote of his life-changing introduction to the “little Caffé on a square:”

“...Still not answering my phone or talking to the world. That night I decided to go out. I looked up the menu for Caffé Lena, a vintage folk music coffee house on Phila Street. I had been going past it for most of my Saratoga life, but never went in; too cautious. I had never heard of anyone going there. I had never heard of any of the singers who played there. But that night, I knew was the night to go to Caffé Lena. Have you ever wanted to go out but were afraid that you would see someone and have to talk? That's how I spend most of my life and this night was the epitome of that. So I hopped on my bike and rode down Nelson Avenue and

made a left on Phila Street. I locked my bike and ran up the steps to Caff  Lena. It was dark and quiet. An unassuming man at the top of the stairs who had never heard of Sean Clancy or Hudson Bay took my seven bucks. He showed me to my table and I sat down at MY table. I looked around and knew no one in the place. It felt good to be there. Like a hideout. Then Pat Donahue walked past my table and stepped up on the small stage in the corner of the oldest coffeehouse in the world. He said hello, tuned his guitar, and played this:

You've been knocked down. You've been dragged out.  
You've been misled and left for dead in a shadow of a doubt.  
Over your shoulder is your only view and all I can say is  
Don't let yesterday get the best of you  
'cause this is the beginning, this is not the end,  
this is not the time to be lying down and finally giving in.  
This world keeps spinning around and again  
And this is the beginning, this is not the end.

Hearing that one song was the most inspirational moment of my life. I can never remember an instant like that when I went from down to up that fast. I rode my bike home, with the CD Life Stories in clutch, alive and fired up. Add music to food and the world would be at peace. Live music, especially a regular guy with an acoustic guitar singing to you, can ease all the stress from your head. Pat Donahue became my favorite singer that no one ever heard of and Caff  Lena became my favorite place that no one knew existed. I listened to the rest of the show but couldn't get "This is the Beginning" out of my head... I sang it out loud on every set the next day. I kept fighting, I didn't give in, won the New York Turf Writers Cup a few weeks later and accomplished my one lifelong goal, becoming champion steeplechase jockey a few months later. Never did win one on Hudson Bay but that day was just the beginning."<sup>185</sup>

The champion jockey championed Lena's Caff , proving that Pierce Petis' observation, "they hang garlands and wreaths on those four-legged beasts and ignore that old backstreet Caf " was now not in fact the case. "They" had finally come to the Caff  and found its appeal, as a third place.

### *Emergent programming*

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<sup>185</sup> Clancy, Sean. *Saratoga Days: A Look Inside Racing's Greatest Meet*. Steeplechase Times Publishing, Delaware, 2000. 169-171.

As a third place, the Caff  s value lies in its hospitality including its ability to provide a “neutral ground” for the community with an eye towards helping emerging as well as traditional artists. Oldenburg writes:

“Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality...conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. Third places are taken for granted and most have a low profile.”<sup>186</sup>

Often the people that perform in third places have a low profile as well. In the 1960s the Caff   provided a place to a subculture of artists and enabled them to realize their artistic visions. Don McLean started his career at the Caff   as an unknown artist well before he penned his famous “American Pie.” Long before Bob Dylan wowed a nation with his folk anthems “Blowing in the Wind” and “The Times They Are A’Changin,” he performed at the Caff   to skeptical audience members, as yet unaware of his potential but with encouragement from Lena and Bill, listening nonetheless. In the late ‘70s and early ‘80s when the Caff   became a third place, its open mic nights served as neutral ground for a new generation looking to realize their artistic ambitions. Dawn Crandell remembered:

I was raised in the folk community and Caff   Lena was definitely part of that folk community. [My mom] brought me here in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s when I was a little kid. I really started coming here on my own when I was thirteen or fourteen. It was the Thursday open mic nights... I used to hang out in the square where Putnam Market is now on Broadway. Kids, mainly “alternative kids” who were into punk rock or reggae or ska or hardcore, all sort of different subcultures, we’d all hang out...get harassed by the police and what not. Then on Thursday nights some of us that were performers would start forming an open mic night. The first poem I ever wrote I wrote up there [at the Caff  ], and it was the very poem that made me think I was a poet. That was back in ‘89 and made me realize

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<sup>186</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Caf  s, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Da Capo Press; Florida, 1999. 42.

that's what I wanted to do. My first chance at performing was on that stage at Caff  Lena's open mic.<sup>187</sup>

The "On Wednesday Emerging Artist Series," created by Board President Stanley



*Caff  Lena Coffee*

McGaughey in the 1990s took the third place concept of inclusiveness and social equality one step further by allowing local youth to book and produce their own shows at Caff  Lena. This program gave the Caff 's guests and "extended family" increased ownership of the activities at the Caff  and allowed them to play a key role in shaping the future of the Caff . The shape of the Caff 's past however is continually adapting to the present through the telling of its story to new audiences.

### *The power of legend: folklore's cultural capital*

Lena's survival instincts are responsible for the Caff 's ability to evolve and adapt in an increasingly globalized atmosphere. From its beginnings as the outgrowth of her need for a radical homespace to a home away from home for a generation of artists looking for the comfort and support of this environment, its reputation grew exponentially until it became a third place and a legacy in its own right. Gruning describes, "Yet there were die-hard coffeeshouses as well, the proprietors of which were more concerned with beat idealism than the politics of image that threatened to consume

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<sup>187</sup> Interview: Dawn Crandell, Saratoga Springs, New York: May, 2005.

them.”<sup>188</sup> Caffé Lena stood the test of time, and now its story is a salable commodity. The Caffé today not only sells tickets to concerts, but also t-shirts, CDs, even its own brand of coffee. The city lists it in its brochures. (The irony of course is that the Caffé is not listed on the city’s tourist map, presumably, according to Sarah Craig because the Caffé would have to pay to be listed.) Kristin Baggelaar notes this recognition in her Encyclopedia under the term “coffeehouse:”

“The folk boom was the heyday of coffeehouses, which were scattered throughout the country but within a matter of a few years the majority of them shut down...with the advent of commercial folk music, many coffeehouses were abandoned for concert halls and larger folk clubs, which are capable of accommodating more people and making more money. Today, the role of the coffeehouse is more modest, tending to the preservation and presentation of traditional folk music, as exemplified by the oldest coffeehouse in America, Caffé Lena”<sup>189</sup>

In Baggelaar’s opinion, the Caffé’s legacy is one of preservation and continued presentation of traditional music in spite of the rise of commercial folk music that relegated many of its predecessors and contemporary venues to the netherworld of folk music. For so many other venues whose success is automatic which is why they proliferate, even in the 1970s Lena pondered the beginnings of the Caffé as a commercial enterprise and why her Caffé should continue to exist even after it became well known as an idealistic venue focused on the growth of artists:

It all started as a means to make money-not for mercenary ends but as a means towards a goal. Whose goal? Who can say. ‘We’ll make enough money in one year to finance at least five years in Europe. Enough money to pay for materials and housing and food and comfort and I’ll create great works for only in Europe

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<sup>188</sup> Gruning, Thomas R., *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties*. University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia. 2006. 105.

