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ON THE WEB

A Singer-Songwriter Is Finding Her Groove

By THOMAS STAUDTER

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PORT CHESTER

The singer-songwriter KJ Denhart, who characterizes herself as an "urban folk and jazz artist," can attest to the value of good fortune and even divine encouragement in her music career.

In the fall of 1998 Ms. Denhart had finally finished recording a CD's worth of her original songs when she learned that her apartment in Port Chester was becoming a coop; unless she wanted to move, she needed to produce a hefty down payment on its purchase.

About the same time, a Manhattan-based record company backed out of a deal to manufacture and distribute her CD. She was faced with a nearly impossible decision: whether to spend her savings on housing or to use the money to put out the CD herself.

"I'm not a very religious person," Ms. Denhart said recently, "but at that point I just didn't know what to do. So I started to go to sleep at night holding a picture of Our Lady of Fatima with the hope that somehow an answer would come to me."

That December she received a Christmas card from an old college friend, Anne Gero, who had become a successful lawyer in New England. Enclosed was a check for \$5,000. "We'd talked on the phone a few months earlier and I told Anne what a struggle it was being in the music business," Ms. Denhart said. "With the money came a note saying that she believed in me and what I was doing -it was an entirely amazing experience. I knew then that my prayers had been heard. In 1999 her first solo CD, "Looking Forward Looking Back," dedicated to Ms. Gero, was released on Ms. Denhart's own Mother Cyclone Records.

Since then Ms. Denhart has written "a whole new trove of songs," she said, including one, "Little Mary," which extols artistic perseverance in the face of adversity. The song is included on her next recording, a CD tentatively titled "Girl Like Me," which is due out next month. "I'm thrilled about putting out a new album," Ms. Denhart said. "I'm finally feeling confident enough to follow my ears, and as a result the music on the album is an eclectic mix of sambas, rhythm and blues, and other styles. As for my lyrics, I think my positive attitude is reflected in some of the songs that are meant to be fun, but there are some songs about hope, too, on the album.

Ms. Denhart's presence in the metropolitan New York music scene has grown considerably in the past two years. An indefatigable veteran of open mike nights, where musicians showcase their talents without pay, she was a regular performer at the Common Sense Cafe in Port Chester in its heyday, and she has also worked at the Bottom Line and some of Manhattan's other music-oriented night spots. For the last several months Ms. Denhart and her band, the NY Unit, have had a steady Saturday night gig at the 55 Bar in Greenwich Village. The release of "Looking Forward Looking Back" even garnered the singer-songwriter some airplay on local FM radio stations like WFUV and WBAI.

Ms. Denhart has built a following in Westchester at Danny's Cafe in Ossining, where she has anchored the

establishment's "Community Night" proceedings on Tuesdays for the past several months. "Angels have appeared in my life when I needed them, and Danny DiPaolo is certainly one of them," said Ms. Denhert, referring to the owner of Danny's Cafe. Mr. DiPaolo, a former recording engineer with an expansive knowledge of music said he first heard Ms. Denhert during an open mike night at his restaurant and was so impressed that he hired her to play on a weekly basis. "KJ has a real hardcore audience here now," Mr. DiPaolo remarked. "She's more than part of our scene--she's part of the family." Fittingly, Ms. Denhert will perform at the first anniversary celebration of Danny's Cafe on Feb. 25th.

Ms. Denhert, 42, grew up in the Bronx, the second child of Grenadian immigrants. "I come from a racially mixed West Indian family with lots of musicians on my mother's side," she said. At 10 she started playing the guitar and writing her own songs; her earliest influences she said, were Simon and Garfunkel, James Taylor and Joni Mitchell. Ms. Denhert enrolled at Cornell University but dropped out after her sophomore year when her musical interests began to ear away at her studies.

She lead her own folk-rock band for two years before joining an all-female rock quartet called Fire and spent the next six years ("in Spandex", she said) touring all over the world with the band. "Because I could play guitar I was able to see the Pyramids and swim in the Red Sea, " she said. After the band broke up in 1986, Ms. Denhert too a temporary job with Dannon Company, the yogurt giant and has since risen to become a business analyst there. She lived and worked in Cleveland for several years, keeping her chops up in a funk band, before returning to New York in 1995.

While her day job at Dannon in Tarrytown helps pay the bills, Ms. Denhert continues to perform a few nights a week, waiting for her next big break -- or angel --to appear. Said Sheryl Bailey, a guitarist in Ms. Denhert's New York Unit: "I know a lot of musicians who dig KJ's work because she's such a good guitar player. But, what's most remarkable about her is the way she can reach people through her songs."