The Joe Alper Photo Collection LLC

Present

Caffè Lena Exhibition
INSIDE AMERICA'S LEGENDARY FOLK MUSIC COFFEEHOUSE
Photography of Joe Alper
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CONCEPT

Few performance venues in the history of American music have influenced the artistic careers of our musical legends more than Caffè Lena. Located in Saratoga Springs, New York, the iconic 80-seat space served as a training ground for Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie, Don McLean, Ani DiFranco, and Emmylou Harris well before they became household names. The New York Times has called Caffè Lena “a time capsule—and a natural documentary subject.” Caffè Lena nurtured and shaped the 1960s folk revival. Outlasting every other coffeehouse of its era, it continues to serve the music community as a nonprofit arts center today in 2013. The Caffè’s pioneering founding figure, Lena Spencer (1923-1989), was the most important female coffeehouse owner of her time. The daughter of Italian immigrants, Lena broke traditional barriers, nurtured our best-loved musicians, touched thousands of lives and earned praise from PBS, BBC, the Library of Congress, and the Kennedy Center. A fearless and innovative artist who lived and died for her coffeehouse, Lena’s triumphant story is a missing and necessary chapter in music history.

From the Caffè’s opening night, to Bob Dylan’s first concerts, to Pete Seeger’s surprise guest appearance, one photographer documented key moments in the club’s history at the height of the folk revival, amassing an extraordinarily rare visual archive of American music culture. Joe Alper (1925-1968) is one of the great-unsung giants of twentieth-century folk and jazz photography. Incredibly prolific during his short career, his portfolio (80,000 negatives) spans 1958 – 1968, before his untimely death at the age of 43, just after establishing the photography department at SUNY Albany. Of those negatives, Alper made a striking 6,000 images at Caffè Lena.

Alper’s immersion into the Civil Rights movement as one of few photographers privledged to travel with the SNCC Freedom Singers was central to his photography. Through the camera lens, he captured the energy and insight of that groundbreaking time and produced some of its most recognizable images. His innovative portraiture and documentary photographs have graced the book and film versions of “Eyes on the Prize,” and were featured in Martin Scorsese’s documentary film on Bob Dylan “No Direction Home.” His images of jazz legends Miles Davis and John Coltrane appear on important records of the era. No other photographer depicted so many illustrious musicians of his time, nor covered so deftly its innovators. Alper’s Caffè Lena images represent a deeply personal part of his collection intrinsic to his illustrious career, as he also hosted performers like Dylan in his home.
Caffè Lena: Inside America’s Legendary Folk Music Coffeehouse brings together Joe Alper’s rare Caffè Lena images in the first retrospective exhibition to explore the artist’s work, as he intersected with luminaries of the folk, blues, jazz, and theater worlds at Caffè Lena. It includes rare audio, video, and text drawn from interviews with 100 artists featured in Alper’s photographs. The material documents underground coffeehouse counterculture, and the Civil Rights and Feminist movements.

David Amram says, “In today’s world, where YouTube and the Internet and do it yourself tools of technology make it possible for everyone to rejoice in the philosophy that teaches us that small is beautiful, the story of Lena and her struggles and the history of the Caffè are all more meaningful than ever.” This exhibition will be of interest to the nostalgic baby boom generation as well as the current DIY Indie generation, especially those who are curious about the freewheeling underground arts scene of New York of that time. It will be the first exhibition to reveal the untold stories of America’s greatest 1960s folk music heroes with never-before-seen pictures and firsthand interview material. Its highly diverse contents will make it a highly interactive, educational and entertaining experience for all viewers, and relevant to such diverse academic disciplines as visual anthropology, American studies, musicology, sociology, urban studies, women’s studies, and of course contemporary photography and visual culture.
TRAVELING EXHIBITION

After opening shows at the Tang Museum in Saratoga Springs NY and Powerhouse Arena in Brooklyn the exhibition will be available in North America beginning in December of 2013.

LENGTH OF EXHIBITION

Approximately eight to twelve weeks, depending upon scheduling requirements of participating museums and the overall tour.
COROLLARY PROGRAMMING

The curators, film director, and select artists featured in the project are available to travel to host venues to give lectures, contribute to panel discussions, visit with classes, and otherwise participate in ways that enrich the exhibition’s impact on its audiences.