<sup>189</sup> Baggelaar, Kristin and Milton, Donald. *Folk Music, More Than A Song*. Crowell Publishing, 1976. 79.



can these things be done. Europe-where the artist is respected-looked up to-revered. Only in Europe can I find recognition-that was the reason-the initial reason.... Even now...when people say to me that they have heard of the Caff  Lena in far flung corners of everywhere I find it so hard to believe and it fills me with the warmest and most wonderful feelings. I ask myself why? How come? And people ask me to what do I attribute the long-lastingness of the Caff  which to the best of my knowledge, is the longest running coffee house with a continually running policy of presenting folk music."<sup>190</sup>

She answered her own question years later when she began to explore the Caff 's place among the capitalistic venues that focused on profit first and the artist second. Lena's priorities earned her a respected place in the folk world, a legacy to be remembered and used for the Caff 's purposes to continue its longstanding tradition, and a national reputation. She wrote:

It has not been easy to keep the Caff  together and it has been beset with its share of hardship, financial struggle, disappointments and sometimes disillusion. The incentive to carry on has been the awareness of its importance to the folk performers who have a place to share their rare talents, to appreciative audiences and the importance to the audience to have a place to come to that is not steeped in the brash commercialism of a dollars-and-cents oriented business culture. I have never allowed myself to succumb to the money-making attitudes of music clubs who insist that the artists they engage must be established in the field with national reputations and best-selling albums. The coffeehouse should be a showcase for deserving artists as well as established musicians. Educate your audiences to expect the best in musical talent, familiar or unfamiliar, and always be governed by the dictates of good taste."<sup>191</sup>

Part of its "good taste" according to Lena and now the Caff 's board of Directors is a strict no-alcohol policy still firmly in place since the Caff 's founding. Sarah Craig explained, "We worry that to serve any alcohol would make it harder to maintain the silence during shows so we've chosen against it, despite the attraction of the revenue that

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<sup>190</sup> Lena Spencer: Personal Reflection, 1976. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

it would bring in.”<sup>192</sup> Though according to Oldenburg many third places such as the neighborhood bar and tavern do serve alcohol, in the Caff  ’s case remaining alcohol-free makes it more conducive to the kind of third place its mission set forth—a place where those of all ages can come, including children.

When asked how banning alcohol changes a club’s atmosphere, Steve Baker, executive director of the Freight and Salvage noted, “It triggers a serious change in the nature of the club as a consequence: [a change] in the composition of the audience. [With a no-alcohol policy] we end up being more family-oriented . . . seeing three generations at once.”<sup>193</sup> Eryn Hoerig, front desk manager at the Swallow Hill Music Association agreed: “There are plenty of clubs that serve alcohol and music at the same time, but [by not serving alcohol] we see it as a chance to set ourselves apart. It makes us kid-friendly.”<sup>194</sup> This non-alcohol policy is radical considering the Caff  ’s financial struggles and the fact that most clubs will begin to serve alcohol as a way to stay in business.

The notable few coffeeshouses and clubs that stayed in business since the 1960s such as Club Passim and Chicago’s Old Town School of Folk music kept a certain standard of taste that like Caff   Lena, usually revolved around pushing through hard times in order to serve the community. The Old Town School’s history book “Biography of a Hunch: The History of Chicago's Legendary Old Town School of Folk Music” describes its history of presenting folk music for the benefit of the community:

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<sup>192</sup> E-mail Correspondence: Sarah Craig, April 10, 2007.

<sup>193</sup> Telephone interview: Steve Baker, April 1, 2007.

<sup>194</sup> Telephone interview: Erin Hoerig, April 2, 2007.

“During the dark days of 1982. . . I often found myself thinking. . . about the idea of the Old Town School of Folk Music. A place where people could come together to learn and play. A place where this music, which is the evolutionary source for all music, could be preserved and admired. A place where you can really be yourself with no pretensions. These thoughts drove me to the conclusion that we couldn’t let the School fail, and I’m proud to say we haven’t.’ Today, the School embodies its founders’ dream of a home where all can come to learn, share, and experience the power and joy of folk music. With 35 years of fine music and exemplary community service behind it, the Old Town School of Folk Music continues to honor its legacy.”<sup>195</sup>

Another important aspect of the Caffé’s legacy is its role as an example for other third places. Although the Caffé is no longer a radical homespace because Lena is no longer alive to run it, many elements of a third place were present at the Caffé during her lifetime and before the phrase was coined. It is interesting to note that Oldenburg coined the phrase “third place” in 1989—the same year that Lena died and the Caffé’s radical homespace identity gave way for it to emerge as a third place.

