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IN
NEW YORK CITY

and Beyond

PERFORMANCE LISTINGS AND
FEATURES ON ACOUSTIC ARTISTS

The Urban folk & Jazz of K.J. Denhert

by Richard Cuccaro



Beginnings

She may have been thinking of the first guitar she ever used. Her grandmother's entire family of eight brothers and sisters were all musicians and, while still a child, K.J. knew she could make music if she just had an instrument. At 10 years old she picked up a guitar with just four strings and wrote a song for a schoolteacher who had passed away unexpectedly. Her brother added the two other strings and she began teaching herself. She first used James Taylor records and a tablature book and then learned Joni Mitchell's open tunings from another book. After that, she says "all of the rest was my ears."

Asked about early recordings listened to, she began with Alvin and the Chipmunks, saying, "there was a B side to the 45 of the Chipmunks' 'Christmas Time,' called 'Almost Good,' an instrumental piano piece that really swung!" From there, she listed a who's who of pop music that included The Beatles, Glen Campbell, John Hartford, Michael Jackson, The Carpenters, The Supremes and Brasil 66 and 67 (even though they were her parents' records). Influencing her direction on guitar were James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Carole King, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, and the Allman Brothers.

She says that her taste became more sophisticated as she observed when "Joni started playing with the LA express and turned onto to certain players, like Larry Carlton on guitar and John Guerin on drums," and continuing, "In college there was Bruce Cockburn, Laura Nyro, Steely Dan, and Bonnie Raitt."

Revelation

Asked about when she knew she'd make music for a living, she said, "By age 14, I was pretty good and would play for my family, their friends and mine. I was never without a guitar... I took it on any vacation. My physics teacher had a coffee house in the Bronx that I played at. I don't remember how I put a band together, but I did, in high school. We got a standing ovation at Gurdy's Folk City on my first night out at an actual bar! I was hooked then and had been writing songs for years. There were no significant music teachers in my childhood. In college I met a guitar player who really intrigued me for what was similar about us... Vicki Genfan. The bar was raised and I credit her and her guitar-playing ability for inspiring me to work to be a better player." [Acoustic Guitar magazine wrote of Genfan: "Her dazzling displays of two-handed tapping, bell-like harmonics and funky bass note slapping have guitar aficionados... slack-jawed with awe"] No wonder K.J. was so

Listening to K.J. Denhert sing for the first time, I thought to myself, "It's like hearing Roberta Flack with an acoustic guitar!" I've never lost that viewpoint. Every time I've seen her, the soft, silky-smooth vocals and the jazz-laced guitar phrasings have always reinforced that first impression. Her fluidity and command of every element in her arsenal has never ceased to amaze me.

On *Girl Like Me*, her latest CD, she receives backup from a host of great players, and the ensemble effect may not always convey the impact of seeing her do her thing live. It sure is a great listen, though. My favorite original composition by K.J., "Violet" is here, as well as some covers that she makes her own. Both "She Loves You," by Lennon/McCartney and "Message in a Bottle" by Sting are given jazzy Latin treatments. The old grade-school chestnut "Oh Susannah" is a ruminative tour de force. She slows it down and, with pensive piano back up and a little poetic license, sorrowfully recounts, "Oh Susannah / Don't you cry for me / cuz I come from New York City / and I brought this old guitar / some good times and some scars / I bought this old guitar with me."

affected. The influence becomes apparent... K.J.'s guitar work is stellar.

The Career

The next sequence of events shed some light on how her experience as a musician expanded. She recounts:

"I left Cornell in 1978 without finishing my undergraduate degree. I had a band and was receiving airplay on Cornell's station. I had some steady gigs but I decided I wanted to learn more about the band business and the business of music. I made one demo with my band and got one rejection letter from Warner brothers... that didn't feel good. So... I bought a strat and answered an ad in the village Voice, and found a job as a lead guitarist in a band. As a result, I spent the next seven years on the road. In the first year, I paid off my college loans playing for a show band that toured the US, mostly playing lounges. That band broke up and I called a few other all-girl

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bands. One of them was looking for me already. That made me feel good... they had a good drummer and bass player so I hooked up with them, rehearsed for about a month and spent the next six years on a wild adventure that took me all over the world, including two USO tours one in Asia and one in Europe. I always joke that I am going to write a book about those years called "Seven Years in Spandex!" In 1986 the band broke up after nearly six solid years on the road at no less than 50 weeks a year."

