

ARTIST DRIVEN: WIRED

JOSIE COTTON

ETERNALLY HIP

On her new album *Movie Disaster Music*, Josie Cotton continues to write intelligent and witty pop songs which contain a healthy and refreshing dose of social commentary. From the cynical new wave of "Rabbit Hole" to the dreamy pop of "Kung Fu Girl," Cotton's voice has never sounded better. Wise, sarcastic and intuitive, Cotton is as melodic as she is insightful, and *Movie Disaster Music* demonstrates she is an artist of great depth and maturity.

Amplifier: How has your approach to songwriting changed over the years? In other words, what do you ask of a song now and does that differ from what you used to ask of it? And what subject matter is fair game for inclusion in a composition? On *Movie Disaster Music* we've got looming circus clowns, a girl who does Kung Fu, Pac Man and Sammy Davis....

Josie Cotton: I've come to realize that if I take myself too seriously, I've lost a certain detachment that helps me be more of an objective observer when I am writing songs. For me this was really an important concept to grasp because I would write from pure emotion. I can forgive anything but cominess and I try to avoid clichés like the plague. There is no subject matter that I would not broach, be it inbred pedophiles or transgender Republicans (if there is such a thing).

Amp: That being said, "Rabbit Hole" which begins, "In the news today I read/Girl was found with a missing head," seems to examine the way the news is reported in 2006. The song is an indictment not only of the news media, but of the viewers themselves, who have to go down a rabbit hole to buy what they're being told--that the only girls that go missing are white; that the Iraq War was necessary; that Bush is doing a great job. Why

do you think people are so willing to do this?

JC: While I agree with many of your observations about our culture, none of this entered my mind as I was writing "Rabbit Hole." That's not to say songwriters always understand what they're writing about!! What's so beautiful about art is that there is room for so many interpretations. For me to tell you what "Rabbit Hole" is really about could bulldoze over something equally valid, maybe more valid. Who was it who said there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come? I really believe ideas have their own agenda at times, and will unwittingly channel their way into the creative process. Sometimes I relish not knowing what a song or a movie or a poem means because at that exact moment I am free of my analytical mind, that boring taskmaster who has an answer for everything and who will dissect anything in its path, especially art.

Amp: You do seem to have a playful eye on pop culture--when you name check things like Elvis or Pac Man, these all evoke the iconography of my youth, but it's hard not to notice that though they're all extracted from a particular age they have somehow remained eternally alive in the collective consciousness of America at large. Why do you think that is? And is there a conscious critiquing of pop culture going on in some of these songs?

JC: Carl Jung I'm not, but it would seem that humans are wired that way. If the brain is a map, then these icons are roadside attractions, some holy, some unholy. Visit them at your own risk! I would be lying if I said I wasn't critiquing pop culture in my songs, or at least probing it with long metal instruments! I'm drawn to things that repel me at first. "Happy Face" was my re-evaluating that damn smiley face. It was really disturbing to me and I didn't know why. The image that came to me right away was the Jim Jones mass suicide. All those dead bodies with that Kool Aid smiley face watching over the whole thing, inspiring it, perhaps. Creepy as hell. That led to a broader idea of how we all fake who we are to some degree... and the danger in that. "Could you dare be un-hip?" from "You're the Boss" is a full-on indictment of popular culture! "Kung Fu Girl" is another, although I originally wrote that

song for Shonen Knife. The lyrics, the title, the melody, the concept were finished in less than 5 minutes. When that happens, which is rare, I feel more like a channel of the collective unconscious, even when it is telling me to destroy itself.

Amp: What are some of the more dominant themes you find yourself returning to when you write--or that your collective unconscious brings you to?

JC: As far as themes go, love is at the bottom of my list. Corny and boring, generally speaking. But I'm continually fascinated how things are often not what they seem and I seem to explore that when I write. I'm drawn to irony and the tyranny of ideas the human animal seems so obsessed with. It seems like I'm always trying to fix things when I write, problem resolution and such. Although I won't tell you which ones, there are actually 2 songs on this new record about death. But I'm an absurdist at heart. That's pretty much where I live and breathe.

Amp: You mentioned the line "Could you dare be un-hip?" Do you think un-hip is the new hip? And because hip becomes un-hip so fast, don't you think that constantly closing window makes it impossible to be eternally hip?

JC: You're talking to someone who didn't even know she was a nerd until Myspace. What is hip? (How the Greek philosophers struggled with that one...) I don't know. It's so relative. Even Elvis had his Vegas years. Only the super hip knew he was hip in the beginning but eventually the masses, who practically crucified him, embraced him as their own. Is it hip once the masses get it? Probably not. But it seems that once something is considered hip, it will inevitably become un-hip and then get re-discovered again. So in that sense it is kind of eternal, with long dry patches of lameness.

Amp: Tough to make it through those patches of lameness, though--a bit like trying to grow out a bad haircut. What are your career ambitions now compared to what they were when you first got started? And what musicians do you find you still admire with as much fervor as you always have? In other words—who has

garnered no dry patches in between!

JC: I'm not sure artists always know when they've lost their relevance. Nature is kind like that! I just want to continue writing songs and making records. Is it music if no one hears it? Of course it is. But does it have meaning? That's debatable. As far as career ambitions go, I don't have any. I just want to work with people who are not insane! I used to take it all much too seriously but the more you try and prove you're an artist, the less of an artist you actually are. You're more like a whore trying to prove she's sexy. My relationship with music is a little odd. I listen to a wide variety of music, from Q-bert to Belle and Sebastian to Melt Banana. My taste is always changing. I'm always hanging. And if I really like an artist, I'm actually afraid to hear their next release. I'm the worst kind of fan! Alas, there are always dry patches, bad haircuts and yes, bad toupees to cover it all up.

-Alex Green

Movie Disaster Music is released June 6, 2006 on Scruffy Records.