



LIVE from Lake County...

it's the coffeehouse concept reinvented

BY STEPHANIE DAVIS | PHOTO BY DON BENSMAN

Denny Carleton and fellow musical performers, better known as "friends," have been a coffeehouse-performing machine in the Lake County area for years. And while he never would have dreamed of bringing the coffeehouse atmosphere to a refined fine arts setting, it's become a case of "business imitates life," he explains.

Singer and songwriter Carleton, performing since the mid-60s, is an originator of the four-years-and-still-brewing coffeehouse series for the Fine Arts Association (FAA) in Willoughby. He is a familiar face at FAA, having also worked there for two decades as a guitar teacher.

The FAA's version of a "coffeehouse" got its wings thanks to Charlie Lawrence, FAA's former executive director. "Charlie observed our performances at coffeehouses throughout the Northeast Ohio area. He thought the FAA should cater to more than jazz and classical audiences," Carleton says. "He told me, 'We need some new blood in the Fine Arts.'"

The idea was to recreate the coffeehouse setting at the Fine Arts by seeking to attract people who liked country, reggae, soft rock, avant garde," Carleton says. "There is music for everybody."

Today Carleton and friends—including performers he's played with since the '60s and even current guitar students—provide informal entertainment in a gallery, a rather intimate setting with tablecloths on tables and lit candles.

All of this can be found in Lake County, a place FAA Marketing Director Wanda Wareham says is "full of warm and welcoming people. And prices for live music entertainment are very modest, if not free, for excellent arts and culture," she says. "We want people to enjoy the arts regardless of the income level."

OVERALL PLANNING

The idea behind FAA's coffeehouse brand evolved when Lawrence saw Carleton's other coffeehouse performances. "You can plan all you want, but if something is working already, then integrate it into your planning," Carleton says.