



Caffè Lena

INSIDE AMERICA'S LEGENDARY FOLK MUSIC COFFEEHOUSE

Caffè Lena: Inside America's Legendary Folk Music Coffeehouse

Edited by Jocelyn Arem
In collaboration with Caffè Lena
Foreword by Tim Robbins

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Brooklyn, NY



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Caffè Lena crowd, 1961

opposite

Lena Spencer, 1976

TIM ROBBINS

Foreword

My first time on a stage performing for an audience was at Caffè Lena in 1965. I was seven years old and my father, Gil Robbins, who was performing a set that night brought my sisters and brother and I up for a Von Trappish rendition of "Black and White," the Earl Robinson/Alan Roberts [David Arkin] song that celebrates the groundbreaking Supreme Court decision Brown versus Board of Education. It was an auspicious beginning for me and a real window into who my father was and the world he and my mother, Mary, brought us up in. My parents had the good sense and foresight to move their young family in 1960 from the dullness of Pomona, California to the epicenter of creativity and progressive thought at the time; Greenwich Village, New York City. My siblings and I grew up around inspired people, folks who were imagining a new world, brave souls that chose to use their art to ask big questions and celebrate the true meaning of freedom. A cauldron was brewing in Greenwich Village at the time and its brew would spread throughout the country and significantly alter how we all thought about and participated in the world. Great songwriters tackled difficult subjects and the Tin Pan Alley love songs gave way to "I Ain't Marching Anymore" and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll."

These songwriters had embraced a revival of folk music that had blossomed in the late 40s and early 50s with the emergence of Woody Guthrie and the popularity of the Weavers. Pete Seeger, blacklisted and forbidden from the tonier stages, travelled the country, banjo in hand, performing where he could, and in so doing inspired many in his audience to pick up guitars and become folk musicians. Pete and others spread the word

of Leadbelly and Woody throughout the country and by the 60s, outposts had sprung up that gave these new aspiring songwriters stages to play on.

Caffè Lena was one of these outposts.

The music and the messages coming out of places like Caffè Lena were empowering people to question, to use their voice in communion with others, to find solidarity with each other through music. There is a unique and wonderful power in an audience singing along with a performer on stage. They are sharing a story together, feeling the emotions of that story together and creating beauty through their collective voice. These moments of unity were happening all over the place like electricity.

Caffè Lena gave a stage to people who were telling the American story.

A couple of years ago, I was approached by Jocelyn Arem, a bright and inspired young woman who was working on a book about Lena Spencer and her Caffè. She had unearthed a treasure trove of photographs containing a who's-who of musicians that had graced the Caffè Lena stage in Saratoga Springs, New York. Looking at the photos brought me back to a beautiful time. She showed me pictures I had never seen of my dad performing at the Caffè. She showed me a picture of Lena who I immediately recognized somehow, even though I hadn't seen her face for almost 50 years. I remember Lena's warmth, her welcoming nature, and that she didn't take shit from anyone. She was the boss. My dad liked her very much.

Many of the faces in this book are no longer with us. They are missed deeply but have left behind great music, an important legacy of courage, and a lesson on what it means to be an artist. Newer troubadours are out there on the road now. They are carrying on, singing new songs, keeping Woody alive, telling the new American story. They are there because of people like Lena Spencer and the artists in this book who paved the way, and who did so with an open heart and a harmonic tone.

*A child is black, a child is white,
The whole world looks upon the sight,
A beautiful sight.
For very well the whole world knows
This is the way that freedom grows;
Freedom grows!*

Los Angeles, 2013



Caffè Lena, 47 Phila Street, Saratoga Springs, NY, 1960



LENA SPENCER

“That’s the way it all began.”

Today is January 8, 1989, four days after my 66th birthday and into the 29th year of the existence of my cafe, The Caffè 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. So now, at this point in my life it is time I write a history of the Caffè; my memoirs, my autobiography, what should it be? One or another or a combination of all three?

I was born on January 4th, 1923, in the industrial town of Milford, Massachusetts, daughter of Antonia and Vincenza (Moccia) Nargi. My parents were emigrants from Italy, the town of Castelvetero sul Calore, province of Avellino. I was born a twin, but my sister died at the age of two weeks. She was given the name Celestina (heavenly one) and I was called Pasqualina (Little Easter). There were three older brothers, Luigi (Louis), Vincenzo (James), and Eduardo (Edward). I was born at home. Two months after my younger sister was born, my mother committed suicide. It was postpartum depression—what they called then “puerperal mania.” My mother’s death was not discussed in my family and there were questions that just were not asked.

My father came to this country when he was eight years old. My grandfather Vincenzo had immigrated to the town of Milford, which was famous for its granite quarries and soon he was working as a granite cutter. My father didn’t go to work in the quarries but instead was hired to work for the Draper Corporation that manufactured looms and shuttles in Hopedale, a small community next to Milford. It was a unique community set up in the 19th century and was a true example of the communist ideal made workable.

