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June 2010

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# The Cult of Cotton

**Josie Cotton is as determined today as she was in the 1970s when she packed up her bags and moved from Dallas to Los Angeles to fulfill her dreams in show business. Although she considers herself a writer foremost before a musician, she soon achieved her goal in 1981 with a one-hit cultish tune. She's now set to release her latest CD, *Pussycat Babylon*, in hopes of once again taking back the reins.**

## Cotton Controversy

Shortly after her arrival in Los Angeles, Cotton found herself at the focus of a divided controversy within the LGBT community. Her catchy hit single, "Johnny Are You Queer?" was looked upon as derogatory by some, and supportive by others. The single was originally produced for the Go-Go's, who performed it live in a few rare appearances; but never recorded it in the studio. As often stated, the rest is history.

The song went on to become an international success for Cotton, and was later featured in the movie and soundtrack for *Valley Girl*, in which she performed it live. She's always loved Canada for its progressive and forward thinking, and the fact that "Johnny" became a top 10 AM radio hit here before gaining popularity in her home country.

Two years and two full-length albums later, Cotton found herself wondering what next? Not one to compromise her artistic integrity by writing a "Johnny II," she released only two albums over the next two decades. Then, in 2006, she discovered her fascination with B movies, and released two back-to-back albums reflective of that musical genre. "At times, it felt like I was a character walking around in those movies," she once stated. Enter John Waters.

## Classic Camp

Although she never actually met the man behind such B classics as *Hairspray* and *Pink Flamingos*, she adored him from afar. Cotton recalls, "It was an online relationship born of necessity that almost turned into a law-suit, but had a beautiful ending." Waters actually wrote the liner notes for one of her albums, quoting, "She knows that eventually if cream can't be destroyed, it rises to the top. Josie Cotton has made the unlistenable unforgettable." A campy video for one of the songs was released, featuring Tequila Mockingbird and her personal friend Ginger Coyote, a rock and roll legend in her own class.

## On Record

Forward to 2010, and Cotton is back full force, or was she ever gone? "Pussycat Babylon" has loads of references to the feline, which she jokingly attributes as "a fairly accurate metaphor for those of the female persuasion—which is very mysterious and baffling." The autobiographical "See The New Hong Kong" will most likely be the leadoff single, which Cotton confesses, "makes me feel a little exposed." The new CD will also include an updated bonus-track version of "Johnny," which Cotton has some reservation toward releasing, given the personal history it evokes. She's currently

working very closely with Hosh Girelli along with other DJs and producers; so the final version is still in the works. There are also plans to release remix versions of other tunes on the album.

Her upcoming performance at Pride Toronto will be her first-ever Canadian appearance. She mentions that her current band consists of well-established musicians who are also intertwined friends and past lovers. “I would actually love to see some bears in their natural habitat while I’m there,” she remarks. I’m sure that she’s referring to the pawed kind, but would appreciate the burly men as well!

## Queer Johnny

Forged in the punk rock underground of the Los Angeles club scene in the late 70s, the origins of “Johnny Are You Queer?” are murky at best. To capsize the infamous “Johnny” phenomenon, Cotton admits “I was just the singer. It was really more about breaking down barriers—sex and politics, punk rock and corporate America, and prejudice that cut both ways. They owned the Queer word back then—lock, stock and barrel. The religious right decided I was Satan’s transgender spawn thing; television evangelists stated that I was actually a gay man trying to convert unsuspecting straight men; and AIDS had just begun to raise its ugly head in the general population.

“When the song hit the airwaves, the queer word had mutated, and it was somehow liberating to hear it being used in this completely new way. Girls could so relate to falling for some beautiful gay boy, and I can’t tell you how many of those same gay boys wrote to me telling me over and over again that they had come out of the closet or realized they were gay.” It’s somewhat ironic, looking back now, that the song reached number two on Canadian radio right under Joan Jett’s “I Love Rock and Roll,” another classic anthem by a now self-confessed lesbian.

## On Today’s Queer Ideology

Cotton rationalizes the fact that *A Single Man*—not even perceived as a gay movie—is a beautiful thing. “I’m a big fan of Adam Lambert,” she confesses. “I feel a special kinship with anyone who’s gone through the ‘Burning Man’ experience,” referring to being scrutinized by the media and public for being who you are. She had a huge girl crush on Shane in *The L Word*, who she later found out was the only true lesbian. She also admires KD Lang, and has aspirations of doing a duet with her someday.



Photo: Klye Ameskin

“Once I was old enough to realize that I was a girl, I didn’t like it at all. I didn’t want to be a boy either; but I couldn’t figure out why you had to be one or the other,” she elaborates. “As a human being, I think it’s the most basic of rights to love who we want to love and to be there for them if they become ill.”

## On Writing

In 2006, Cotton decided to put words to paper about her “Johnny” experience, calling it *The Queer Story of Johnny and Josie*. This is where she first found her voice as a writer, which later led her to having her own column in Punk Globe Magazine, called, “My Myopic Mini-Skirted Meanderings.” In closing, she summarizes, “As much as I love music and everything going on right now, writing beats everything hands down. I am currently working on a book, and plan to finish my musical next year. Kittens do have claws after all.” Meow!

Oh yeah, to finally answer *The Question*, Cotton says, “There was no real Johnny, but there were legions of him.” **O**

## Josie Cotton plays Pride Toronto, Altera-Queer South Stage, Saturday July 3rd, 9pm



### Cotton Pickings

Car: A circa 1966 gold Avanti

Colour: Orange

Outfit: My newest dress—a Hong Kong Suzie Wong latex number.

Music: I’m listening to a lot of bouncy mindless instrumental music on [luxuriamusic.com](http://luxuriamusic.com)—bossa nova, spy, gogo, surf, Italiano pop, bachelor pad—that kind of thing. It forces my brain to stop and puts me in a great mood.

### Discography

1981 - Johnny Are You Queer? - 12" Single (B-Side) “Blackout”

1982 - Convertible Music

1984 - From The Hip

1996 - Frightened By Nightingales

2006 - Movie Disaster Music

2007 - Invasion of the B Girls

2010 - Pussycat Babylon (Summer Release Date)

[www.myspace.com/josiecotton](http://www.myspace.com/josiecotton)

[www.josiecotton.com](http://www.josiecotton.com)

[www.scruffyrecords.com/pussycatbabylon](http://www.scruffyrecords.com/pussycatbabylon)