*The Caffé sets an example for other third places*

Following Oldenburg’s concept, many businesses and organizations redesigned themselves as “third places,” such as the Third Place Coffeehouse in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the Third Place Bookstore in Lake Forest Park, Washington. Years before Oldenburg published his work on the third place, in a letter to Lena, Terry Leonino in 1982 wrote of her desire to model a new space after the Caffé:

“Dear Lena,  
I haven’t written to you in so long but I just felt like dropping you a line. Greg and I have been very busy since we returned from our successful tour of England, and Scotland late last summer. Since we have gotten back we’ve moved, set up ourselves a concert series and workshops at the new “House of Music Traditions” in Takoma Park, Maryland, which is a music store that I help manage! It was an opportunity offered to us we couldn’t pass by. Greg and I have always wanted to

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<sup>195</sup> Grayson, Lisa, ed. *Biography of a Hunch: The History of Chicago's Legendary Old Town School of Folk Music*. Chicago: Old Town School of Folk Music, Inc., 1992. 48.

have a place like the Café for acoustic musicians. Since so many of the other local venues have closed we felt inspired to get involved and it is now taking up all of our free time between our own concerts and out of town gigs. How's the Café?"<sup>196</sup>

Caffé Lena may also have influenced Ani DiFranco's new performance space in Buffalo, New York— Asbury Hall. From her website, "Every detail of Asbury Hall, both onstage and off, is informed by her experiences performing in venues around the world."<sup>197</sup> Like Don McLean and Bob Dylan before her, Ani DiFranco's early performances were on stage at the Caffé. Dawn Crandell remembered Ani DiFranco's first night at the Caffé:

There were so many people who performed here when they were a lot smaller. Every generation there are those names. Folks that I caught... I was waitressing the first night Ani was here. She was nineteen; I was sixteen. Her first tape [had just] come out, just self-titled. [The audience] was six to ten people; something small. I made nine dollars in tips. I was the only person waiting tables and I remember that I loved her so much...the tape was nine dollars, so I gave [her] my tips, [saying] "I must have this cassette tape!" (laughs) She came back the next year and word of mouth had spread so the house was almost full. It kept on building till she was too big to fit in this small space anymore. Seeing performers come in every week shaped me aesthetically the way I perform now.<sup>198</sup>

Dawn Crandell's impressions of Ani on stage at Caffé Lena in the 1990s left a lasting impression. She compared not only the aesthetics of her performance but the Caffé's space to other venues in New York City, the location where Lena first ran to when leaving home as a young woman and from where she and Bill found early influence for the Caffé as a radical homespace. Now as a third place, Dawn describes the Caffé's

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<sup>196</sup> Written correspondence: Terry Leonino, February 22, 1982, courtesy of the Lena Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum

<sup>197</sup> Website: <http://www.babevillebuffalo.com/asburyhall.asp>

<sup>198</sup> Interview: Dawn Crandell, Saratoga Springs, New York: May, 2005.

home-like atmosphere and political openness giving voice to a contemporary generation of artists who define it in terms of their first performance space:

Being able to have that space as a young person to be able to shape your art... I really haven't found any place that has this energy or atmosphere. I've performed in small informal underground [bookstores] with no stage, one mic, seats, bookshelves to New York theater workshops and theater festivals and everything in between. Even though I don't come here as often, when I step on that stage it feels like home, because this is where I got my chops, so to speak. The places in the city are not so much of the coffeehouse variety; I think they serve alcohol. It's such a different energy. Unless it's more of an underground political activist theater space, a lot of the space in New York are more like clubs with alcohol and that type of thing. It's just different.<sup>199</sup>

We should expect Caff  Lena to be significant to the future exploration of folk venues and folk music because it is the best example of a space that nurtures as well as provides opportunity. It's emergent identity broadens its story to make way for new musical forms and shows why the Caff  is still as vitally important today as it was fifty years ago. There is only *one* Caff  Lena. Yet, as a third place, its characteristics touch on elements that are lacking in today's culture —namely a safe place for community. Its longevity further promotes a feeling of intimacy, a familiarity in the telling of a tale that has since become legend, or folklore. Dawn Crandell's husband Baba Israel, a hip-hop artist in New York City who presented a workshop for young people at Caff  Lena in 2005 explained the importance of a unique, intimate community setting:

Dawn has told me about Caff  Lena over the years and told me the folklore about the place. Dawn and her mom are so connected to this place. Besides being a venue it's usually where we stash our stuff! In some ways it's very familiar— It reminds me of some of the long running venues in New York City like the Nuyorican Poets Caff  (the first place where I performed) which has been around since the late '70s. In some ways it has that same feeling of continuity, longevity, and integrity, because it's filled a consistent role. But it's different because its

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

idiom is about folk music, a different side of the culture. What I like about it is that people come here to listen to the music. It's not a place where tourists come to have drinks and talk about ball games, other things besides the music. They want to have an intimate and unique experience. That's something I sense when I come here and I appreciate that.<sup>200</sup>

The Caff  's unique experience, due to its third place identity, now extends farther outside its doors than Lena could have imagined. From jockeys looking for an escape from Saratoga's Victorian culture to the Lena folder in the Folklife Reading Room at the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center, the Caff   made a lasting impression on America's musical culture and continues to speak to the place of the folk coffeehouse in the future of American folk venues.

*"The Northway and Beyond:" The Global Impact of Caff   Lena*

*"The folk concept is filtered through the lens of the present and the recent experiential past."-Thomas Gruning<sup>201</sup>*

Gruning writes of folk's shift into present day "crossroads of the ordinary:"

"The exoticism of the primitive that marked folk's early entr  e into "polite society" has shifted to "world music." Folk's "exotic" has moved to the crossroads of the ordinary: an "Ordinary" in which interrelationships of image and meaning are entrenched in complex webs of signification."<sup>202</sup>

It is ironic that after struggling to be accepted by mainstream society throughout the 1960s and early '70s, it is this very acceptance that now causes the Caff   in 2008 to

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Gruning, Thomas R., *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties*. University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia. 2006.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. xv.

struggle once again to remain the same idealistic venue it was the day Lena and Bill opened it. Now that coffeehouses are a widely accepted phenomenon, the Caff  serves a beneficial role yet is problematized by the co-opting of its values by the dominant corporate culture. It's beneficial role as a third place serves to reinforce the identity of those seeking to find acceptance, social equality and a neutral ground on its stage. As Baba Israel notes:

Hip-hop is this huge commercial mainstream but it is also folk music. It starts from people. It's another form of storytelling, people telling their identities and getting their stories out there. It's a vital voice and it should be part of the mix here.<sup>203</sup>

While the nature of folk venues changed to adapt to the new singer/songwriter movement of the 1980s and 1990s, the Caff  did not change. It evolved. Ralph Rinzler noted Lena and the Caff 's larger contributions to the concept of "art in a market-place world:"

"Lena never took much for herself, but she gave to the musicians and to those who came to listen the chance to communicate openly. For those of us who benefited from her vision and contribution, we have only a sense of thankfulness, indebtedness, and gratitude for her gift of how to make art possible in a market-place world."<sup>204</sup>

The Northway served as a major factor in promoting the Caff 's widespread appeal. Music performed at the Caff  represents not only local traditions, but also the traditions brought from the South up North during the folk revival movement. Places like

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<sup>203</sup> Interview: Baba Israel, Saratoga Springs, New York: May, 2005.