CATALOGUE AND COMPANION BOX CD

A catalogue of approximately 294 pages is being produced by Powerhouse Books to accompany the exhibition. It will include an introduction by Academy Award-winner Tim Robbins and texts by Arlo Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Ani DiFranco. In addition, Tompkins Square Record label will release a companion box CD set for sale with the book featuring newly discovered live recordings made at the venue by Joe Alper’s photographic subjects (47 songs, all unreleased). The box set is being produced by the GRAMMY winning Magic Shop Recording Studio (O’ Brother Where Art Thou, Norah Jones).
The show can be curated to any size venue space, with the potential to expand as needed depending on the show requirements. In addition to 6,000 already digitized and available images, we have over 25 master prints available and up to 500 artifacts (in both original and digital form for easy reproduction) drawn from and providing unique access to the Caffè Lena collection at the Library of Congress. Artifacts include rare concert posters and handbills, typed and handwritten lyrics, signed albums, as well as unique memorabilia from Pete Seeger, David Amram, Carolyn Hester, and Dave Van Ronk.

*Caffè Lena* begins in the post-war industrial town of Milford, Massachusetts, where Lena Spencer grew up as a restauranteur’s daughter. Her Italian-American upbringing and restaurant experience featured prominently in shaping her sense of hospitality at the Caffè. The exhibition follows Lena through her arrival in New York where she intersected with Joe Alper, whose wife Jackie Gibson Alper (former member of the Weavers and friend of Woody Guthrie) served as Alan Lomax’s assistant at the Library of Congress. The exhibition unfolds onto a brief exploration of the Greenwich Village folk scene, one of popular music’s most fascinating intersections of art and politics and from where Lena and Joe Alper both drew inspiration. It continues on
to the Caffè’s birth and evolution in the unlikely town of Saratoga Springs through four thematic sections: emerging artists, luminaries, theater, and community. Each section will detail the untold stories of our most beloved artists’ early careers, including the making of two American classics, Don McLean’s American Pie and Arlo Guthrie’s Alice’s Restaurant. The accompanying wall texts chronicle the Caffè’s development from countercultural outpost to the venue recognized by the Library of Congress as “a national treasure.”

The exhibit can be set up to include a number of multi-media components as well as the photographic exhibit. The exhibition can include two documentary films (“Caffè Lena” –1989 PBS, “Caffè Lena Today” – 2013 Lost Footage Films) exploring different eras and facets of Caffè Lena’s history, with rare performance footage and interviews with such artists as Kate McGarrigle, Rufus Wainwright, G.Love, Utah Phillips, and Arlo Guthrie. In addition to the films, three viewing stations can allow visitors to watch behind the scenes excerpts from interviews with the artists, including a special Caffè Lena PSA video created by the GRAMMY Foundation. An original Caffè Lena table and chairs, and a replica of Joe Alper’s original Minolta camera are available to display.

Throughout the exhibition space seven listening stations can be used to enable visitors to hear Caffè Lena’s musical evolution and innovations during its 53-year period. Each station would include tracks from the 700-hour recently discovered Caffè Lena audio archive, plus outtakes, cover versions, and other songs created at Caffè Lena that influenced a generation of artists and music appreciators.

An hour-long audio tour can be created to feature Bob Dylan and other artists and individuals, such as GRAMMY Award-winning musician Joan Osborne, GRAMMY Foundation Vice President Scott Goldman, Pulitzer prize Award-winning author William Kennedy, and MacArthur Genius Award-winning playwright Liz LeCompte, each sharing their stories and insights about Caffè Lena, music, and the turbulent sixties.
PREVIOUS EXHIBITION HISTORY

While Joe Alper’s images have been featured in various exhibitions, publications and album covers for over 50 years, never before has his work been treated so extensively. Building upon the recent international exhibition of Alper’s images of Bob Dylan at the May 2013 Milan Image Arts fair in Milan Italy, curated by Wall of Sound Gallery, this exhibition covers and provides groundbreaking connections between five decades of documentary work. In addition, this will be the first major exhibition highlighting never-before-seen archival material in the Caffè Lena Collection at the Library of Congress.