He did not work very long for Draper’s. He was somewhat of a radical, believed in the power of the unions, and became involved in the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). Along with other fellow workers dissatisfied with working conditions, they went on strike and attempted to unionize the plant. Their efforts failed, they lost their jobs and were blacklisted. My father then went to work in the quarries. My family was growing up during the Depression, but my father was very fortunate. During the Depression, there was a lot of Work Projects Administration work, and they were doing a lot of building using granite. You’ll find that there is Milford pink granite in the Yale library, and in a lot of buildings in New York.

After the Depression, at the end of the 30s, going into the 40s and the advent of all the trouble in Europe, granite went out of fashion. My father’s brother bought an old, broken-down hotel in Milford, the Union Hotel. It had a bar on the first floor and a restaurant on the second floor and floppy rooms on the third and fourth floors. He offered it to my father and gave my father the job of running the place. My father thought it would be a nice business to leave to his sons. And then came the threat of war. My brothers all had registered for the draft. Come Pearl Harbor, they were put into active duty.

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. Being the youngest and the only girl in the house, I used to have to iron my brothers’ shirts. When I graduated from high school in 1940, I wanted to go to college in the worst way. I wanted to be a journalist. But my folks didn’t believe in college. Well, they

Lena Spencer, 1963

BOB DYLAN

“Listen to him, dammit.”

Terri Thal had started managing her husband [Dave Van Ronk] that spring, after they both decided his manager wasn't doing anything to promote him. By summer she decided to “become a grown up manager” and was beginning to handle some of the singers in their circle, who needed managers: Van Ronk, Tom Paxton, Mark Spoelstra, and [Bob] Dylan. Terri got Dylan his first out-of-town gig (and an out-of-town engagement was a mind-blower, because there were very few clubs around outside the Village that would book folk singers, “There was literally no place to get a singer up on a stage outside town,” Terri recalls). She called Lena Spencer, an actress who ran a place up in Saratoga Springs called Caffè Lena, and asked her to book Dylan...

At one point it was so noisy in the place that Bill Spencer, Lena's husband, had to get on the stage and tell the audience to quiet down. Dylan didn't talk about it when he got back to the Village, but Spencer, who thought Dylan had enormous talent and was furious at the indifference of the audience, told Terri and others what had happened at Lena's. He got up on the stage and told the audience: “You may not know what this kid is singing about and you may not care, but if you don't stop and listen you will be stupid all the rest of your lives. Listen to him, dammit.”

Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan: An Intimate Biography* (London: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), p.85-86.

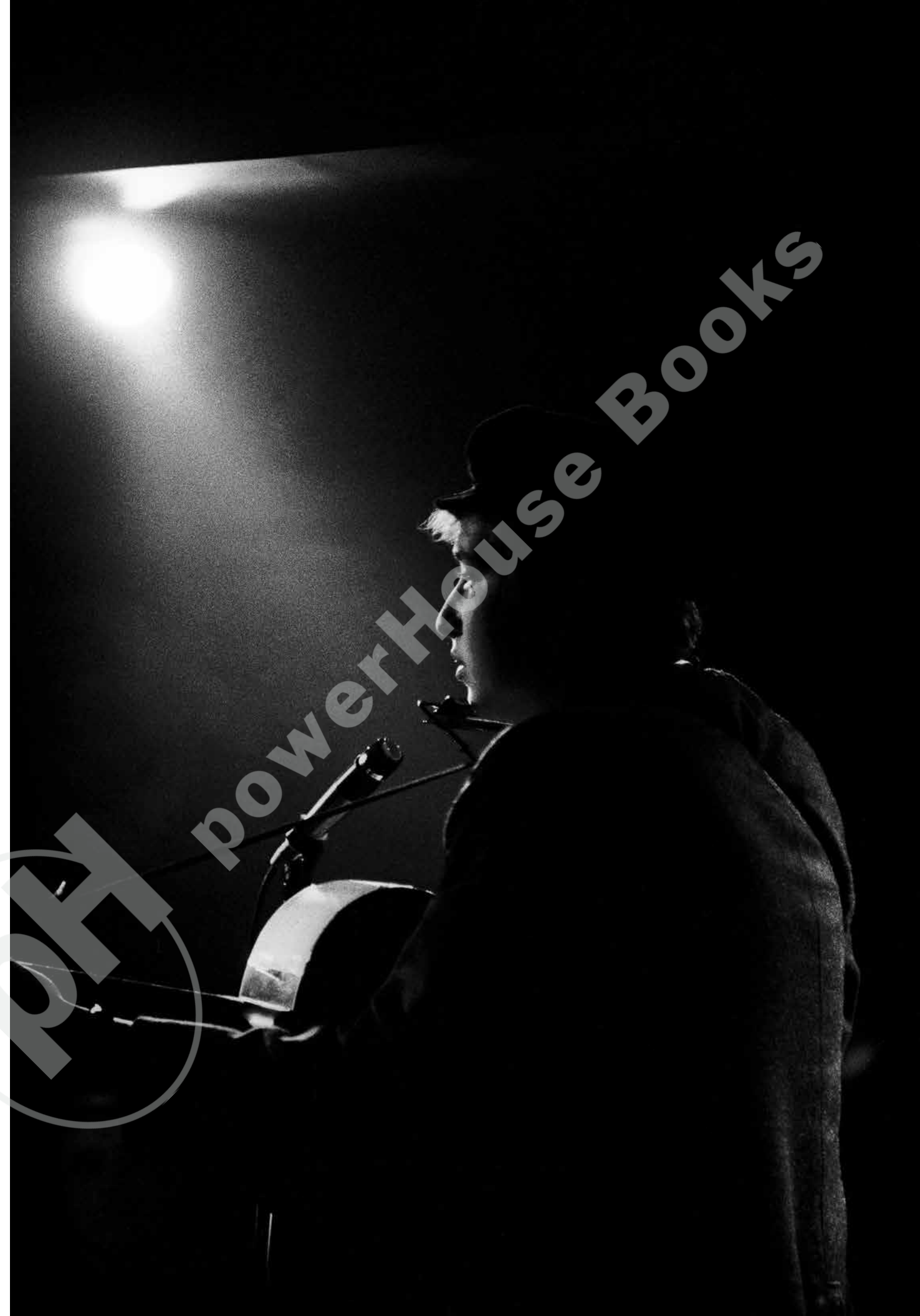
Whenever Lena needed a performer, if she didn't have someone for a weekend sometimes she'd call Dave and beg him to come up and do an appearance. Sometimes she would call me and ask me to help get her someone. When I started working with Bob, he was raw, certainly not a professional performer. But he wanted work and I said, “I'll do what I can.” Some of the clubs in the Village booked him, but out of town no one wanted him. I called Lena, and she wouldn't take him. Finally, I said, “You owe me. Every time you got a problem, you call me and I solve it. I want you to hire this guy.” And she did!