<sup>204</sup> Ralph Rinzler, "Celebrating 25 Years of Caff  Lena" by Mae Banner, in the *Fast Folk Magazine*, liner notes. Courtesy of the Lena Spencer Collection at the Saratoga Springs History Museum.

the Highlander Cultural Center and Caff  Lena connected music in various regions for a purpose during this critical time period in America’s cultural history, and continue to do so in today’s changing world. For this reason, Smithsonian Folkways offers the Caff ’s 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary concert as a downloadable file on its website, and the Library of Congress recently took an interest in the Caff  Lena archival collection. Lena’s hope to be recognized outside of Saratoga Springs, and the Caff ’s ongoing relationship with musicians from other countries including Jacqui and Bridie from England and Ember Swift from Canada are due in large part to its identity as a third place.

The Caff  is not only a history of events that shaped a town and a community. The story of Caff  Lena asks us not only to see it as a place reminiscent of a time long gone, but as a place with an emergent quality, capable of situating itself comfortably in the present day and encouraging new art to take shape. Without seeing the Caff ’s history in light of its current activities, we risk relegating this living site into a frozen relic of the past. For this reason, the Caff ’s current manager, Sarah Craig, recently created a mix CD of new artists who performed their first shows at Caff  Lena this year as a gift to its longtime supporters and potential donors.

Just as it is not enough to look back at history, it is also not enough to remain in the emergent future without a sense of our past. As Jacquelyn Hall writes in *Remembering*, speaking about opening the past into the present, “I was motivated in part by a sense that the civil rights revolution was receding into a past that was all too safely closed off from the present. The mass demonstrations that are stamped on my generation’s collective memory seem more and more distant...”<sup>205</sup> The critical point in my mind is that the Caff  still exists, and that music is continually changing. What happens when the Caff ’s

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<sup>205</sup> Pollock, Della. *Exceptional Spaces*. University of North Carolina Press. 1998. 186.



chairs are replaced, as was the case last year? What significance does this have for the symbolic past and future of the venue?

The image of the coffeehouse is vulnerable to today's corporate coffeehouse where a sense of belonging is replaced by a sense of stolen and homogenized coffeehouse "atmosphere." Though in its early days the Caff  *did* serve the purpose of "a venue where somebody said how can we make some money" Baba Israel notes the Caff 's larger presence, its familiarity and its unique status as the oldest continuously running coffeehouse and not a chain like other venues giving it its ultimate sense of purpose.

It's a place centered on the culture of the place...that's what makes it familiar, it's not just a venue where somebody said how can we make some money. That's not what's going on here. You can feel the difference. It's in everybody that's here. Everyone is invested in what's happening. Unfortunately that's becoming more and more rare. As we see venues that are run by homogenizing every aspect of our culture, from strip malls to the venues we have to big chains or places in New York like BB Kings, which is a great venue but there's no sense of who's running it or its purpose. It's rare when you feel a venue has its own culture and it's not just what's happening on that night. I appreciate being in those places; this is one of them. I think people are aware of it on a national level and probably international as well. It's local, but has a larger presence from what I can tell.<sup>206</sup>

In today's increasingly globalized environment with the World Wide Web and corporate power gaining mass attention and pervading all aspects of our lives including where we spend our time among members of our communities, Caff  Lena stands out as a site for local, intimate, independent music and culture. Gruning writes, "To be sure, popular dissatisfaction with the global and the return to...localism resonates in terms of today's folk "community.""<sup>207</sup> Judi Dench, in an National Public Radio story "Living

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<sup>206</sup> Interview: Baba Israel. Saratoga Springs, New York: May, 2005.

<sup>207</sup> Gruning, Thomas R., *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties*. University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia. 2006. xv.

Quietly in 'Cranford' says part of the story's appeal is that "We have lost that feeling of a community all being together, and of course, irritatingly, wanting to know what everyone else's business is."<sup>208</sup>

In another NPR story "A Divided Nation, United in 'Idol' Worship" Folklorist Cat Williams agrees that voting is key to the pop culture phenomenon American Idol's success. Williams notes:

The United States is facing a "crisis in democracy; there was the contested presidential election in 2000, suspicion about what went on in Ohio in 2004, and a great deal of angst right now surrounding the Democratic primary process. We are in this crisis of democracy and since democracy is such an important part of our cultural identity, maybe American Idol provides another way for us to express ourselves democratically."<sup>209</sup>

It is not surprising that a popular talent search program should reflect our nation's greater need for political agency in a time reminiscent of the 1960s when people distrust government and are looking for ways to claim their national identity. Bloom and Breines write of the 1960s: "Beneath it all was the notion that how one lived one's life and the power of art in the world were as crucial to an emerging social transformation as any political activity, and more important, that they were all one."<sup>210</sup> Caff  Lena stands as testament to the power of place to provide an intimate platform for the enactment of changing political ideas on a stage that is open to all sections of society. Unlike American idol however, all voices are heard and recognized, and no one is booted off the stage and made to go home. They are already in a sense, already there.

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<sup>208</sup> Website: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89941160>

<sup>209</sup> Website: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89652902>

<sup>210</sup> Bloom, Alexander and Breines, Wini, *Takin' it to the Streets: A Sixties Reader, The Port Huron Statement*, by Tom Hayden, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003. 229.

**OPEN DOOR CONCLUSIONS:** *Finding the Spear*

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*“This story is like a long narrative ballad. It is still being made up and has no end....the quest became as important as what it was we were questing after...The energy created by the rediscovery of the living root forms of American folk music and their recombination through electricity, chemistry, and technology into the music of today and tomorrow is what changed our lives. We allowed that reality to enter our lives, and we, in turn, are using it to create something of our own that we can hand on to those who are to follow.”*

*-Eric Von Schmidt<sup>211</sup>*

Caff  Lena today is a dependable place of refuge that functions as neither home nor work, that exists on neural ground and serves to level [its] guests to a condition of social equality, and a self-conscious relic of the 1960s folk revival movement whose identity is reinforced through the continued telling of its story and widespread legacy. It is critical that Caff  Lena exists as a third space in today’s context, as the Caff  continues to serve the needs of the community by responding to the decline of public life and public space in contemporary American culture. Caff  Lena is independent, small-scale, and both government and incorporated chains have wreaked havoc upon it by virtue of their portrayal of an intimate Caff  Lena-like space in a large corporate coffeehouse.

