

Oh Johnny

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What's a nice middle class American girl called Josie Cotton doing singing on a record called 'Johnny Are You Queer?' Get out your slingbacks and hold onto your wig hats as Michael Delaney dishes the dirt about a little town flirt who gets hurt real bad. Is that Johnny's ring you're wearing, Josie? Uh huh. Anyone who survived the 60s will know the story well.



WOW CHEEKY! Josie Cotton's debut single Johnny Are You Queer?, despite the power pop propagation of one of the more repugnant and derisive gay terms, a percocious, affectionately tongue-cheek pre-apocalypse, post punk hybrid ala Connie Francis, Lesley Gore, Ronettes and Shangri-Las femme-pop innocence and the jostling neo-surf rock 'n' roll bounce very much the groove of nouveau California Girls' The Go Gos (the single Our Lips Are Sealed and album Beauty and The Beat.

Similarities with the latter's post-Beach Boys boogaloo are not exactly coincidental. Written and produced by brothers Bobby and Larson Paine, mainmen behind the Go Gos concept, Johnny Are You Queer? was one of that band's most popular songs prior to it being dropped from their repertoire following the decision to break with their instigators.

The Paines pass over the obvious discriminatory connotations by tagging Johnny Are You Queer? as, simply, 'a modern love song'. Hardly as urbane Bowie's John, I'm Only Dancing, both prefer to see it as an accurate description thwarted teen romance set in classic

"True Confessions' character ('Josie Cotton feared the shocking truth...but she had to know!') with a slight twist in its tail: 'When you asked me for a date/I thought that you were straight/Johnny Are You Queer?'

It's catchy, bright and memorable and despite obvious AM radio restrictions, it's destined to be a hit. It's also, a classic example of exploitive, opportunistic and sexist kitsch even though it is presented with apparent humor and was never intended to be in any ways a slight against the gay community.

Johnny Are You Queer? rollicks with a beefy, insistent dance stance that recalls Blondie's Hanging On The Telephone, but this no sharp, provocative NYCNY street-wise pop culture here; this is the new breed Los Angeles freeway cruise 20-odd years further down the (fault) line from Ride The Wild Su Annette Funicello, Be True To Your School, Disneyland and Sandra 'Gidget' Dee.

In form, Johnny Are You Queer? owes as much to the late fifties and early

mid sixties (Jan & Dean, The Crystals and songs the likes of Stupid Cupid, it's My Party and Lipstick On Your Collar) in its championing of the great American trash pop aesthetic as it does to the punky, razor-pop of L.A. 'Queens Of Noise' the Runaways. Somewhere 'twixt the two extremes, Josie Cotton is busily staking home turf, but just exactly how she's going to follow this particular debut single is probably causing sleepless nights already.

Born in Dallas, Texas, Josie's family background could have easily inspired the hit television series of the same name. Cotton explains: I'm from an old Texas family. My granddad was in the oil business but when I was one year old, my mother eloped with a Yugoslavian ballet star. So when I wasn't on the family cattle ranch I was growing up in the wonderfully strange world of dancers and artists.

Nurtured by these surroundings, her own talents appeared to have blossomed. A child prodigy, by age four she was dancing with international ballet stars Maria Tallchief and Denilova. Throughout her childhood, Cotton appeared in many musical and dance productions, and as she entered her teens she began studying voice and music theory with some of the world's most respected teachers. Instructed in a wide variety of musical styles, she gained valuable experience singing everything from complex Latin Jazz to authentic Gypsy love songs. But still she longed to be a pop singer in the tradition of her earliest influences -- Petula Clark, Brenda Lee and The Ronettes.

Following her muse, Cotton moved to Los Angeles where she met Larson Paine in early '80. They met while standing in line to purchase traveller's cheques -- she was en route to Paris to sing in the cabarets and he was on his way to Nashville. They never did catch their respective planes and shortly after, the creative liaison which yielded Johnny Are You Queer? was consummated, quite by accident during a publishing demo session.

Originally released in October 81 by Bomp Records, and L.A. based independent label, the song proved an immediate hit, prompting Elektra to contract for national distribution. On one of their many state-side trips, Air Supply managers Fred Bestall and Lance Reynolds, had it brought to their attention and quickly inked Cotton to their own Big Time Label for Australia. Following months of mounting FM and club airplay, Johnny Are You Queer? was released locally at the beginning of March in both 7" and 12" forms.

From this point, the rest of the story is up to you. Just don't hold your breath waiting to hear it nestling homogeneously within commercial broadcasting formats, that's one thing that's not about to happen: 'I'm so afraid I'll lose you/If I can't seduce you.../When I saw you today, boy/walking with that gay boy/It hurt me so/I just gotta know/Johnny are you queer?'

Kim Wilde, eat your heart out