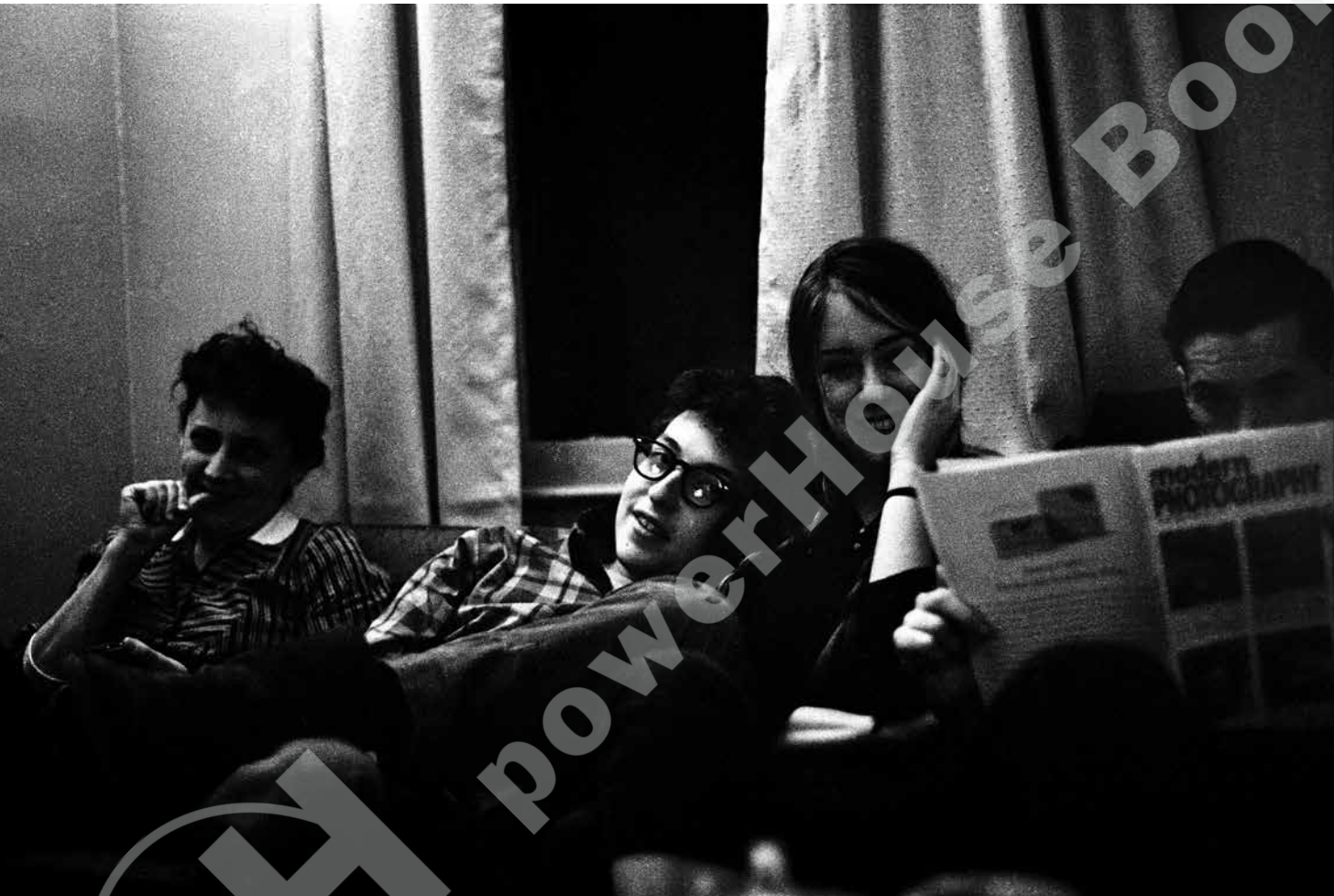
Terri Thal

When he played with the veterans Bob called himself Blind Boy Grunt as a tribute to, and playful take on, the nicknames of the blues and jazz greats who preceded the young white pretenders. He had the eyeglasses for the role. After a gig at Caffè Lena's in Saratoga Springs, New York, we spent a week at the home of photographer Joe Alper and his family in Schenectady, New York. At a thrift shop in town Bob found a pair of wire-rimmed eyeglasses with opaque blue glass lenses in them.

Suze Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties* (New York: Broadway/Random House, 2009), p.22.