In addition to independent coffee houses like Caff  Lena, there has been a rise of coffee chains like Starbucks that have copied these early American coffeehouse but shined up their countercultural element to create the sophisticated mainstream cafe. With Starbucks, we now have nostalgic reminiscences of the traditions Lena propagated. In

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<sup>211</sup> Von Schmidt, Eric, and Jim Rooney. *Baby, Let Me Follow You Down: The Illustrated Story of the Cambridge Folk Years*. 1979. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994.

cities across the country, the American public sees a replica of the values she put forth, values that still exist in a little café in upstate New York to this very day. Sarah Craig argues, “Artists and listeners of today deeply value the history of Caffé Lena, as a connection to the culture and spirit that drew them to non-commercial music in the first place, and as a validation that the music has been important to America for a long time.

The aggressive competition on American Idol and the homogenized, chemical filled Frappachinos at Starbucks are not why people come to Caffé Lena. It is not about selling something to you, it’s about giving you the ability to get something besides what can be bought or sold. Starbucks and McDonalds are not examples of a third place—they are a combination of corporate nature and consumption rather than a place to build

Bob Dylan performing at Caffé Lena, Saratoga Springs, New York, in winter 1961-62



relationships. They are a microcosm of what is wrong with our culture today. Although they model themselves after third places like Caffé Lena emulating the Caffé’s food, music, and hospitality, they will never be homey places because each one is the same as the next—they lack a defined personality that gives them an inclusive, third place niche.

*Bob Dylan at Caffé Lena Photo by Joe Alper*

Bob Dylan who played at Caffé Lena

in 1961 now “performs” at Starbucks through dissemination of his music via this giant corporate coffeehouse. Interestingly enough, the songs on the album were all performed at the Gaslight, a folk café in New York City in 1962. Capitalizing on the mainstream

coffeehouse movement his songs are now institutional ambiance for a cookie cutter coffeehouse culture.<sup>212</sup>

Unlike Lena running her Caff  or the On-Wednesday Series teenagers running their own shows, people can't feel ownership over Starbucks. Each Starbucks store is dictated by corporate culture rather than by an individual's proprietor's culture. Starbucks has set rules about how each and every store is supposed to look and feel, and how the food and beverages should taste. It is an exact science, not an art form.

As Ray Oldenburg writes:

“Coffeehouses...are on the rise...but others are needed... Developers build houses and call them “homes.” They build socially sterile subdivisions and call them “communities.” It's also happening with alleged third places. Officials of a popular coffeehouse chain often claim that their establishments are third places, but they aren't. They may evolve into them but at present, they are high volume, fast turnover operations that present an institutional ambiance at an intimate level. Seating is uncomfortable by design and customers in line are treated rudely when uncertain of their orders.”<sup>213</sup>

Lena Spencer rode the wave of the emerging folk revival by providing a folk coffeehouse a venue for countercultural art. Now corporate powers have ridden the wave of the coffeehouse as social center in order to capitalize on this meeting place for the masses. It's ironic that the new evolution of the coffeehouse has co-opted this countercultural symbol for its own purposes and given it a mainstream cultural identity. The Caff  is a testament to the folk coffeehouses of the '60s that stand in opposition to this kind of corporate power. The fact that it is still in existence in the face of the

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<sup>212</sup> “Dylan signs with Starbucks” *The Guardian/UK* by Jamie Wilson, Wednesday, June 29, 2005.

<sup>213</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Caf s, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Da Capo Press; Florida, 1999. 3.

corporate coffeehouse springing up all around it shows the lasting influence of this small but tremendously important cultural landmark.



McDonald's website – Image of “McCafé” [www.mcdonalds.com](http://www.mcdonalds.com). Accessed April 25, 2008

*“It’s time for our leaders to step up and ask:  
“How do we build community in a modern world?”  
-Perry and Szalavitz<sup>214</sup>*

With the advent of technological advances into today’s world such as personal computers separating us into cubicles, people are consciously and unconsciously starving for community (extended family) and sense of place. In “The Boy Who Was Raised As A Dog” by Bruce D. Perry and Maia Szalavitz the authors assert:

“The wonderful thing about our species is that we can learn; our memories and our technologies allow us to benefit from the experience of those who came before us. But at the same time those technologies, even the ones that are presumably meant to bring us together, are increasingly keeping us apart. The modern world has disrupted and in many cases abandoned the fundamental biological unit of

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<sup>214</sup> Perry, Bruce D. and Szalavitz, Maia. *The Boy Who Was Raised As A Dog: What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing*. Basic Books, New York, New York, 2006. 234.

human life; the extended family. There has been so much emphasis on the breakdown of the nuclear family, but I believe that in many cases the extended family...is at least as important.”<sup>215</sup>

People today are realizing the importance of the extended family, and doing what they can within the confines of their corporate and technological influenced lives to find this lost world. Starbucks and McDonald’s corporate coffeehouse would not be successful if there was not an urgent cultural need for this phenomenon. Likewise, online communities are now bringing us as a culture back to our roots as community-minded culture. These communities include Etsy for homemade crafts and Myspace for homemade friend networks. They use the advent of technology to allow us to return as individuals to a critical sense of community. How does the Caff   preserve its sense of community and place when there is a Starbucks just down the road across from Phila Street on Broadway, and when it needs a Myspace page just to keep up with changes in folk music? It adapts. In a recent thread on the Caff   Lena Board of Directors email listserv, I received the following two emails from fellow Board members:

I was listening to an interview with Rebel Steve Earle the other night ;) and even he is saying that corporate sponsorship is the way to go :) maybe it's because he is in love and has softened up a bit... seriously... I think the times of idealism are shifting to a more real people are people attitude. If we look into a sponsor and they have a great track record... go for it.. if they have a record of abusing workers - selling tobacco etc. skip onto the next. Anyways - just thought I would share :) Hope everyone is well!<sup>216</sup>

It would be great if everyone could work and be paid a salary, benefits, health insurance, etc, by a not for profit organization, but some of us do work for (gasp!) a profit making enterprise (hopefully making a profit, especially if the workers want their pay to at least rise as fast as inflation). <sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid. 233.