Speed Bump

"After three months I went to work for Dannon Yogurt as an entry-level finance administrative temp. Eighteen years later I came out with a hands-on education in Sales Finance and had been exposed to marketing concepts and their analysis, but I never stopped playing music. I worked tirelessly on my guitar playing, writing, singing and performing for all 18 years. It's lucky that I did, because leaving that career behind as I did this October it wasn't like I had to start a career in music... I had one. I have four CDs so far and no remaining debt. I have a working functioning band, enough material for another record and a handful of steady gigs."

She attended The Northeast Regional Folk Alliance (NERFA) conference weekend in November this year for the first time to try to understand what the opportunities are for her as a solo performer, with her duo, and with her quartet. She played numerous showcases including with both Acoustic Live and Tribes Hill. In addition, despite feeling a bit under the weather with a cold, managed to stay up most of Saturday night/Sunday morning jamming in the hallway -- a real trouper.



Current Developments

KJ states: "I added a marketing team in May, so that when I was ready to return to my true vocation full time - I wouldn't be scratching my head for what to do next. This really got the momentum going. Three days after my official retirement date we started radio promotion on *Girl Like Me*. I received an indie music award nomination for the song "Violet" and an honorable mention in the Falcon Ridge emerging artist showcase. John Platt has started spinning my cover of "She Loves You" and the first four weeks yielded 29 ads and we've made a few charts. We're only halfway through. There is a publicist set to come on board and I've got two recording projects going on. One has to be finished by January when I'll head to St. Bart's with songwriter and guitarist Adam Falcon. We're going to put out an acoustic record that really focuses on the way we play guitar and sing. Not that we're trying to emulate anyone but I see it as a modern pairing in the fashion that Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway [an apt comparison] made some great contributions. I am also collecting some live tracks that are quite compelling to help with our releases to jazz stations."

She says: "I still love acoustic guitar and use it in many ways in my writing and in the band. The wah wah pedal gives me a somewhat unique ability to take edgier solos."

Well said. It cannot be stressed too strongly that KJ must be seen live to be fully appreciated. In addition to her musicianship, she exudes personality. As she stated in another interview: "I just get carried away. My drummer Ray did an imitation of some of things I do when I get into it. I was on the floor laughing- no matter what mood I'm in, when the band locks in, I have an arsenal of involuntary gyrations."

In response to a query about her current philo-

sophical state, she said: "I was shocked at the outbreak of the recent war and very depressed. I just didn't believe that anyone in an industrialized nation like ours could actually think that a real war would bring about any resolutions. I spent a lifetime finding my own voice, my own values, and my own sound. The world is in a tenuous tight-rope walk, and this country that I love is inextricably involved in a complicated bind that we can't turn and walk away from. When is art ever more important, than when a nation is forced or terrorized into asking the real value questions?" To which we can only add in our best 60-ish rhetoric: "Right on, sister!"

Web site: www.kjdenhert.com

Upcoming Gigs:

On Thursday, Dec 4th K.J. has an 11:30 set at Downtime as the finale of the "Girls Rock & Girls Rule II" a benefit to support Voices of Women Organizing Project, Battered Women's Resource Center The show starts at 6:30 Address: 251 W. 30th St (for other artists see the listings pages)

A steady gig at The 55 Bar in Greenwich Village, NYC, her next 3 dates are Dec 6th and 20th, and Jan 3rd. She plays 3 sets each night with her band from 10pm to 2am 55 Christopher St, 212 929-9883

Friday, Dec 26th 6 -10pm Gadaletto's Seafood & Bandstand Cherry Hill Plaza, New Paltz NY 845-255-1717 K.J. is joined by guitarist Adam Falcon

Dec 30th DTUT, 1626 2nd Ave (84th-85th St) NYC (212) 477-1021 KJ will play a set in addition to an 8:30 set by Ina May Wool

New Year's Eve 9pm at "17 Main" 17 Main St., Mt. Kisco NY 914 244-1974 K.J. and Band