Bob Dylan, 1962





Jackie Alper, Bob Dylan, Suze Rotolo, and
Guy MacKenzie, 1962

Bob Dylan, Suze Rotolo, 1962



PETE SEEGER

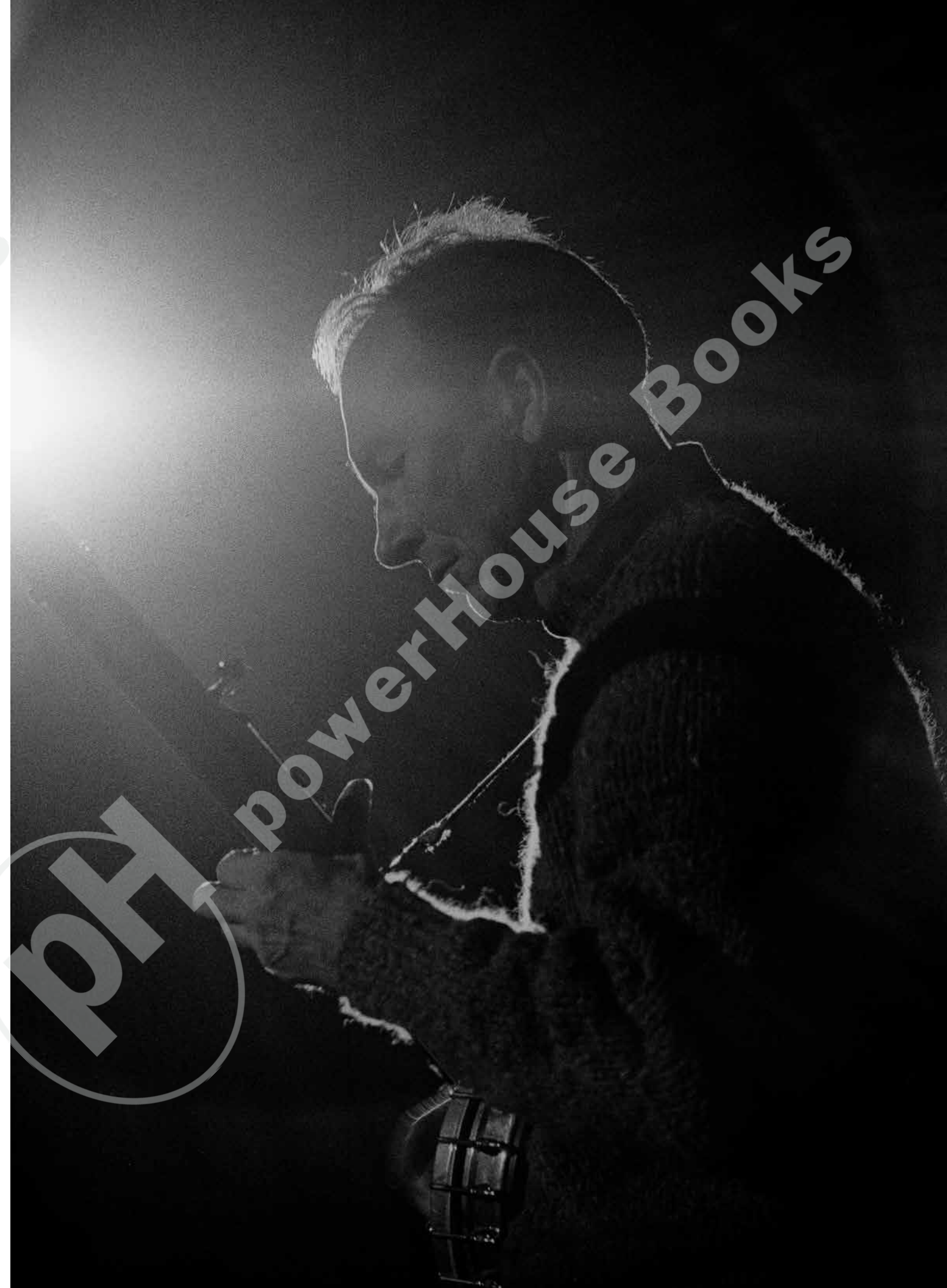
**“It’s all these small things,
which may save the human race.”**

If there’s a human race here in a hundred years, it will be millions of unknown people and unknown things that will save us. The powers that be have got so much money that they do terrible things. They can destroy a legal organization or a think tank, but what are they going to do about millions of little things? If they break up three of them, four more will spring up to take their place.