<sup>216</sup> Email Correspondence: Maurizio Russomanno, April 3, 2008.

<sup>217</sup> Email Correspondence: Howard Lebowitz April 3, 2008.

In my response, I attempted to outline my feelings on the Caffé's changing role since

Lena's era:

Hi all, It's interesting to remember that Caffé Lena started as a for-profit business. As Lena said, it started as a "money-making venture" to allow Lena and Bill to make enough to retire in Europe! However, it seems the evolution of Caffé Lena's STYLE AS a business was one that absorbed Lena's care and concern for her audience (customers) and performers ("hired" professionals) as a kind of extended family. Because of her "survival" attitude and strong-willed, inspiring personality that always looked out for others, these values extended far beyond Lena, to give the Caffé that feeling of a space that, once the non profit took over, could simply carry her values forward... It seems her "for-profit" business in fact ended up "profiting" the community first, and Lena second. I think Lena really re-defined "profit" in her own terms...

I feel that oftentimes there can be a stereotype of "profit-making enterprise" equals "bad" and non-profit equals "good", and of course we all know that is not the case. Of course, the idea of "corporate personhood" can be problematic when corporations have the same rights as people and their power and control goes unchecked, but there are also many corporations whose missions are helping others. These things are complex, but I feel that keeping a dialogue going is crucial to making sure that beyond anything, the board continues to discuss what the Caffé's values are and ought to be. I think that if fostering a spirit of community, tradition and emergent art (I like "storytelling") in the "style" of Lena's legacy is kept paramount in our mission, then the Caffé will not only continue to "survive" as it has always done, but we can hopefully together find creative ways for it to thrive...perhaps that can be a question for discussion: what does it mean for the Caffé to THRIVE where it has always SURVIVED? In admiration, Jocelyn<sup>218</sup>

After sending this email, I then posed the question to myself, what does it mean for the Caffé to thrive? Are the times of idealism indeed shifting to a more real “people are people” attitude? If people are just people, what do people need from their communities? Are they the same things they needed when the Caffé first opened in 1960? Guning writes, “In a world of expanding technology, all folk expressions, traditional and

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<sup>218</sup> Email Correspondence: Jocelyn Arem, April 4, 2008.



contemporary, are fragile and demand the strength that only a united folk arts community can provide.”<sup>219</sup> The corporate world and the “countercultural” folk world are bound together in a dance that demands they both adapt not only to changing times but to each other. While Starbucks saw the advent of community minded gathering as a chance to capitalize on this phenomenon, years earlier in 1989 the same year Lena passed away, Folk Alliance was started to preserve the tradition of folk music and folk communities in a new era. Guning writes:

“The tenacity of an ideology that positions the “enlightened” as guardians of tradition continues to manifest itself in the mission statements of various venues, folk song societies, and related not-for-profit organizations... Indeed many of today’s folk enthusiasts approach the goal of preserving folk music (in any of its manifestations) with a missionary zeal.”<sup>220</sup>

The Caff  moves forward as it has always done, with the zeal of a community who stand by Lena’s vision for a space conducive to identity-making in changing times. As a third place, the Caff  offers an inclusive neutral ground unlike any corporate coffeehouse. There is only one Caff  Lena. It is its own brand.

#### *The authenticity of belief*

*“That was what the folk revival was about, is about and will probably always be about—people and how they related to themselves, their feelings and their world through the ages. So, if a test for scholarly authenticity is needed, we’ll fail the test, but we hope to pass when it deals with the authenticity of belief.”*<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Gruning, Thomas R., *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties*. University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia. 2006. 66.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>221</sup> Okun, Milton. *Something To Sing About! The Personal Choices of America’s Folk Singers*. The Macmillan Company, London, 1968. 14.

What is authentically “folk” is a constant question in the folk world. The Caff  represents the oldest continuously running coffeehouse venue specifically for folk music, but what is the authentic Caff  Lena? It lies in the belief in the power of community – the hope that art gives us to better understand our world. It exists in the small, day-to-day things that make us who we are as a culture and a community. Sarah Craig mused, “A lot my questions for Lena would be sort of small and detail oriented instead of large and sweeping.”<sup>222</sup> Lena noted, “When I think of highlights of the Caff , I think about the small, day-to-day experiences because the little things have made the Caff  what it is. It’s a very modest place, and it hasn’t changed.”<sup>223</sup>

The Caff  hasn’t change its core principles, and yet these principles are flexible and versatile—they allow the Caff  to change and evolve with the shared vision of those who stand together to preserve its unique role in America’s musical heritage. CS Lewis writes:

“It is when...such persons discover one another, when, whether with immense difficulties and semi-articulate fumbings or with what would seem to us amazing and elliptical speed, they share their vision—it is then that Friendship is born. And instantly they stand together...”<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Interview: Sarah Craig, Saratoga Springs, March 11, 2008.

<sup>223</sup> Baggelaar, Kristin and Milton, Donald. *Folk Music, More Than A Song*. Crowell Publishing, 1976. 79.

<sup>224</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*, Harcourt Brace and Company, San Diego, New York, London. 1960. 65.

## **APPENDIX A**

### *Caff  Lena Timeline*

1923

(January 4) Lena Spencer is born Pasqualina Rosa Nargi, in Milford, Massachusetts

1930s

Lena lives at home in Milford, Mass. She spends weekends in New York City with her uncle where she is introduced to jazz music and theater.

1940s

Lena begins songwriting and joins amateur theater group in Boston, Massachusetts. She works for a Rubber Factory during WWII and later as a waitress in her father's restaurant

1958

Lena runs away from home at age 28 and relocates to New York City where she changes her name to Lane Garin in order to remain undiscovered. A few months later her family find her and bring her home to Milford where she begins working odd jobs as a waitress, seamstress, and for a radio station where she meets future President John F. Kennedy on his campaign tour of Massachusetts

1958

Lena marries Bill Spencer

1959

(April 16) Lena and Bill Spencer settle in Saratoga Springs

1960

(May 21) Lena and Bill Spencer open Caff  Lena

1961

(May) Lena and Bill Spencer separate and later divorce

\*Bob Dylan performs at Caff  Lena in June 1961

1962

The Supremes have their first record released by Motown. The Twist takes off

Lena Spencer took a chance on a young folk singer named Bob Dylan

Bob Dylan performs at Caff  Lena January 14-15, 1962

1965

Formation of the Gallery Theater. The Caff  Theater Company produces works by Albert Camus, Brendan Behan and other international playwrights

1968

Frank Zappa & The Mothers of Invention release We're Only In It For The Money

Don McLean turned down a prestigious scholarship to Columbia University Graduate School in favor of becoming resident singer at Caff  Lena in NY.

