FEATURES

Josie Cotton Talks About Great Songs From Bad Films

"Johnny Are You Queer" singer goes beyond the shadow of the Valley Girl for a B-movie revenge.

By **Tony Sokol** | May 13, 2020 | 0

Photo: Kitten Robot Records

Generation C is being invaded by the B-Girls. 80s cult singer Josie Cotton, best known for blurring the angst of both liberals and conservatives with “Johnny Are You Queer?,” sees the science fiction claustrophobia arising from the coronavirus pandemic and wants to help. Cotton joined the Minutemen’s Mike Watt, the Runaways’ Cherie Currie, and Eddie Spaghetti on the song “Flatten the Curve,” to benefit the Jubilee Consortium and the Sweet Relief Musicians Fund. Everyone else, she advises to cuddle up with a bad movie. Cotton ventured beyond the valley of the dolls in a “so-bad-they’re-good” movie hunt to accompany this real life B-Movie scenario and re-released ***Invasion of the B-Girls***.

The album title is a twist on the Denis Sanders’ 1973 film ***Invasion of the Bee Girls***, where giant killer bees masquerade as sexy women scientists who kill men for their blood during sex. The New Wave pioneer originally released the collection on CD in 2007. The remastered release includes her version of “Female Trouble,” the theme song of John Waters’ 1974 cult film classic. The track is driven by the horn section of the band Tower of Power but kick-starts with “Get Off the Road” from Herschel Gordon Lewis’ killer biker chick classic ***She Devils on Wheels*** (1968). Cotton pays double honors to the king of gore, Russ Meyer, with tracks from ***Faster Pussycat Kill! Kill!*** and the beyond-classification low-budget, soft porn masterpiece ***Beyond The Valley Of The Dolls***. She dares to ask “Who Killed Teddy Bear?”

To match the varied film genres – monster, biker, sci-fi, grindhouse, exploitation, sexploitation, civil rights parables and musical snuff films – Cotton bounces between music genres. Cheesy pop, sleazy funk, British Invasion, psychedelic, country swing, Bond-theme-sounding soundscapes, and Japanese folk music for Mothra fans, are all represented to make respectable art out of worthless trash.

Josie Cotton is the nom de plume of Kathleen Josey. Groomed to be a dancer from the age of 2, Josey reinvents herself for every project. For ***Invasion of the B-Girls***, she might be the bee-hived “Girl In Gold Boots” with a polka dot shift dress, a leather-clad man-eating she-devil, or even a daisy pullin’ broad. She played an undocumentable humanoid in the trippy 1986 science fiction film ***Nomads*** along with Pierce Brosnan, Adam Ant and cult-movie favorite Mary Woronov. She even changed her name for her 1993 album ***Frightened by Nightingales***, which was a shift in direction. The album may have gone “Lookin’ for Elvis,” but strayed from simple rock and roll to art rock dream pop with cool time signatures compelling listeners to “Danse Macabre.”

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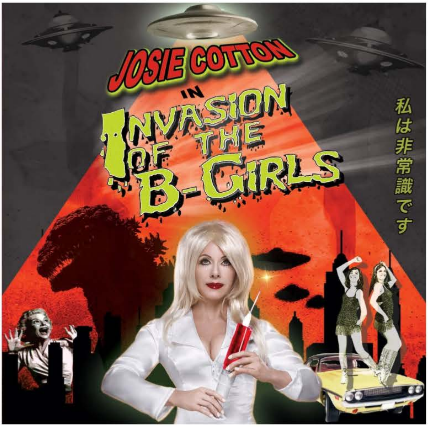
Elektra Records killed “Johnny, are You Queer?” just as it hit the Billboard top 40 but got banned in Amsterdam. Her second album, ***From The Hip!***, bounced between new wave, surf band, girl group and neo-rockabilly with some hep guitar styling from the Stray Cats’ Brian Setzer. What was to be her third album, 1985’s ***Everything is Oh Yeah***, might never have been released if

Stranger Things hadn't happened. But when you think Cotton fell down the rabbit hole of ***Movie Disaster Music*** she emerged with "Beautiful but Deadly" melodies and created Robot Kitten records.