What Lena did over a long period of time was just one of the many little modern miracles which may save the world. It’s all these small things that may save the human race. The great woman in Kenya who got women to plant trees went from village to village; she didn’t ask the government to help her. She knew she’d just get the brush-off. So think of Lena as being a woman who did something so extraordinary that her work will go on through the centuries. Who knows, there may be a group of women from Afghanistan who will hear of Lena’s story and say, “Our husbands can’t complain about this; we’ll wear the veils, we’ll do everything we’re supposed to, but we will sing as we go from one town to another.” It will seem perfectly harmless to their husbands, but they will be showing what women can do.

Lena was very, very honest. And not eager to be famous or rich, but just do it with joy, where she was. If anybody had offered her a high paying job, to move to some far off place, she would have turned it down. I’m sure I did lots of silly things, but she took me as I was and didn’t try to control me. I’m sorry that I can’t travel to Caffè Lena anymore. I have to stay home pretty much 100% of the time now.

Dr. King showed us all that you can achieve revolutions without forcing violence. You have to be very smart about it, not in very much of a hurry, but not be too slow either. Lena at times used speed and other times slowed down. Lena is an old friend, and her Caffè must be famous throughout the English-speaking world, at least. The human race needs more persevering people like Lena.



Dearest here -

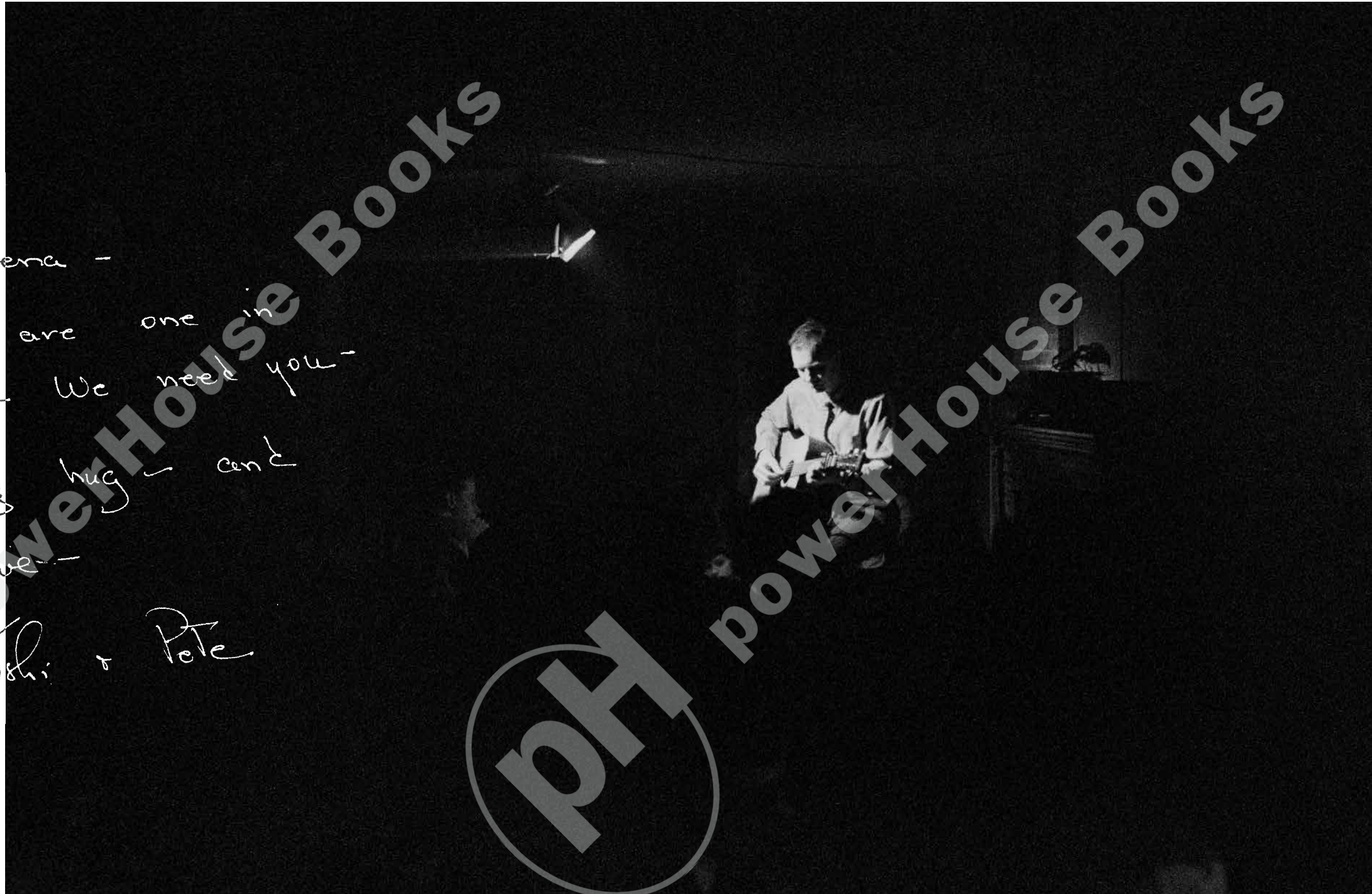
You are one in

a million - We need you -

A big hug - and

lots of love -

Josh & Pete



Pete Seeger, 1962



MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT

“An angry New York state trooper, or an angry Lena Spencer?”

