

Cry Lebanon

Special Report: the Us Festival

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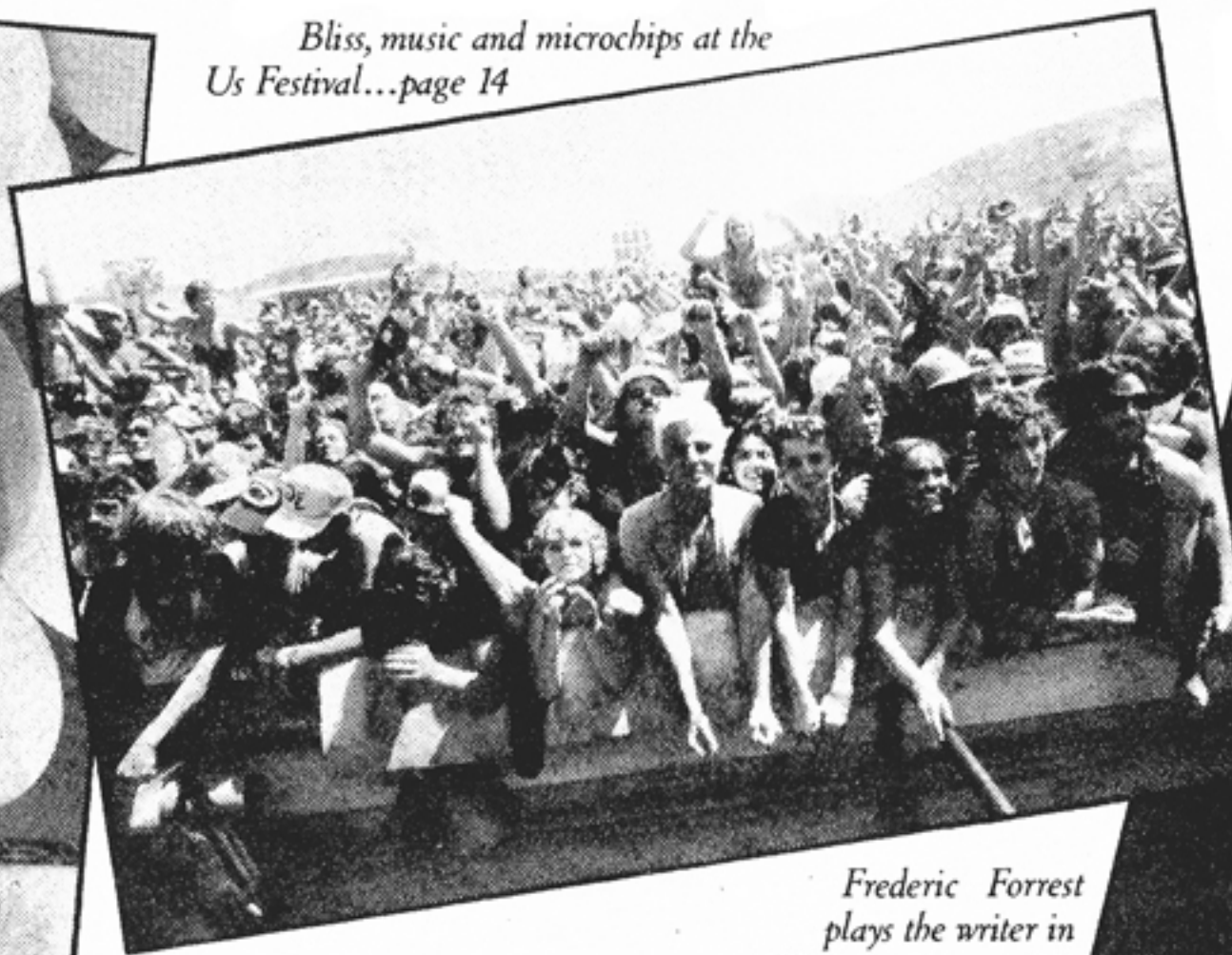
Exclusive

## THE PRIVATE YEARS



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COVER: photograph of John and Yoko by Allan Tannenbaum, New York City, November 1980.

# Josie Cotton: girl rocks

By Steve Pond

L O S A N G E L E S

**T**HE NEIGHBORS back home just didn't understand Josie Cotton. That's hardly surprising, since, as a little girl, she used to imitate Ronnie Spector, and now, with the release of her first LP, *Convertible Music*, she finds herself banned across the country for asking the musical question "Johnny, are you queer?" But the folks who didn't understand Josie Cotton back home were of a different sort: they were the high-society families who travel in the big-oil, big-money circles of Dallas.

