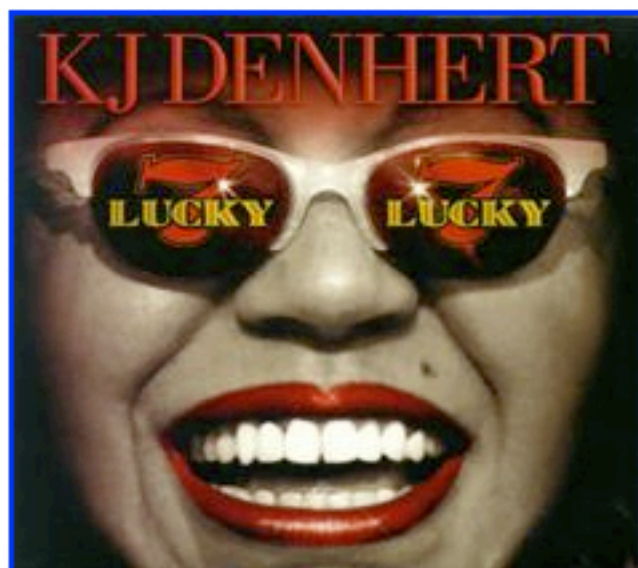


### KJ Denhart: *Lucky 7* by George Graham



Crossing musical genres is something that many artists like to do, but it does tend to be discouraged by record labels who want to market the artist to perceived specific audiences. This week, we have one of those artists who care little about the boundaries between styles, and gets away with it through producing her own recordings on her own label. KJ Denhart easily moves between soul, blues, folk, jazz and even some music influenced by Steely Dan on her new CD, *Lucky Seven*, and makes it all fit together very naturally.

KJ Denhart also has an interesting story. She first became known through her work in the 1980s in an all-female pop-rock band called Fire, in which she served as lead guitarist and vocalist. The band toured throughout the US, Canada and Europe, and Ms. Denhart jokes about her experience calling it "seven years in spandex."

After Fire broke up, Ms. Denhart started a career as a financial analyst, with the intended goal of accumulating enough funds to create and record her own music independently. She recorded her first CD on her own Mother Cyclone label in 1995, and has been steadily releasing new music ever since. In 2003 she left her day job, and since then has been putting out a project each year. *Lucky 7* is her seventh self-issued release, though this one is distributed by an independent label with some wider distribution.

Ms. Denhart shows her abilities as an articulate lyricist in addition to her fondness for mixing influences. The latter seems natural given her background. She was raised in the Bronx, of Grenadian heritage, from the West Indies. Her early influences include the 1960s Brazilian music of Sergio Mendes, along with being a big fan of Glen Campbell and John Hartford on the Glen Campbell TV show in the 1960s. She calls her biggest influences Joni Mitchell and James Taylor, was strongly into Steely Dan, and was a big fan of jazz flute player Hubert Laws. Rather than deciding on one direction for her new CD, she draws on just about all of that on *Lucky 7*, and does it in a tasteful almost effortless-sounding way.

Ms. Denhart plays mainly acoustic guitar, a Martin-made instrument that resembles the distinctive sound of James Taylor's guitar. She is joined by a somewhat varying band. She calls her regular band members the New York Unit, and it includes bassist Mamadou Ba, keyboard man Peter Vitalone, and drummer Ray Levier. Ms. Denhart produced and arranged much of the album herself, but was joined by keyboard man Bennett Paster as co-producer on about half the tracks. There are some notable guests including bassist Richard Bona, who played percussion in the Pat Metheny group, jazz-rock fusion drummer Steve Haas, and percussionist Manolo Badrena, who was part of Weather Report in the 1970s. Ms. Denhart herself is an able guitarist, and a wonderful singer who sounds great on all the styles incorporated into the album.

The CD opens with a song called Little Problems. She says that when you are making and financing your own album, problems are inevitable, but they can often be turned around to be the source of inspiration. It's a nice soulful blend of Ms. Denhart's styles.

Her jazzy side comes out on the title track *Lucky 7*, which was originally to be called *She's on the Money Tonight*. The song has a great infectious groove that enhances the lyrics.

There is a suite of three tracks called *What's My Name* which started out as three separate musical ideas. The first is a short, rather ethereal introductory section that features a guest appearance by Richard Bona on bass.

The second part of *What's My Name* shows Ms. Denhart's Brazilian influence, and takes an even jazzier direction.

The third part turns into a kind of soulful jam, which gives some of the players in her band a chance to do their stuff.

Ms. Denhart shows her Steely Dan influence on a song called *He's Not Coming Home*, which turns out to be one of the highlights of the album. Ms. Denhart says it was inspired by her parents who despite spending most of their adult life in New York, always considered Granada their home. She also experienced homesickness during a time when her job had transferred her to Cleveland, where she had no family.

Ms. Denhart is a fine songwriter, so it is a bit of a surprise that she chose to cover *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. But she does give the song an entirely different twist, showing a little subtle bossa nova influence.

She does perform one song solo on the CD. *Sad Song* is as the lyrics describe, and is nicely done.

The CD ends with another of its strongest tracks *Rivera*, which nicely encapsulates the stylistic amalgam that is KJ Denhart. The song was recorded live on an early morning session, and is about the mural painter Diego Rivera.

KJ Denhart's new CD *Lucky 7* is a fine album from a veteran performer who has been working independently now for some time. That lets her indulge her wide-ranging musical interests, and she does so with a lot of class, joined by some excellent backing musicians. They support her well as she weaves together folk, soul, jazz and Brazilian influences. Her songwriting incorporates those diverse styles easily and without sounding forced.

The sound quality of the CD gets nearly an "A" from us. The engineering and mix were done by Ben Wisch, who is known for his work on the New Folk scene and such artists as Mark Cohn, Jonathan Brooke, and jazz singer Diana Krall. The sound is clean, open and airy, and Ms. Denhart's vocals are captured well. The dynamic range -- how well the recording maintains the difference between loud and soft passages -- is mediocre.

If you are a regular to these album reviews, you may know that I put a high value on eclecticism and crossing musical boundaries. KJ Denhart does it particularly skillfully on *Lucky 7*, mixing things up but maintaining a very appealing sound throughout.