Here's the story of John Hurt at Caffè Lena. I was living in Philadelphia, where I made the booking, and John was in Avalon, Mississippi. So if he was going to go anywhere, he had to take the bus from Grenada, Mississippi, into Memphis. I talked to John, and he's all ready, and then he said to me, "How am I going to get there?" So I said, "Just take the bus to Memphis, then take a cab to the airport, and I've got a ticket waiting for you at the airline, and you'll fly to Philadelphia." John said, "Oh, I can't do that." I said, "You can't do what?" He said, "I don't know how they get me from the bus station to the airport, and I don't want to fly alone." This is the night before the Caffè Lena gig.

So I flew from Philadelphia to Memphis. I met John at the bus station. We took a cab back to the Memphis Airport, jumped on a plane from Memphis to Philadelphia. I had my car parked at the Philadelphia Airport. So we got on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which led to the New Jersey Turnpike, which led to the Garden State, which led to the New York freeway. Now I'm going about 75, 80 miles an hour, and John is hanging on. I'm heading north, and it's already 7:30 p.m., and I am hauling ass. I get to thinking, "I could get stopped here for speeding. But who would I rather face? An angry New York state trooper, or an angry Lena Spencer?" Man, that's a no-brainer. I got up to about 90. I'm flying, I'm going up the highway, and it's now like, 8:30. I get off at Saratoga. I go flying onto Phila Street. I get there, I grab John, we start up the stairs. I look up, and there's Lena. She's looking down at me and John, and she's got her arms folded. And she said, "Dick. We like to have the performers arrive early, so the audience doesn't worry."

I never told her the story, cause I was afraid she would have been mad. After all of that craziness

and flying and speeding, we got in, just exactly no earlier and no later than we should have.

Lena ran a tight ship. She was like a school principal. She'd have hit you across the wrist with a ruler. You have to put the audience first, so that people know they're going to have an uninterrupted ability to concentrate on the music. That's how the long-standing people stay in business. I don't think it could have stayed open for years just on the coincidence that Dylan had played in '61 and '62. You've got to have good music, a good sound system, good food, a good atmosphere, a good vibe, and a dedicated loyal clientele. All of that is more important than the fact that one superstar happened to have played there early in his career. Because if that's the fact, then every bar that Hendrix and Springsteen ever played would still be going.

Lena didn't give a shit if you liked it. She sailed her own course. She had a very strong intent of how she wanted her club run. It was her vision. She didn't want to answer to a committee, a sub-committee, a bunch of advisors, whatever. It was the Caffè Lena; it wasn't the Caffè Bunch of People. She didn't care if her vision was the popular one. She was not in the business of being popular. She wanted to run a club.

I think she had enough followers who admired her and who understood her intentions of what her vision was and what she would not allow. You don't have to sit around and wonder, "How would Lena have handled this?" She made sure that people knew. Her followers are exactly that. They follow the path that was her intent.

Dick Waterman

Mississippi John Hurt, 1964

ARLO GUTHRIE

“I believe in Lena yesterday, today, and tomorrow.”

Since 1961, I had done a couple of open mic, or “hootenanny” nights at the Gaslight and Gerde’s Folk City in New York. Finally, in the early summer of 1965, when I was 18 years old and just outta high school, I decided that I was gonna do some gigs. I had just bought a red ’57 MGA, a beautiful English sports car, from Pete Seeger and I was rarin’ to go. I had my gee-tar in a soft case. Caffè Lena was the first stop.

I got to Lena’s, and here was this really strange woman who had cats that talked. We stayed at Lena’s house. She was picky, but we got along fine. I remember becoming very fond of her. 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, I came to believe that she was someone I could trust.

I loved going back to Lena’s for all kinds of reasons, almost none of which had to do with actually performing. When you went to Lena’s, it wasn’t just like another gig. It was really old school. In those days it wasn’t like you went and played one night. It was gonna be the next week or two of your life. It wasn’t like you went to the hotel, then came and did the gig, and then went away. It was a total immersion into Lena’s life.