Josie Cotton spoke with ***Den of Geek*** about movies, music, sex, gas and blood, how there are stranger things than valley girls and why all men are mothers.



DEN OF GEEK: You are working with Geza X, a renowned punk. How did the two of you work out the intricate arrangements on the songs?

JOSIE COTTON: Yeah, he was the main producer on that record, and played guitar, lead guitar on all of it too. Well, we try to be very religious in keeping with the original soundtracks for the most part. A lot of the musical arrangements came from Geza. Primarily, I mean I sat in there. I had, of course, a lot of opinions about every detail, but he was really the main person who put this project in the world.

The album also gives you an excuse to play with a lot of musical genres.

Well, as a singer it was quite amazing to be able to use all those different parts of my voice. If you're a recording artist on a major label, you have one brand and you're branded for the duration. That was such freedom for me to be able to do that. It was great.

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What was the most challenging as a singer?

I would say the theme song for ***Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*** was the most intense for me. I just had never used that part of my voice. I mean I trained and whatnot, but I don't even know what you call it, that persona. I mean, the song is kind of a different multiple personality I must have been hiding somewhere.

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What kind of emotional state do you have to get into just sing a love song to Green Slime?

Well, I mean there's that and there's also the love song to Godzilla who was clearly a reptile, trans-species love. I had to be an actress. Basically, there's no getting into real emotions on that record. It's absolute fantasy but the emotions are real. So that's what actors do. They take phony situations and put real emotions in them. I try to do that. I can't say I had a lot of emotional connection with green slime.

As far as the trends and trans-species Godzilla love, you've always been very pioneering.

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Yes, I guess so, you're talking about my previous material? Well, I would say, because I'm a concept person. I would say that's true.

How were Tower of Power in the studio?

They were all about getting it done. They were super serious musicians. They had it all written out. They came in and just laid it down and they kind of chuckled and then they left. They were just the most serious musicians I've ever been around because there was no funny business. They just got it done and got it perfect. And usually, it was just one take and it was just perfect every time. That was amazing.

The greatest thing about this record was that Russ Meyer threatened to sue me, and John Waters, in a very polite way, said he was going to sue me. But that was kind of the pinnacle of a B movie in my real life so I would cherish that. I never got sued, that's even the happy ending, but I did have those moments.

You've done *Disaster Movie Music* and this is the B-Girl movie music. What's the next genre you're going to set the tune? Is there a spaghetti Western line dance album in your future?

Did you hear my single Ukrainian Cowboy? Well, what I've fallen in love with and it really started with that ***Invasion*** record was researching and having a concept in my mind. I did so much researching that I found that I absolutely loved it. So yeah, right now I'm just exploring different ideas for different records. I have quite a few in mind. ***Volume B*** is clearly something I want to do. However I think I got a lot of the great movie theme songs the first time around, because I've looked and it's slim pickings.

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I'm trying to expand my curriculum of it being from usually from the sixties or seventies, eighties, if I had to. So I'm expanding. I've fallen in love with all these Italian horror movies from the seventies, but I can't understand what they're saying. I'm in love with the visuals and the whole overacting and the music. It's just divine but I have no idea what's happening. I know there's some killing going on and some erotic moments and it's just incredible. I'm hoping to get some translations going, because I found some amazing music in that world.

You have been exploring genre film ideas since at least the "Bruce Lee, All I See is the Face of Bruce Lee" song.