Cotton's grandfather was Clinton V. Josey, J. Paul Getty's oil partner, and she grew up in a real-life *Dallas* milieu, fighting, she says, to keep from "ending up in Peter Pan collars the rest of my life. Dallas is a pretty conservative place, and I just couldn't accept that life. I always made as much trouble as I possibly could."

Cotton pauses and tucks her legs — clad in black fishnet stockings — beneath her black minidress as she sits on a couch in the huge but sparsely furnished hillside home of her coproducer, Bobby Paine. With her



bouffant hairdo, bright pink lipstick and purple eyeshadow, she looks every inch the bubbly, early-Sixties teen glamour queen presented on the cover of *Convertible Music* and in the infectious, party-time beach music inside. Yes, she admits in a breathy, soft and hesitant voice, she was spoiled by the moneyed upbringing.

"I hesitate to say it because it sounds like...such an easy life," she says quietly. "I used to be embarrassed by it, but I can't hide it anymore. In that situation, there's not a lot demanded of your charac-

ter, so you never quite find what you're made of. And if you're female and pretty, you might as well just lie back on your chaise lounge and watch the grapes being peeled for you."

Cotton says she was driven to break out of that life early on—at about age five, when she was "the most career-oriented, *unkiddy* kid you can imagine." Showing her the way was her mother, a class-A nonconformist who, when Josie was a year old, eloped with a Yugoslavian ballet dancer. "I saw her with her orange hair and her turquoise Continental, and it made an impact," she says.

Having an Eastern European artist around the house didn't hurt either. "When she married Nikita, it saved me from becoming a stock *Dallas* character," says Cotton. For one thing, she began studying ballet at age three, taking classes from a ballet master who also worked with the likes of Maria Tallchief and Alexandra Danilova.

And when the precocious Josie wasn't dancing with those Russian stars, she was listening to her stepfather's music. "He'd play music

from all over the world. Belly dancing music, Ethiopian music, Bulgarian music. I'd light candles, make everyone sit down and watch, and then dance through the room with my scarves." But rock & roll — James Brown,

the Beach Boys, the Troggs and girl groups like the Ronettes—remained her chief passion from the early Sixties on.

"I could imitate 'em all," she says of the girl groups. "I had their sound down, I knew all the songs, and I stood in front of the mirror with a microphone singing them."

A knee injury ended Cotton's ballet career in her early teens, and she began to get serious about a singing career. In the late Seventies, she moved to L.A., where she sang on commercials, made demos and tried to get her career moving.



Josie and friends: 'I feel comfortable with the image.'

But nothing really happened until she became involved with Larson Paine, a songwriter who worked with his brother, Bobby.

At first, her relationship with Larson was purely romantic, then she began to show him songs she'd written, only to have him reject them all and tell her to stick to singing.

She kept writing, while the Paines themselves were briefly working with the Go-Go's. When the Go-Go's and the brothers parted ways after three or four months, the Paines were left with a song they'd written, "Johnny, Are You Queer?"; they needed to make a publishing demo, and Josie was dying to do the vocals. But Larson didn't like the idea.

"We had a three-day fight, around the clock," she says. "I asked him why, and finally he said, 'Because it's gonna make you a star, and I don't want my girlfriend to be a star.' But his brother finally said I could sing it, and as soon as I did, it was obvious that it was the right thing."

Released as a twelve-inch single by L.A.'s independent Bomp Records, the song caused an immediate furor. "It was banned just about everywhere, and the more liberal the marketplace the more thin-skinned they were. It was just that *one word*. But I heard people say that I was antigay, and then one religious TV show held up the record and said it was actually a guy singing, and that a record that big was supposed to be played at thirty-three rpm, and the fact that

it was played at forty-five rpm meant that we were encouraging alternative lifestyles."

Some record companies, in fact, told Cotton they'd take her if she dropped the song, but Elektra signed the whole package. And on *Convertible Music*, the Paine brothers were in charge; though Cotton wrote most of the songs herself, the Paines produced the record and supervised everything down to the cover artwork and Cotton's miniskirted image. "They're painting a picture, and more power to them," says Cotton. "I'm happy to have someone overseeing everything. And the image is something I feel natural with."

But there is one thing about her image that Cotton would like cleared up — the idea that she's a little rich kid with money to burn and a hobby making music. "I don't have to go hungry, and I don't lack for the necessities of life," she admits. "But I will not really come into any money until much later in life, for which I'm glad." She pauses and picks her words carefully as she talks about her grandfather's will. "Let's just say there was a rat in the cheese dip. It was supposed to turn out differently for me. It's not the way my granddad left the world thinking it was gonna be. That's due to one unnamed person."

Josie Cotton looks down at her shocking-pink fingernails, her spike-heeled shoes, her fishnet stockings. She laughs quietly. "Maybe I should write him and thank him." □