


# Josie Cotton talks lost 1986 album, 'Valley Girl,' and getting asked out by Nicolas Cage


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“I used to think it was girl’s movie,” says new wave star Josie Cotton of 1983’s *Valley Girl*, a *Romeo & Juliet*-esque cinematic saga of a forbidden romance between popular suburbanite Julie and Hollywood punk Randy, the latter played by Nicolas Cage in his first starring film role. “And then I realized it was *guy*’s movie, because it was really about guys being able to be individuals and sensitive and creative and be able to actually have real feelings. A lot of guys have come up to me and said, ‘I broke into manhood during that movie.’ Like, how to be a sensitive guy — not a jock, not a bully, but somebody cool. Nicolas Cage did a great job portraying that character.”

And it turned out that life imitated art. Cotton, who performed three songs during the cult classic’s prom scenes, reveals in a Yahoo Entertainment/[SiriusXM Volume](#) interview that Cage actually asked her on a date after meeting her on the *Valley Girl* set, and he invited her an excursion even cuter and more innocent than afterschool coffee and pie at the Studio City Du-Par’s or hanging at the Sherman Oaks Galleria.

“What’s-his-name asked me out,” she begins casually, before confirming that yes, by “What’s-his-name” she means future Oscar-winner Nicolas “Randy” Cage. “He was so cute. I didn’t [say yes]. I had a boyfriend.” So, how did Cage make his move? He actually asked Cotton, “‘Want to go out and look at cool furniture or something?’ We were both interested in mid-century furniture.”

Cotton adds: “It was a good approach. ... He’s a sensitive, creative guy.”



While *Valley Girl* didn’t lead to offscreen romance, it certainly boosted Cotton’s career, and she was especially grateful that *Valley Girl*’s director, Martha Coolidge, was willing to let her perform her polarizing single “Johnny, Are You Queer?” in the film. “Looking back, I think it was pretty brave of her, because there was so much controversy around me,” says Cotton. “I was like a pariah, in terms of just that song. There was corporate backlash, and there was money to be lost there. So, I was just impressed that she was brave enough to put that song in the movie.”

Cotton describes “Johnny, Are You Queer?” — which started off as Fear song and was later revised as a Go-Go’s song, before Cotton’s demo-tape recording of it became the official version — as “kind of an atom bomb. It made such a strange impact on the world, and there was retro reactions from various religions.” In fact, Cotton oddly caught flak from both sides of the political spectrum. Some members of the LGBTQ community thought the song — about a frustrated girl wondering if the man she unrequitedly crushes on may be gay — as homophobic. Meanwhile, anti-gay conservatives people also objected to the lyrics, accusing Cotton of *promoting* homosexuality.

“And they joined together to hurt Josie!” Cotton recalls incredulously. “It was just ironic to me when I realized that the televangelists and the New York political, gay community would come together to come down on that song. It was even banned in *Amsterdam*! But I do think that will go on my gravestone, because that’s pretty cool. When I heard that I was like, ‘OK, it was all worth it.’”

A year before *Valley Girl*, Cotton fielded offers from various records labels — including IRS, home to the Go-Go’s — but only if she agreed to *not* put out “Johnny,” which had initially been released as a single by indie label Bomp! Records and had become the No. 5 single of 1981 at Los Angeles alt-rock radio station KROQ. “There was that path through the forest I could have taken, but I thought it was kind of a cop-out. I always thought like that a bad way to start, compromising with [IRS Records], even though that was the really cool label,” she says. “I wish I had actually stayed on Bomp!, because they were the only ones who really got it. They were the ones who got [“Johnny”] to be international, and they would have taken it all the way.”

Eventually, Cotton signed to major label Elektra Records, which released her excellent debut album of Spectorian powerpop, *Convertible Music*, in 1982. But then, she says, just as the song was entering the top 40 of the Billboard Club Play chart, Elektra panicked and “killed” the “Johnny, are You Queer?” single. “They took it off the radio. They took it from the stores. They became very afraid of it,” she recalls. “It got so political. It actually got approved on AM radio with a beep — like, ‘Johnny, Are You Beep?’ — but [Elektra executives] just said no. They pretty much killed a hit record.”



