Fifty years ago, Lena Spencer opened a beatnik coffeehouse on Phila Street. Today, it’s one of the finest—and most famous—small music venues in America.

Good evening, and welcome to Caffè Lena.” For fifty years, on each weekend evening, those words have been spoken into a microphone on the small stage of an intimate performance space on the second floor of 47 Phila Street in Saratoga Springs. For nearly thirty years, that voice belonged to a remarkable personality, Lena Spencer, who created the coffeehouse with her husband, Bill, as part of a far-fetched plan to earn enough money to live in Europe for a few years. As it turned out, it became Lena’s life, and she became one of the great impresarios of her era.

She was born Pasqualina Rosa Nargi in 1923, the daughter of Italian immigrants in Milford, Massachusetts. In their patriarchal family, Lena was a maverick, wanting to strike out on her own. She became passionate about theater and, at one point, left for New York to follow her dreams, but was tracked down by an uncle and sent home.

At age 35, while working in Boston, Lena met and married an art student named Bill Spencer. In 1959, they decided to tap into the trendy coffeehouse business. They thought they could earn enough in two years to go to Europe for five. They opened their little café on May 20, 1960, with a performance by Jackie Washington (now known as Jack Landron) and Maxine Abel. Lena announced it would be open from 8:30 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. on show nights, and Sundays would be set aside for hootenannies. The novel venue quickly developed a following, mostly of people in their twenties or younger.

The Spencers traveled to New York and Boston to look for performers, booking them for three-night weekends in Saratoga Springs. A year later, she hosted a young unknown named Bob Dylan, and, characteristically, she recognized his talent and “asked him to come back despite much heckling from the audience.” He played Caffè Lena three times. In that first heady decade, Lena introduced Saratoga audiences to literally hundreds more.

In those days, Skidmore College was housed in dozens of old buildings along Circular Street and Union Avenue, and the Spencers suspected its students would be a ready-made audience. But the city was down at the heels. The gambling crackdown a decade earlier had eliminated a critical income source. The Northway was planned but not built, the Saratoga Performing Arts Center wasn’t yet a dream, and the city’s hotels were ancient. Aside from the four-week racing season, Saratoga was dead.

The coffeehouse business was strong through the Sixties and the early Seventies, as the Baby Boom generation claimed acoustic music as its own. Shows, which then started at nine, often ran late into the night. Performers and fans kept the party going at the Executive, a bar just west of Caffè Lena, or at other places in town during all-night sessions.

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proprietor of Hattie’s Chicken Shack, now Hattie’s Restaurant, once recalled how Lena helped launch a great talent: “One time I had a girl from Georgia working in here. She was a black girl named Bernice Johnson. She sang one night in this old chicken shack. A man came in and heard her and took her to Lena. She started singing at Lena’s. After that she sang at Carnegie Hall.” She is now nationally known as Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Theater was never far from Lena’s heart. In 1961, the Spencers launched the Gallery Theater, combining Bill’s visual arts with Lena’s performing arts. But, the following year, Bill left for Boston with a Skidmore woman, and the theater languished. Three years later, it was revived in a big way in collaboration with a flamboyant Welshman named John Wynne Evans; the sophisticated fare included Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, Emlen Williams, George Bernard Shaw and Brendan Behan.

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Arlo Guthrie, Don McLean, Tom Paley, Loudon Wainwright III, Emmylou Harris, David Bromberg, Pete Seeger, Tom Chapin, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Tom Paxton, Odetta, Dave Van Ronk, and literally hundreds more. Hattie Moseley Austin, the beloved proprietor of Hattie’s Chicken Shack, now Hattie’s Restaurant, once recalled how Lena helped launch a great talent: “One time I had a girl from Georgia working in here. She was a black girl named Bernice Johnson. She sang one night in this old chicken shack. A man came in and heard her and took her to Lena. She started singing at Lena’s. After that she sang at Carnegie Hall.” She is now nationally known as Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock.

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On January 26, 1968, the Deputy Commissioner of Public Safety closed Caffè Lena for a laundry list of code violations. Of course, much of Saratoga was then in violation of fire codes; Lena’s, as one example, was heated by a wood-burning stove surrounded by bricks, something that would be unimaginable today. Many suspected that the caffè had been targeted by the city because of its audience.

As they always did, Lena’s friends came to the rescue. The capital district’s folk music club immediately scheduled a benefit concert. By late March, repairs were complete, and Caffè Lena reopened.13 But it was only the first of many crises.

