

QUEER PUSS

The Return of Josie Cotton

By Michael Slattori

Josie Cotton crashed onto the world stage in the early eighties with her controversial new wave hit, 'Johnny, Are You Queer?'. When the underground dance hit was unexpectedly catapulted on to the airwaves, it sparked a meteoric rise in fame for Cotton that just as quickly went down in flames. Cotton was attacked by the religious right for "Johnny...", then labeled homophobic by the gay community, and the song was even banned in Amsterdam. The backlash thwarted her promising career and ultimately made Cotton a pariah in the music business.

Still, Josie Cotton forged on in the underground, releasing indy hits including "Convertible Music", "From the Hip", and "Frightened By Nightingales". In 2006, she released "Movie Disaster Music", her most critically acclaimed album to date. It was followed by "Invasion of the B Girls", a campy by reverent homage to B-Movie theme songs from the 1960s and 70s. In his liner notes to the album, film director John Waters wrote "Josie makes the un-listenable unforgettable."

Her latest record, "Pussycat Babylon", co-produced by legendary punk keyboardist Paul Roessler, releases this summer. It's a modern electro-pop inspired album featuring some of the underground's most influential players. Dead Kennedy's producer Geza X plays guitar, Princess Frank is on drums, and an original member of Black Flag, Kira Roessler, plays bass. It's the first album since "Jonny..." that has the potential to hit mainstream. But is the mainstream ready yet for Josie Cotton?

Why was there such a backlash to 'Johnny, Are You Queer' in the early 80's?

The queer word had not been used in polite society yet so it shocked people to hear it in a Top 40 song.

Conservatives thought Johnny was too gay, the gay community accused you of being homophobic.

The reaction from the religious right was hilarious to me at the time. I considered it a badge of honor. I have to say I was truly dumbfounded by the reception I received from the New York gay community. In California, it was considered a gay anthem. It was really written as a blues song for teenage girls. Part of why the song is funny is that the girl in the song is oblivious to the fact.

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Was the song originally intended for the Go-Gos?

They performed the song early in their career as their producers at the time, The Paine Brothers, actually wrote it with them in mind. But when the Go-Go's walked out on their production contract, The Paine Brothers gave the song to me.

Did the the song de-rail your career?

Absolutely. The labels were terrified of the controversy.

If you had the chance to do it all over to do again, what would you do differently? Would you still have recorded the song?

That's always the question that stops me dead in my tracks. True, I was offered record deals based on me dropping the song. I turned the deals down and my career suffered. Would I do it again? Yes. However, I would change the way I handled the situation. I would stand up for myself now.

Would you have become a more vocal gay rights advocate?

I've always defended and loved the gay community. That's why it was so hurtful when The Advocate and The Village Voice took the position they did towards me.

Is today's world ready for queer Jonny?

I think so. Queer Johnny has been introduced in the living rooms of America now, through television, media, stars coming out... It's pretty ho hum these days. What the world is not ready for is angry gay Johnny or sexually explicit Johnny. When we incorporated Elephant, a set of twin gay rappers on the dance remix of the record, it caused as much of a reaction as the original Johnny. Older white straight guys labeled the song homophobic. Kids in their twenties, however, love it. They think its funny and cutting edge. They get it. It's fascinating to me that the sex and violence that has been accepted in hip hop is perceived so differently if the characters happen to be gay. Now that's a dialogue we need to have.

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Why is Jonny, Are You Queer an important song for young gay men and women?

It's not important at all. It's how we choose to live our lives that's important.

As one of the original shock-rockers, how do you feel about today's new breed of rocker girls like Katy Perry and Lady Gaga?

I love them both. We need them both. I think it's a little strange and sad how Katy Perry went after Gaga recently over her video. If art doesn't push the limits or at least explore them then its not really art in my opinion.

How do they match up against the ladies of the 80s?

As far as the 80s goes, girl singers back then were facing a huge amount of sexism that opened up doors for the female artists of today.

What are today's rocker girls rebelling against? How is it the same/different from what the 80s girls were shouting against?

I don't think they're rebelling against anything having to do with a girl. They get to be human now. What a concept!

Would you agree 80s music and artists from the 80s are enjoying a comeback?

A huge comeback!

Why are today's youth rediscovering 80s sounds?

It's the old twenty year cycle. The 60s were big in the 80s. But it's almost over. 90s nostalgia is right around the corner.

How would you describe the music on your new album, Pussycat Babylon?

Pussycat is the dancey pop record my fans have been asking for. It stirs and shakes together bubbly pop, techno electro, Euro-trash disco and Japanese new-wave into an exploding post-punk cocktail. It's as quirky and noir as it is intoxicating. Blending dreamy pop melodies with edgy wit and deft word play. It's my most irresistible, most revealing record to date.

What's your favorite track on the album?

I like them all for different reason but I do love the title track, "Pussycat Babylon" a lot.

What is the most meaningful track on the album?

"See the New Hong Kong". It's about the end of my last relationship and trying to move on.

How does the album compare to your previous B-Movie inspired albums?

My last album, 2007's "Invasion of the B Girls", was all theme songs from B movies in the 60's and 70's. It was complete camp. John Waters wrote the liner notes so you can imagine. My new record is the most autobiographical record I've ever recorded. I wrote the songs like stories and myself as a character in them.



Josie Cotton

What side of Josie Cotton are you exploring on Pussycat Babylon?

The dark side. The name 'Josie Cotton' sounds ridiculously happy and my early music was... but I always felt like an outsider and I'm just now letting the ironic part of myself peer out into the world.

How did John Waters become a fan?

I never had any idea he was a fan until he put me on his record, "A Date with John Waters" and called me one of his favorite singers in the press. Then we kinda bonded after he tried to sue me for recording "Female Trouble" for my Invasion record.

Has John Waters given his stamp of approval on Pussycat Babylon?

Last time I saw him he asked me what was holding up my new record. I told him how the label people were making me re-release "Johnny Are You Queer" first and he told me to add rappers to the track which was so ironic because that was what I had been struggling to do.

You recently in an interview, "It's amazing to me I'm not a lesbian." What do you mean by that statement?

Growing up, I never felt like a girl. I really resented being one. I literally wanted to have my breasts removed surgically. My bigger problem was I didn't want to be a guy either. I never trusted very much for reasons I will probably never talk about.

What's the biggest misconception fans have of Josie Cotton?

That I'm an airhead bimbo. It has driven me crazy over the years. I swear at times it has made me want to eat my own arm.

What's a more accurate description of Josie Cotton?

A nerdy bookworm.

What's next?

I'm concentrating now on my live performances. I have this amazing band and am very comfortable again with the role of rock singer. I'm also writing! I completed a stage show based on the original television dance show, "Solid Gold". We're hoping to bring it to New York! I'm also in discussions on a stage show based on my "Invasion of the B Girl" record.

You've become quite a prolific writer.

Writing makes me sane but performing makes me feel alive. I need both. It's strange to be just reaching my stride this late in the game but I've always had the sense I never got to finish the race.

Keep running, Josie.

Until the end.