Cotton put out one more album on Elektra, *From the Hip*, but after Elektra “showed her the door” in 1986, she ended up never releasing her third album, *Everything Is Oh Yeah*. But now, thanks to a hit TV show that no doubt owes some sort of debt to *Valley Girl*, that album is finally coming out this week.

“I had signed with a publishing company, Red Queen, and they said, ‘Oh wow, your songs would be great for *Stranger Things*,’ because they put out a call for music from the ‘80s and they said, ‘They want something that was never released,” Cotton explains. “That was such an odd request. And I went, ‘Well, I know I did something like that, but I don’t know if [the tapes] are still on this Earth.’”

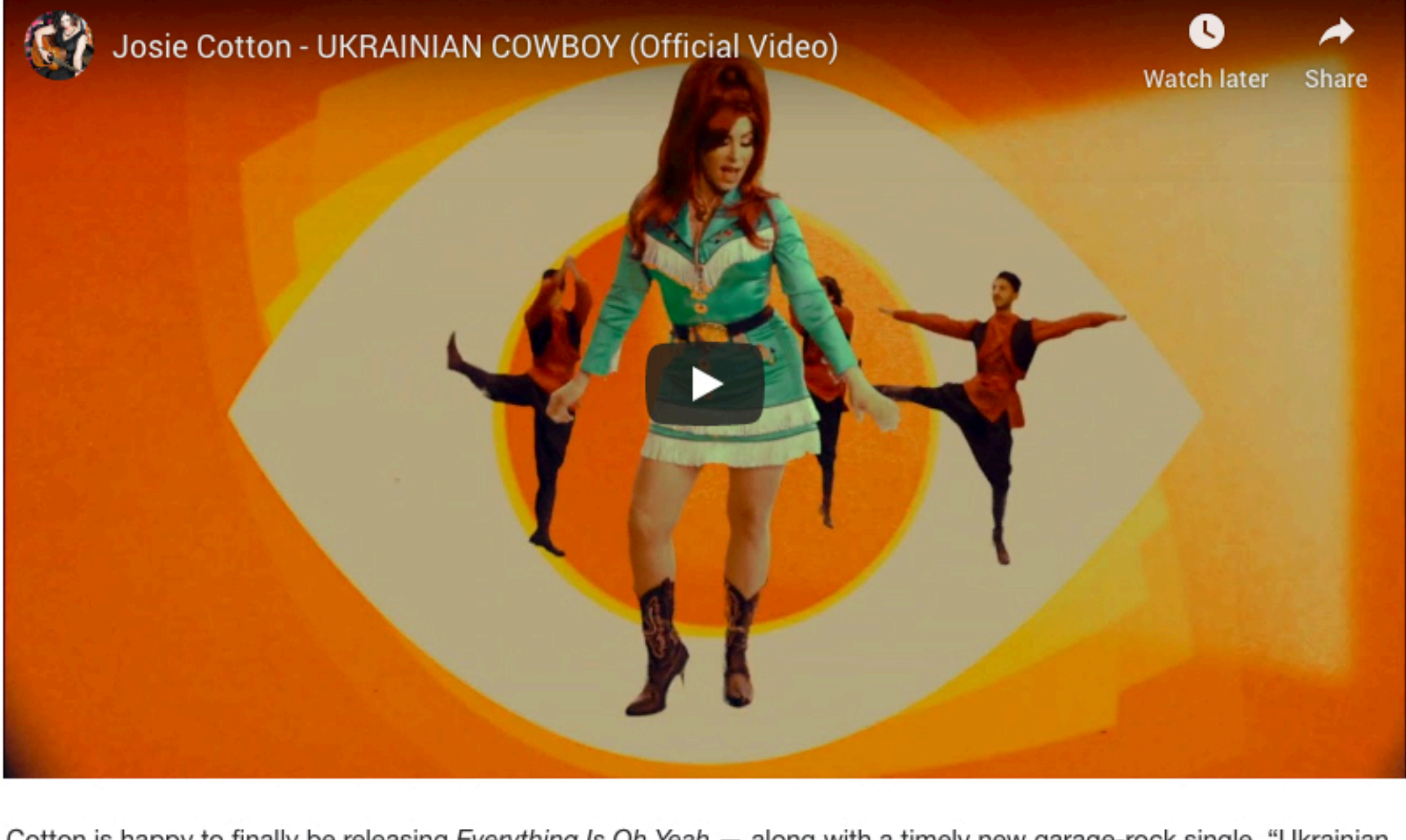
Cotton eventually hunted down the *Everything Is Oh Yeah* tapes — “One of them was in the garage of my old producer, and the other ones were unmarked and in the rafters of my current studio” — and when she finally listened back to them after all these years, she “couldn’t quite process what was happening. It was so surreal. Then the song I did with Brian Setzer came on. It was just like, ‘Wow, this was something good. This was something I could be proud of. We have to release this *now*.’” (Incidentally, Setzer also asked Cotton on a date in the ‘80s, but she turned him down too. “I had a boyfriend. A different one,” she says. “I was always attached at the hip with somebody.”)



