

By Gary M. Kramer

JOSIE ARE YOU QUEER

Singer/songwriter Josie Cotton is best known for asking the musical question, "Johnny Are You Queer?" She'll perform an electro-pop remix of the '80s classic at L.A. Pride on June 13, with dancers she describes—her tongue firmly in cheek—as "gay twin punk hip-hop rappers called 'Elephant' who look like *Children Of The Corn* and are beyond pornographic."

Cotton spoke about her song and the effect it had on her career. She says that when she was shopping her first record around IRS Records offered to sign her—if she dropped the song "Johnny."

"I had to make a life-altering decision," she recalled. "IRS was the label of choice for musicians in the 1980s, but to compromise myself so early in my career seemed like such a cowardly thing to do. I was very aware once I recorded that song that I would always be the 'Johnny Are You Queer?' girl, but it was a conscious decision on my part."

Despite her integrity, the song became a public relations nightmare. Although "Johnny" was an international phenomenon in the dance clubs, Cotton recounts that "once the political firestorm started, Elektra [the label that did sign her] got cold feet. They pulled it from the charts, stopped filling orders, even cancelled the video for 'Johnny' the night before the shoot."

Nevertheless, the song achieved considerable notoriety—and controversy—wherever it was played, when it actually was played. Cotton explained, "'Johnny' was banned in Amsterdam, but went to number two on AM radio charts in Canada. In America, on the West Coast, it became an anthem in the gay community empowering folks to come out of the closet. But on the East Coast, some gay groups and gay publications really believed 'Johnny' was homophobic. Radio programmers were nervous because they thought it was a gay record. The religious right televised on their TBN network that Josie Cotton was actually a gay man promoting homosexuality, and 'Johnny' was used for brainwashing purposes in sleep deprivation programs for Christian re-education camps in the South."

Regardless of the responses to the song, does Cotton, who is straight, have a real Johnny as inspiration?

"I'm sure there were many, many, many Johnnys, but I never met him, and I never had that experience of falling for someone who was gay. At least not yet!" Cotton laughs at the prospect, before continuing, "It wasn't interpreted by me as a personal experience; it was more of [role-playing] a character—a pretty, dumb girl who'd fallen for a gay guy." The idea of

interpretation and performance is very near and dear to Cotton. When she first moved out to L.A., she had the acting bug, although she ultimately chose music over acting. "I had to focus on one or the other," she admitted.

While her music started out New Wave, Cotton has covered '50s girl group songs like "Tell Him," as well as made rock-er grrrrl songs such as "Maneater," which appeared on her *Invasion of the B-Girls* CD. Her latest musical effort, *Pussycat Babylon*, has a 1960s Asian flavor, and includes two songs she'll perform at Pride: the dreamy, atmospheric "See the New Hong Kong" and the rockin' title track. Cotton describes her influences as ranging from Tim Burton/operatic trailer trash to all things Asian—from Japanese toys and anime art to Mao Tse-tung (she mentions a collection). But her greatest influence, she insists, is the Italian "sex bomb" Gina Lollobrigida.

"I have tried on many different personas, but [currently] I have returned to my original inspiration. Even musically right now I feel most myself in the exotica/cocktail lounge music genre—like the soundtracks in those Italian movies of the 1960s. It does something to me, like making me want to shamelessly flirt and run through marble fountains in an evening gown."

While it might be something she could pull off for one of her videos, Cotton claims she enjoys playing around with identity and sexuality. "I've fully embraced my own sexuality but I have always been confused about the role I was cast as a female cause I never felt like a girl. I explore that on the new record—probably on every record I ever did." She adds as a knowing aside, "It's amazing to me I'm not a lesbian." And while it remains to be seen if her new work will have the impact her initial hit did, one question remains: Given all the hullabaloo, does Cotton feel queer fans have embraced her for "Johnny?"

She observes wryly, "I made a very controversial record which impacted my career in unfathomable ways and then I disappeared. No one ever knew the whole story and that's largely my fault. But do I feel I was ever acknowledged for what I went through over a word that wasn't even my issue? Not by the community at large, but I have been personally thanked countless times by many gay guys—and that's made it all seem worth it."



Portrait: Austin Young — Makeup: Mathu Andersen — Hair: Christian Landon — Styling: Lenora Claire