ORGANIZATIONAL BODY

This exhibition is curated and produced by the Caffè Lena History Project in association with the Joe Alper Photo Collection LLC, the Saratoga Springs History Museum and the Library of Congress.
Jocelyn Arem is a curator, folklife consultant and cultural historian. The publishing of this remarkable collection will be the culmination of her decade-long work as Director of the Caffè Lena History Project in association with the Library of Congress, for which she has drawn on her academic training as a folklorist and ethnomusicologist, and her experience as a folk musician. She has published extensively on the 1960s folk music scene in the American Folklife Center News, The Association for Recorded Sound Collections Journal, and Boston Beats Magazine, and received numerous grants for her research including a recent grant from the GRAMMY Foundation. Her research has appeared on Fox News, NBC, NPR, CBS, ABC, and in American Airlines Magazine. She has appeared in a TV special tie-in to Martin Scorsese’s Bob Dylan documentary “No Direction Home”, and on WXPN and WAMC public radio.

Edward Elbers is Manager and Creative Director of the Joe Alper Photo Collection LLC. He received his BA from Harvard in Biology and Computer Science, and has since worked extensively in technical marketing and digital photo restoration. Beginning in collaboration with his late wife Jaye Alper, he has spent the last decade organizing, digitally archiving and restoring the 80,000-image Joe Alper Photo collection, working closely with the GRAMMY Foundation, the Caffè Lena History Project and the Library of Congress to develop Joe Alper’s folk, blues and jazz photography material. A member of NAPP (National Association of Photoshop Professionals) his digital restoration work has been featured at the International Folk Alliance Conference in Toronto, Canada and during GRAMMY Week in Los Angeles, California.
AVAILABLE CURATORS

Ian Berry is Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs and Curator at The Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College. He received his B.A. in Art History from the University at Albany and his M.A. from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. Before coming to Skidmore Ian served as Assistant Curator at the Williams College Museum of Art. A specialist in contemporary art, he has organized several exhibitions for the Tang Museum including projects that combine antique maps, scientific equipment, Rube Goldberg cartoons, and Shaker furniture with new works of international contemporary art. His recent solo artist projects at the Tang have featured artists such as Paul Henry Ramirez, Nayland Blake, Jim Hodges, and Alyson Shotz. Among his many publications, Ian is co-editor of the recent catalogue, “Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress,” co-published by MIT Press. As Lecturer in Art History, Ian teaches the seminar course, Inside the Museum, which serves as an introduction to the history, theory, and practice of the modern museum.

Nancy Groce is a curator and folklife specialist at the Library of Congress’s American Folklife Center. Prior to her work at the Library, she served as a curator at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, where she was in charge of major Smithsonian Folklife Festival programs. Her previous positions include as senior program officer for the New York Council for the Humanities, borough folklorist for Brooklyn, New York, and fellowships at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. She received a Ph.D. in American Culture from the University of Michigan and holds an M.M. in Ethnomusicology/ American Music and an M.A. in American Culture. Author of numerous books and articles, she has been involved with a wide variety of scholarly projects, exhibitions, concerts, symposia, conferences, lecture series, media projects, and public presentations.
SELECTED IMAGES

Reverend Gary Davis at Caffè Lena c.1962

Big Joe Williams guitar c.1964

Caffè Lena Opening Night c.1960

John Hammond c.1963
Bob Dylan at Caffè Lena c.1962

Dave Van Ronk at Caffè Lena c.1961
Caffè Lena History Project
Exhibition Proposal Caffè Lena

Pete Seeger and Family c.1962

TOSHI & PETER SEEGER
BOX 421, BEACON, N.Y. 12508

Dear Lena—
You are one in a million — We need you—
A big hug — and
lots of love—

/Toshi & Pete

Letter from Pete and Toshi Seeger c.1985
Big Joe Williams and Short Stuff Macon rehearse c.1964

Big Joe Williams and Short Stuff Macon TV filming c.1964

Noel Paul Stookey c.1964
Bottle of Wine

May 10, 1964

LET ME

THE LAST THING ON MY MIND

Copyright 1963, Deep fork music inc

Tom Paxton Lyrics c.1964
March 21, 1976

Dear Lena...

I hope you will be pleased with the attached story in spite of the opening sentence! "ith some of my more flattering remarks about you and your establishment edited out, that opening sounds harsher than I had intended it to do!!

As you are aware, I'm sure, I was describing the building and not your emporium!

Edythe and I look forward to seeing you soon again. Thank you for your hospitality on that memorable Sunday two weeks ago. It was a joy to meet you and "crothy.

We are going out of town Tuesday for two weeks but will be in touch when we return.

Best wishes,

Jane Barton
Windy Hill Farm, Esperance, New York 12066

Phone: 1-875-6533

Variety Letter to Lena c.1976
Arlo Guthrie Poster c.1970s

Tom Paxton/Nanci Griffith Poster c.1980

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