Josie Cotton today. (Photo: Reybee, Inc.)

Cotton recalls another moment of doubt in the post-“Johnny” era, during the making of *Everything Is Oh Yeah*, that also factored into that album getting shelved: when Setzer and notorious Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren got into an argument about the album right in front of her.

“It’s a weird story,” she begins. “My producer, Larson Paine, was friends with both of them. They’re both extremely iconic and brilliant, and that day they came [to the studio] at the same time. They’d always come separately and they had very different views about music and particularly my record. Malcolm just said I should erase it and start over, because the future of music was dance music and hip-hop and beats. Brian said, ‘Rock ‘n’ roll is here to stay!’ He loved what we were doing and he said, ‘You should absolutely release this record and just keep going.’ That was just an odd moment... people that I admired so much, it kind of stopped my brain. I just couldn’t move forward: ‘It’s good!’ ‘It’s bad!’ ‘Release it!’ ‘Erase it!’ So with that, combined with my fear of the record business, I just went, ‘No.’”



Cotton is happy to finally be releasing *Everything Is Oh Yeah* — along with a timely new garage-rock single, “Ukrainian Cowboy” — and she’s no longer bitter about what happened with Elektra in 1986. “The best thing that ever happened to me was getting dropped by Elektra Records, because it forced me to really explore my experience as an artist and do all kinds of records,” says the singer, who in the ‘90s and 2000 continued to released music and manage two recording studios with punk producer Geza X. “I didn’t trust any record company, so I put everything out on my own labels and was able to experiment and become more of an artist than I could ever have been if I had had to stick to that brand. I would have gone stark raving mad in a straightjacket if I had kept doing ‘80s music, honest to God.”

Still, Cotton she seems at peace with the fact that many fans will always remember her for “Johnny,” which has been adopted as a gay anthem in recent years (“People have told me didn’t know they were gay until they heard that song, or came out after they heard that song... They tell me, ‘You broke down all the barriers now,’ and that’s what makes it so rewarding”) and *Valley Girl*, a movie with a \$350,000 budget that no one thought would become such a cultural phenomenon (Cotton even still owns the plastic skirt — and matching purse! — purchased at the now-defunct Melrose Avenue boutique Cowboys & Poodles, that she wore for her *Valley Girl* prom performance.)



“The movie still holds up. I was proud to be a part of that, that whole soundtrack” — which also included Modern English, the Plimsouls, the Flirts, Felony, the Psychedelic Furs, Sparks, and Men at Work — “and the musicians keep talking about some kind of a tour for the movie. That would be pretty amazing,” Cotton says. So, what if Nicolas Cage still wanted to take the “He Could Be the One” singer furniture-shopping *now*? “Oh... you know. Life goes on,” she laughs.

The above interview is taken from Josie Cotton’s appearance on the SiriusXM show “[Volume West](#).” Audio of this conversation is available on demand via the SiriusXM app.