January 1968- City commissioner Kenneth E. King uses fire code regulations in an attempt to shut down the caf 

1968

(February 4) Fundraiser sponsored by Pickn' Singn' Gathern' raises \$2,000 and expands public awareness for the caf .

1971-1973

The Wildflowers Folk Collective, a booking co-op of Saratoga Musicians who produced and played music in the local area is based at Caff  Lena.

1972

"Welcome To Caff  Lena" CD released on Biograph Records by producer Arnie Kaplan

1973

Lena helps Skidmore students found student-run "Lively Lucys Coffeehouse" which lasts until 1982 and is then reinstated by Student Entertainment Committee and the Traditions Committee

1974

(November 29) Mayor Raymond Watkin declares Lena Spencer Day

1975

Bruce Springsteen releases Born To Run  
Christine Lavin volunteered at the Caff  Lena

1976

Stevie Wonder's album release Songs In The Key Of Life would win five Grammy awards. Frampton Comes Alive is released.

Michael Jerling, now a regular at the Caff , first auditions for Lena. He is 19.

Skidmore alumna Kristin Baggelaar '69 adds a prominent listing for Caff  Lena to her encyclopedia, *Folk Music: More Than a Song* (Crowell: 1976)

Lena has her own radio show on Skidmore's WSPN entitled, "Lena's Open Door"

1977

(Winter) Lena attends National Entertainment Conference in Texas

1978

Fundraising concert held at a local movie theater on Broadway in Saratoga Springs, hosted by Robin and Linda Williams, and Jackie Alper. Loudon Wainwright III is the headliner

1980

(May 20) 2,000 people turn out for a fund-raising concert at Proctor's Theater in Schenectady

1981

(Monday, July 27) Lena plans a fund-raising event not only for the Caff  but also for the Saratoga Day Care Center. In the form of a joint benefit auction, Lena's donates 50% of all proceeds to this organization.

1984

(May 21) Caff  Lena celebrates 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Arlo Guthrie performs  
(September 30) Mayor Ellsworth Jones declares Caff  Lena Spencer Day in Saratoga Springs

1985

\*Madonna Launches her first road show, The Virgin Tour  
\*Scott McKenzie, John Phillips, Denny Doherty give a series of Caff  Lena benefits \*The Caff  Celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration with a benefit concert at the Saratoga Springs History Museum in Congress Park. The concert is hosted by Al McKenney and Jackie Alper. Pete Seeger performs and The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Smithsonian Institution send congratulations. A CD recording is release by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

1987

\*(June) Lena receives honorary doctorate of humane letters from Skidmore College  
\*Devon Square writes and records the song, "Caffe Lena" (Michael Cooney, Nick Seeger, and Pierce Pettis have each written and recorded songs about Caff  Lena)  
Lena plays "a slatternly woman" in "Ironweed" feature film based on the book by William Kennedy  
Hamilton Alley in Saratoga Springs, NY is renamed, "Lena Lane"  
Lena receives Crystal Loving Cup, presented by Albany Mayor Thomas Whalen at the Bringing Home the Stars Festival

1988

Metroland Newspaper votes Caff  Lena Best Coffeehouse in its Reader's Poll

1989

Folk Alliance is created  
Lou & Peter Berryman sing "Your State's Name Here"  
Milli Vanilli wins Best New Artist Grammy, only to have the award taken back when it is revealed that they did not sing on their own debut album  
(March 15) Lena honored with Saratoga Arts Council's first lifetime achievement award on first Lena Spencer Day  
(September 10) Lena suffers a fall on the Caff  Lena stairs on her way to see Spalding Gray perform at The Egg in Albany, New York and goes into a coma  
(October 23) Lena dies at age 66 in Ellis Hospital, Schenectady, New York  
Funeral Services arranged by Ruggiero Memorial Funeral Home in Milford, Mass.  
Funeral held at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church, East Main St., Milford, Mass.  
Lena is buried in St. Mary's Cemetary

1990

Caff  Lena’s first Localathon, an annual fundraiser is produced

1992

Seattle becomes the core of Grunge Rock with groups like Nirvana and Pearl Jam. Prince changes his name.

1995

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum opens in Cleveland, Ohio.

1998

The Caff  Lena Capitol Campaign successfully raises the funding necessary to purchase its building on 47 Phila Street. Pete Seeger writes a recommendation letter on behalf of the Caff  Lena Board of Directors

(Thursday, June 18) Mayor J. Michael O’Connell declares Lena Spencer Day

2000

\*Bob Dylan is nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature

\*November, 2000- Caff  Lena Celebrates 40 years with a concert at Spa Little Theater, hosted by Jackie Alper and George Ward

\*Sarah Lee Guthrie performs at Caff  Lena for the first time

2004

(April ) Caff  Lena history project director and board member Jocelyn Arem completes her undergraduate thesis in Ethnomusicology entitled, “The Early Days of Caff  Lena: The Socio-Historical Identity of an American Music Venue, An Ethnography-Oral History Account”

2005

(June 5) Caff  Lena celebrates its 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary with history exhibit produced by board members Torey Adler and Jocelyn Arem entitled, “Caff  Lena: 45 Years of Community, Culture, and Creativity, 1960-2005.” Board member Joe Deuel creates a new history project website: [www.caffelenahistory.org](http://www.caffelenahistory.org). The Board of Directors launches a fundraising initiative to renovate the building and provide handicap access

2008

(February) Caff  Lena named best small folk venue at Folk Alliance Conference

(May) Caff  Lena history project director and board member Jocelyn Arem completes her Masters thesis in Folklore entitled, “Forty Seven Years at Forty Seven Phila Street”

## APPENDIX B

### *Song Lyrics*

*"Lena, Won't You Open Your Door" by Michael Cooney*

Good evening, welcome to Caff  Lena. I would wish you all to know that you are being addressed by the effervescent irrepressible toast of Caff  Lena society (laughs) anyway its so nice of you all to be here. And its so nice of Michael Cooney to be here. And won't you please welcome, Michael Cooney.

