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Poor Best

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"I used to have a day job and a 401K; now I make 60 to 70 percent of my living from a bucket, and I'm happy." That infectious happiness of K.J. Denhart captivated a packed house at The 55 Bar. The crowd was an eclectic mix of curious twenty-somethings and middle-aged jazz fans who were, at most, mesmerized and at the least enticed by the bold woman shimmying through the crowd in a white blazer and patchwork sneakers. The diverse crowd spoke of the ability of Denhart's unique fusion of jazz and folk to transcend genres and ages. She channels a myriad of influences, from Joni Mitchell and James Taylor to Carole King and Sergio Mendes, to deliver a surprisingly high-energy performance.

The bold singer/songwriter/guitarist owned the stage with the confidence of someone who has seen a good bit of the ups and downs of life and decided to celebrate it all. Her lyrics reveal a musician who isn't afraid to confront her own spectrum of emotions and identities. In "Little Mary" she sings, "Little Mary don't you be afraid/ There are a million of us feeling this way/You may be cryin' when the moon is full/But tomorrow could be a damn nice day." In the spirited "He's Not Coming Home" Denhart calls herself a "wannabe nomad" and explains that she views the song from the perspective of the deserted and deserter. The truth of these contradictions in K.J.'s own life creates an honesty that emits at her shows.

In the 1980's she began touring the U.S., Canada, and Europe with the all-female band Fire. She then moved to Cleveland and worked as a financial analyst to get that 401K. But she always wanted to return to music full time. A decade ago she moved back to New York and took up residency at The 55 Bar. Around that time Denhart met up with drummer Ray Levier, the foundation of her funk, who has witnessed the singer's phoenix-like rise on the global music scene.

Denhart's roller-coaster story was best exemplified Saturday night during the three-part "What's My Name." The song took the audience through the struggle to find her identity in the music business. It opened with a soulful duet between Denhart and keyboardist Bennett Paster, which revealed a more vulnerable side to her normally defiant music. But the beat quickly picked back up as a smile broke across her face when she repeated the line "It all will be fine." Saxophonist Aaron Heick and bassist Andy Galore carried the song into a pure funk melody with Levier throwing in a little taste of Brazil to the mix. By the end of the song the band was displaying the best of jazz/funk/folk fusion.

Denhart covered classics like Van Morrison's "Moondance" and displayed her acoustic strength in the solo "Let it Go," refreshing breaks in a sea of jazz/folk fusion where a song's individuality was sometimes lost.

Lucky Seven, Denhart's latest, is available at live shows and is set for a full release in February 2008 on Motema <http://www.motema.com/>