There was a little place down the street called The Executive, where we would basically just eat, and hang out at Lena’s all day. It was very dark, and she had some beautiful girls staying with her who I fell madly in love with. When you’re 18 and you’re off on your own, you can’t beat that combination. There was an old guy named Tom that was living there. Tom would be telling racehorse stories and odd characters

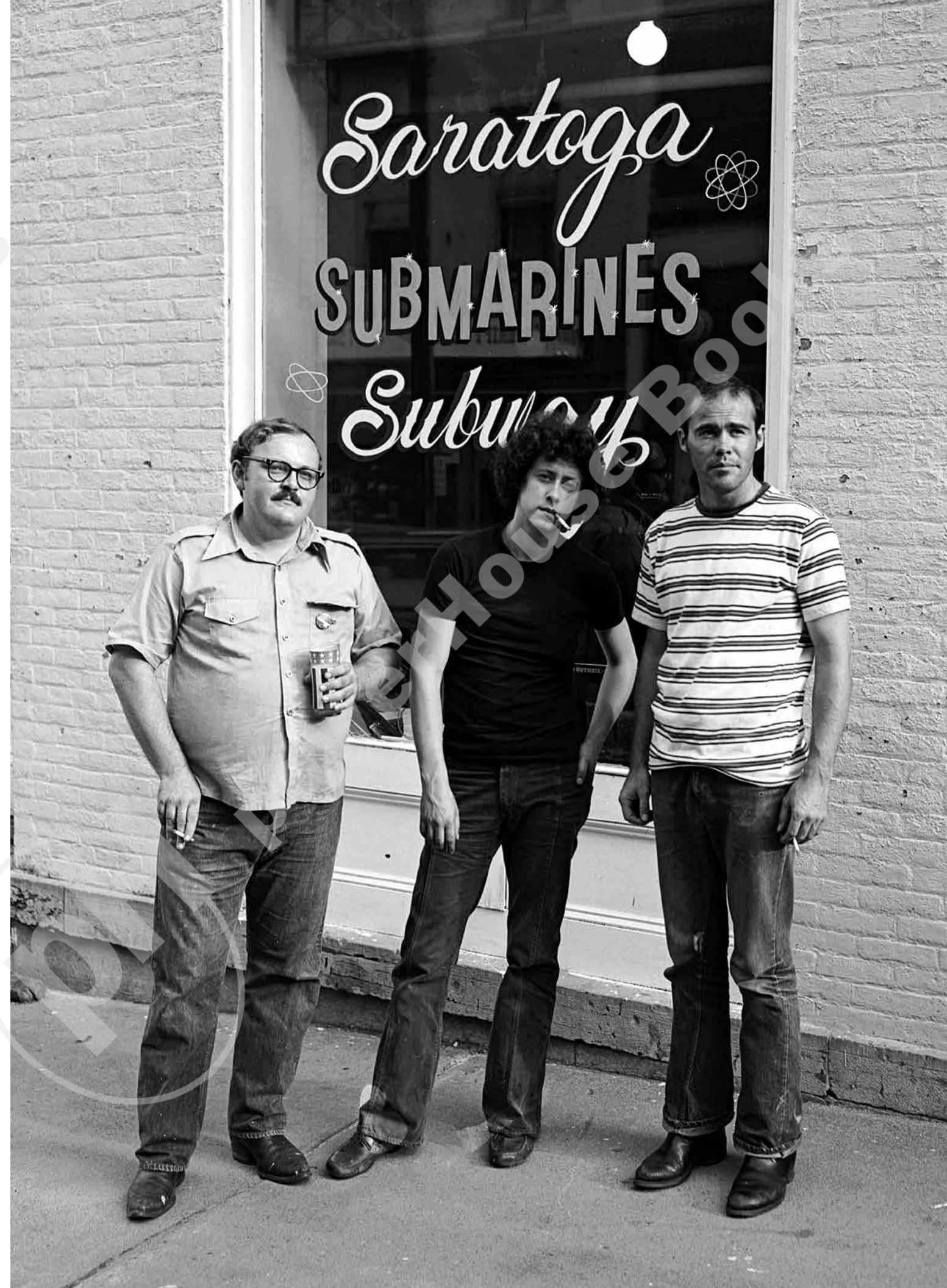
would come in. It was sort of an odd little crew, something out of *Lord of the Rings*. It was like reading a book.

Lena would sorta look into ya. She could peer into people, stare ‘em down, and sort of look into ‘em. If she liked their souls, it didn’t matter how screwed up they were, or even how normal they were. Her heart and soul was into what she was doing. When I played at her coffeehouse, she took care of me. She was one of my early teachers, and to this day I love her dearly. I believe in Lena yesterday, today and tomorrow. Lena’s one of my oldest friends. I hope I can hold onto my ideals as long as she has. Like Cesar Chavez and Pete Seeger.

She would bring in young people still learning their stuff. You didn’t have to be a polished performer to play there. To spend the time and energy on an unknown person was one of the features of Lena that I loved—the idea that somebody would actually go out of their way to promote somebody no one ever heard of! You were hearing the future, and that was nice to know. Those places are so few and far between. So very few other clubs could afford to take those kinds of risks. She was able to do it because her lifestyle was not a very expensive one. Lena was not a fan of glitz and glamour.

Caffè Lena is one of those places where you grow as an artist, and we desperately need places like that. There aren’t a whole lot of them, and it doesn’t have to do with the 60s. It’s a timeless place, because the personality of Lena is a timeless personality. She’s somebody who refuses to be tied to a particular place and time.

