



PANEL 1

THE ORIGIN STORY OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC

It is the early 19th century. Black slaves and Irish-American laborers are clearing the wilderness to make room for new cotton plantations and westward expansion. After a day's work, they pass an hour of leisure hootin', hollerin', and caterwaulin' joy, sorrow & their live's bitter conditions. They're playing fiddle, spoons, and banjo. The different strains of music (the long sweep of the fiddle, the pick-pick-picks of the banjo, the powerful force of the human voice) are mixing and interweaving skyward with the campfire smoke, creating, through their camaraderie and passion, a new thing, a new kind of music.

Scattered at their camp are the tools of cutting down the wilderness, along with some whiskey jugs and coffee pots and some smelly boots. At the periphery to each side are two other characters. To the left, the colonial woman, darning the men's socks by lantern light, peering over at the music-making scene. She's a part of their world, but not at the center. To the right, a Choctaw mother with babe on her back is leaving, perhaps on the Trail of Tears.

And surrounding all the characters is the thick darkness of American wilderness, with a big bright moon over all, seen through the branches. Night birds tweet.



PANEL 3

THE MODERN EXPERIENCE OF CAFFÈ LENA

I chose to run with Power of the Intimate Performance as the theme. As in the first piece, I visually dramatize the power and presence that emanates from performances. In the first piece, the music is sent skyward, towards the moon; in this piece, the singer is singing horizontally, towards an audience. The singer's song, the vector of energy coming from her mouth, has transformed into stem and leaf and blossom growing out of her and weaving through the audience. I added another girl in the audience, guitar on her back, wearing a dress similar to the singer's. One aspect of the sacred community is the new generation taking their lead from those who have come before.

In the first piece, light emanates from light sources (the campfire, the lantern, the moon); in this piece, the scene is dominated with black paper, and her song is a powerful triangle of light cutting through it. The audience is bathing in that light, and is connecting to her and to each other in that light.

The audience is a collection of differently-aged people listening, having different experiences, but all connected through the energetic threads emanating from the musician. The piece captures the ephemeral moment of communal feeling that Caffè Lena facilitates. The brick borders indicate the idea of the brick and mortar space that makes this possible.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Andrew Benincasa makes paper-cut art, stop-motion animations, and stories. In his early-20's, Andrew pursued literature, languages, and education, but then made an abrupt shift to creating and performing shadow puppet shows. He performed for small audiences, week after week, year after year, developing his aesthetic and relationship with the audience. During this time, he taught himself paper-cut art, and, eventually animation.

Andrew now operates from his studio in Brooklyn, NY as a freelance artist, making artwork, lightboxes, and animations for clients, as well as working on his own projects.

A video of Andrew creating the Caffè Lena lightboxes can be viewed online at caffelena.org/step-inside-lenas/





PANEL 2

THE LENA PANEL

For this piece, I picked out the theme of "Welcoming," as well as embodying the community that Lena created. Lena stands at the center, in an ellipsis of light, with her arms out, both welcoming the audience and introducing the musicians (The Freedom Singers). It is a gesture which expresses her values and pro-activeness. Lena as Master of Ceremonies, magically bringing people together and creating, through her character, desire, and action, this community.

Outside the ring of stage-light, we have the audience, all types of people from Lena's 1960s crowd, including Utah Phillips, Joe Alper, John Hurt, Hedy West and Molly Scott. I captioned some key aspects of the space so that this composition acts as time capsule to the old Caffè.

And on the top I created a mosaic themed banner with the text "Good Evening, and Welcome to..." in an ornate, old English font with mosaic patterns around it. On each end I placed a mosaic circle, with one of Lena's Pasha cats with an espresso cup.

My goals for this piece are to honor Lena by showing her at the center of the community she created; to show a historic moment, and to evoke the vibe of Welcomeness to people basking in the lightbox's glow.



THE CAFFÈ LENA Lightbox Murals

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

ANDREW BENINCASA

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