I'm still at the door  
And I'm chilled tot he core  
Lena darlin' baby take me back once more  
Out in the snow and I'm shivering so  
My strings are rattling  
In the breezes that blow

Now Lena be nice  
Coz I don't knocked twice  
Let me in there Lena you know I'm cold as ice  
From there to I smell a chicken stew  
Oh Lena I love only you

Oh...  
Chorus:  
Lena, Lena  
Lena won't you open your door  
Lena, Lena won't you change your demeanor  
This is old bill bailey  
Don't you love me no more  
I plead coz I need that place behind the stove I used to have before  
Now Lena (knocks) oh Lena! (knocks on guitar)  
Why the devil don't you open your door?

Let me in please  
Honest I'll freeze  
I'll catch the grip again and I'm staring to sneeze  
I'm gonna start crying  
It's a low down crime  
She's singignt he song  
About the old summertime

Frosty me, my nose is like a beet  
Let me in there Lena you know I need some heat  
I love you still and I always will  
Oh Lena, oh Lena this is Bill.

## APPENDIX C

### *Song Lyrics*

#### *Caff  Lena by Devonsquare*

She opens the gate down at Caff  Lena  
Hoping the crowd mends her cracks in the wall  
They're singing the truth in that old Cantina  
Mystery Lena  
Here's to Lena  
La la la la la Lena

They're placing their bets down at Saratoga  
She's smoking that long cigarette  
The tables are set  
She sits there waiting  
She's the Mona Lisa  
La la la la la Lena

Whose secret arms  
Were there to hold you  
Long ago  
When the music stole you  
Let's go down  
Let's go down  
Let's go down to the Caff  Lena

So open the mic down at Caff  Lena  
The dreamers and drifters are here  
Strumming guitar got their rags and rhythm  
Listen listen  
Save the musicians  
Says la la la la la Lena  
La la la la la Lena



## APPENDIX D

### *Song Lyrics*

*This is for Lena's Café Written and performed by Pierce Pettis*

*"This poignant tribute will be appreciated by all who have enjoyed the results of Lena Spencer's self-sacrifice and dedication." Recorded at the Caff  on March 4, 1992.*

Saratoga Springs is full of castles and kings  
All displayed in Victorian pride  
There are things on this earth more than title or birth  
There are riches that money can't buy

Lena knows something  
Lena shows nothing  
Except for the look in her eye  
She still walks up those stairs  
She still sets up those chairs  
Night after night after night

#### Chorus:

This is for Lena  
This is for me  
This is for friends along the way  
This is for those who believe in a dream  
And won't let it just slip away  
This is for Lena's Caff 

Lena is older and the winters are colder  
Than they've been for quite a long time  
But a room full of smoke, music, laughter and hope  
Sure make that old place come alive

Stan Rodgers, Harry Chapin and Steve Goodman too  
They've all stood right here on this stage  
And the love that they left it still lives in this room  
Time cannot take it away

#### Chorus

Saratoga Springs  
The horserace it brings  
Money, power and fame  
They hang garlands and wreaths  
On those four legged beasts  
And just ignore that old backstreet Caff 

There is more than a place  
There is more than a name

There is more than what newspapers say  
There is more than a song to what a singer can sing  
But its more than my words can explain

Chorus:

This is for Lena

This is for me

This is for friends along the way

This is for those who believe in the truth

And won't let it just slip away

This is for Lena's Caff 

## APPENDIX E

### *Song Lyrics*

*Sweet Little Café In a Square by Nelson Eddie*

*(Welcome to Caffé Lena Album, 1972)*

Lena:

“Twelve years ago when we started the Caffé, I came across a bunch of old ‘78s. And I found a record called, “Dear Little Café” It was recorded by Nelson Eddie. And it’s really a neat song, so I thought I would try it out with the boys in here. So we kind of whipped it into shape. (laughs) I’ll even try to do my Nelson Eddie impression.”

We’ll have a sweet little Café  
In a neat little square  
We’ll find our fortune  
And our happiness there  
We will thrive on the vane and resplendent  
And contrive to remain independent

We’ll have a meek reputation  
And a chic clientele  
Things will fall under our spell  
We’ll be so zealous  
That the world will be jealous  
Of our sweet little Café in a square

## APPENDIX F

*Song Lyrics*

*Lena the Queen of Saratoga by Lena Spencer*

(Lena humming)

Zippy: Hi Lena!

Lena: Hello Zippy

Zippy: Boy you got a lot of mail today

Lena: Really?

Zippy: Yeah. You must know people everywhere.

Lena: Well a lot of people have performed here.

Zippy: Boy I guess. Some big names?

Lena: Hmm. Some pretty big. Bob Dylan.

Zippy: Yeah?

Lena: Yeah! Arlo Guthrie, Tom Paxton, Dave Van Ronk...

Zippy: Boy. Hey here's one addressed to: "Lena, the Queen of Saratoga" I didn't know they called you that!

Lena: I wrote a song about "Lena, the Queen of Saratoga." (Music starts)

Zippy: Yeah? I'd like to hear it sometime.

Lena: Hmm, do you have a minute?

Zippy: Sure

Lena: (clears throat)

Lena is the Queen of Saratoga  
Even though she doesn't wear a Toga  
She runs this small café  
It's down the street a way  
Where singers sing and sway  
And how they love it  
Want more of it

She had a husband named Bill  
She really loved him until  
Billy boy he took a fancy to a college girl named Nancy  
Down old Saratoga way

Then she met another fella  
He told Lena she was bella  
Laid it on real thick  
But although he called her honey  
All he wanted was her money  
That made Lena sick

She gave him the old heave ho  
And not once did she grieve oh  
She didn't need him she had her café  
She gave it her devotion  
It's known across the ocean  
From coast to coast and you hear people say

They say that  
Lena is the queen of Saratoga  
Though she doesn't practice Hatha yoga  
She's called princess of folk  
And mister that's no joke  
She proudly wears the cloak  
A folksong mother there's no other  
Like Lena in all the land  
And Lena really is grand  
Folks from Boston to Gallinas  
They all love her Caffé Lena  
Down all Saratoga way  
Da da da da da!

Zippy: Wow, thanks!

Lena: You're welcome

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