Arlo Guthrie, Rich Lewis, and Horald Griffiths, 1973



RUFUS WAINWRIGHT

“I’m definitely from a folk-ochracy, folk and foremost.”

My mother Kate’s happiest days were at Caffè Lena. She was from Montreal, ended up in New York City, and then back in Montreal. In a lot of ways Saratoga was the halfway point, where she would discover stuff. It was free and open for her and allowed her to heal from what had happened in the big city. It was this nice filter of familiarity that she would go through on that epic journey up Route 87.

You have to remember that folk music at that time was the biggest type of music there was. Joan Baez was like Madonna. It was a heavy-duty situation, if you were gonna make it in that world. I don’t think Kate felt intimidated at Caffè Lena. Being Canadian and being a woman, she felt very at home. Whereas when she came to the city, she felt more nervous because it was tougher. In that town, Kate was able to live a fantasy. The town was odd, caught in another century—it had big mansions and America’s oldest racetrack, but it was poor. There was this decrepit romance she connected with. Lena’s was the Shakespeare Company of cafes of that era.

I remember Kate’s Caffè Lena stories that she constantly told. One was when they were down in Saratoga in the summer at the same time that the New York City Ballet was there. They’d go on crazy midnight drives with the dancers and end up taking their clothes off and going skinny-dipping. There was another story where Kate got a job playing piano near the racetrack. There was apparently some old bar, some shack that was owned by a black woman. Kate would play the blues, and all these very wealthy Vanderbilts and Rockefellers would come in between the races and get trashed in this side-of-the-road shanty where my mother played the blues.

We would drop by and visit Lena, and I vividly remember the Caffè. I would have been around 12 [years old]. I remember those murderous stairs! She had amazing minted malt milkshakes. I later wrote “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk,” so who knows, maybe it came from an early memory of that. There was a big 25th anniversary party for Lena and I sang for it. It was around this time when I was first onstage. Kate and Anna decided to indoctrinate their children and turn them into these sort of singing minstrels, which you could get away with in Canada. When I was that age, I would have to sing the line, “Tis summer, the darkies are gay.” Needless to say, I was ready to go! This was in an old casino. I remember Lena having a lovely time. That was the last time I saw her alive. I remember the group bought her a huge stereo system. She turned to my mom and said, “I wish they’d just given me the money!” She was very poor.

When Kate was filming the 1989 PBS Caffè Lena documentary, she was wearing a great sequined jacket, very un-folky of her! I remember meeting and being very impressed with Spalding Gray because he was a huge star. It was right after *Swimming to Cambodia*. I also remember meeting Dave Van Ronk there. When we met these people, it was a lineage we were encouraged to absorb. I’m definitely from a folk-ochracy, folk and foremost. We’ve always operated in an inclusive manner with all types of musicians. It is more involved [with community], and we keep it as loose as possible. That’s from the coffeehouse mentality.

Rufus Wainwright with Kate and Anna McGarrigle, 1985





ANI DiFRANCO

**“If you come with the songs,
there are people there to listen.”**

In the early 1990s, being a budding folksinger, I'd heard of Caffè Lena. There are just a handful of already very famous folk venues in that illustrious, mysterious folk underground, which I was very fortunate to slip into as a young writer and songwriter. I was attracted to the folk underground because of its political idealism and its sense of community. There was a real awareness of how music connects us socially, how it uplifts us, how much power and potential there is to connect that with community activism. That just makes a lot of sense to me.

I knew Caffè Lena was a place to reach out to. I had one cassette at the time. I was probably 19. I packaged it up, wrote a little note, “Please hire me, love me,” and sent it over to the woman booking the joint at the time. She took a chance and booked me.

That room was just so tiny, tiny, even back when I was tiny, tiny. It was like a house concert vibe there. I'd heard that it was a stop for all folksingers for many years and it seemed to still retain that spirit. It was a place where people go who appreciate songs and songcrafting, not a place where you have to put on a show, or dress up, or have lights moving around. If you come with the songs, there are people there to listen. It typified the welcoming spirit that I felt when I entered the folk community from Pete Seeger, Tom Paxton, and Utah Phillips.

In 1990 Utah and I shared a booking agent, Jim Fleming. Jim introduced me to Utah's work—here's your stable mate! We were just people who looked at each other and recognized that we were doing the same work. You know, “You look like

Santa Claus and I look like Hot Head Paisan, but we're doing the same work!” Not only did the folk world need new blood, I needed teachers in this life. Utah was immediately somebody I gravitated toward because he had so much to teach. I could feel that he was somebody I needed to hang around as I was honing my craft.

When I was 19, there was nobody who was 19 and calling themselves a folksinger. The crowds at these little folk clubs were getting older and older and older. The seminal performers and activists and writers were, I think, feeling like their scene and their culture were dying. When I came in, there was probably a person here or there who felt uncomfortable or threatened by a shaved-headed, jack-booted, pierced 19-year-old with a much more aggressive style and in-your-face political approach. But by and large, what I felt was, “Oh my God—thank goodness!” It was a celebration for the old guard who could see that, ya know, that there was a future beginning.

CAFFÈ LENA

Inside America's Legendary Folk Music Coffeehouse

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