Lena and her caffè attracted people who were outside the mainstream. At first it was perceived as a beatnik hangout, but by 1967 the hippie movement was in full flower and Caffè Lena was viewed by some Saratogians as unsavory. A sympathetic observer, Rodney Scoville, noted in a letter to The Saratogian that a news story had unfairly dismissed the place as being “patronized largely by long-haired ‘Greenwich Village’ type of people….”14 Since much of the opposition was based on suspected drug use, it’s ironic that Lena was firmly opposed to drugs.

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In the coffeehouse entrance, posters from the 1970s and 1980s form a collage that reminds patrons of long-ago shows.
housing very affordable. It no longer was. In 1979, she was forced out of a vast 23-room duplex in the Collamer Building for which she had paid forty dollars a month, and she was pushed out of two smaller flats in the decade that followed, the result of Saratoga’s gentrification. In the last year or two of her life, she was reduced to sleeping in a chair in the café’s back room. And her health was failing, though she didn’t admit it. Caffe Lena kept her going, and she kept it going. “It has become a way of life. I don’t know what I’d do without it,” she said. 18

Early in her career, she had encouraged a young talent, the monologist Spalding Gray. Now famous, he was scheduled to perform on September 9, 1989 at The Egg in Albany. Lena looked forward to the show, and was leaving with her niece when she fell down the building’s staircase, striking her head. Doctors later thought she had suffered a heart attack. Rushed to Ellis Hospital in Schenectady, she slipped into a coma from which she never emerged. On October 23, Lena passed away, leaving hundreds, if not thousands, of friends to mourn her. 19

Of course, Lena had never been big on planning, and the café was at risk of going into limbo. A group of her friends met within days of her fall and kept it operating. At her death, the problem of Caffe Lena’s future came to the fore. Her only heirs were two older brothers in Massachusetts; then, again, she left no property, except the “name and goodwill” of the business. Jimmy and Eddie Nardi graciously consented to sell the business to a new nonprofit corporation, Caffe Lena Inc., following its organizing meeting in January 1990. 20

The new operation steered a careful course between tradition and innovation. Under paid managers, booking continued substantially the same, with many of the old performers mixing with new faces. Changes were made to improve the audience’s experience, including installation of central air conditioning. While Lena had been operating “for profit” but never made one, the new organization was intended to be nonprofit. By 1994, however, it had accumulated a discouraging debt of $14,000. The board responded decisively, and by combining austerity, successful shows, and contributions, retired the debt in five years. Lena Inc., following its organizing meeting in January 1990, 20

...continued making improvements (such as extensive rewiring and the replacement of the original bentwood chairs) and keeping up with new musical offerings. In late 2009, yet another challenge presented itself, when it was discovered the building’s first floor was failing, and again the board addressed the issue quickly, making plans for reconstruction in the near future. Under Craig’s management, programming has flourished. Caffe Lena hosts over 400 events a year and is in operation five nights a week. Wednesday’s “Emerging Artists Breakout” draws teen-agers and encourages their artistic development. Thursdays are usually “open mic” nights for an older crowd; one Wednesday each month is a poetry open mic, and every two months on a Monday a storytellers’ open mic takes over. Occasional Sunday afternoon family concerts draw parents with small children. And every Friday, Saturday and Sunday, members of the audience drive from as far as Quebec, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont to see a show. Its fame is so great that, in 2008, it was named “the best small venue in North America” by the International Folk Alliance.

On May 20, 2010, the café will mark its fiftieth anniversary with a major concert. Few businesses endure for half a century, and fewer still do so when they are founded on a dream. Caffe Lena contributes something intangible but wonderful to the city of Saratoga Springs and its region. It is Lena Spencer’s legacy, the gift of a remarkable personality who chose Saratoga Springs as her home and gave to it more than she ever received. 21

SOURCES

1 The first years of Spencer’s life are documented in a typewritten autobiographical essay begun on January 9, 1989; unfortunately she did not complete it. (Caffe Lena Collection, Historical Society of Saratoga Springs)
6 See, for example, the news story about Emmylou Harris’ first appearance, “New Singer at Caffe,” Saratogian, 7 June 1969, 14.
7 Mae C. Banner, “She Had a Place That Will Live Forever,” Saratogian, 24 October 1989, 1A.
9 Banner, loc. cit.
10 Story told to Field Home by an unknown informant, 1989.
11 See, for example, the news story about Lena Spencer’s fiftieth anniversary, “Lena Spencer Symbolizes A True Dedication to Arts,” Saratogian, 19 Mar. 1989, 1F.
15 Mae C. Banner, “She Had a Place That Will Live Forever,” Saratogian, 24 October 1989, 1A.
18 “Beverly Perry, “Hard Times Continue to Plague Caffe Lena,” Saratogian, 27 May 1983, 4C.