I've just always been in love with Bruce Lee. There's just no way around it. In "Kung Fu Girls," if you notice, I was trying to imitate all those incredible Kung Fu girls. I used to watch it every Saturday and there'd be these incredible Chinese Kung Fu women and girls. I was trying to imitate their sounds in that song so hard. I think I sounded like a rabbit being squeezed, but I tried. Since I was a little girl, that was my escape hatch out of this world. Science fiction. ***Invaders from Mars*** is still deeply etched in my brainstem, watching this incredible flying saucer come down and it takes over the whole town, including the kid's parents, and he's the only one who's left.

I guess that's kind of how I felt as a kid. I felt so alone. I was the only one who knew what was going on, that was my feeling. I just kept loving it. Then I was introduced into exploitation movies, which was my come-to-Jesus moment. Russ Meyer, in the beginning, was just incredible and they kind of destroyed him. He just made all B movies after ***Beyond the Valley of the Dolls***, but I started collecting all this stuff. I even have records that they use "the East is West."

Do you remember the first genre movie song you did?

I remember putting clips, dialogue from various movies into some of my records for ***Movie Disaster Music***. I think that was the first one that I used some crazy [stuff], I think when Joan Crawford is getting put in a mental institution and she's screaming and stuff like that, just the love of that genre. I do draw a line. ***Hostel*** epitomizes the kind of movies I avoid. Not that I'm not afraid of the blood, I don't mind it, but it's when there's cruelty, mental cruelty. That's where it just does not take me there.

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Are there any new movies that you think will become B movie classics?

I kinda thought I might be asked something about this and I was looking for any movie in 2019 that I liked, in terms of science fiction or horror. I think Quentin Tarantino comes as close to recreating B movies as you can get and I think he does justice to it. I got no problem with Quentin. But I think all the real talented writers have gone to television. There's so many great science fiction TV shows, it was just quite amazing in terms of just the writing and the ideas and the awkward, horrible, funny moments.

One of my favorite ones was ***Black Mirror***, but there are certain episodes I could never finish. The only other movie like that I could never finish was ***Eraserhead***. Then ***Black Mirror*** came along and I was like, oh God, I can't finish watching that either. It just seemed too real. It was hitting too close to home and the world. It was like, "oh my God, that's, ooh, that's awfully close to what we're doing now. That's just a step away from them." I was just reading that they're not going to continue with season six because the directors said everyone was already depressed. I just thought that was amazing and I started thinking, "well, gosh, science fiction has kind of caught up with itself."

All the dystopian views of the world the Huxleys and the Orwells were predicting, they were talking about the future and now these dystopian worlds are kind of really close. ***Black Mirror***, I think that was like the moment when science fiction caught up with itself. I just thought that was kind of amazing that they felt that too. It's a really interesting time to be alive.

You came up with the idea for this album while watching *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster*. Tell me about the song which gave you the epiphany and what those princesses meant to you.

It just transported me. I don't even know the exact place I went, but that always struck me when I was watching it, as I had so many times. The last time I'd seen it though, I had not been a singer and I didn't have my own recording studio and the means to create something like this. But it was just a revelation when I thought, "oh my God, I can do a whole record from these crazy movies that I love." That was a particularly beautiful one at that moment and also absurd, as they're singing to Mothra, who is fluttering these giant eyelashes. It's just so funny. I mean, you're laughing and crying and everything at the same time.

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I never even wondered what the princesses represented to me, but it was something so magical. I've studied paganism and I've gone around the world and read philosophies and whatnot, and there is something extremely pagan about it, I'm thinking now. I didn't think of it at the time, but it's the nature spirits and then these gigantic eyelashes Mothra is fluttering.

How did the producers of *Stranger Things* know you had unreleased stuff around? Do they have a premonition?

They didn't. I had just signed up with Red Queen, which is a publishing company. I was just trying to straighten out all my songs. They were all in disarray and it was all crazy. They were in contact with all TV people who are always looking for material. The first thing they presented to me was the idea of finding something I had recorded and never released, which was just an odd request. They wanted a record that was made in the eighties and never released. Who else would do that, but I did it.

I had to find them. They were in garages and in rafters, and I really didn't know if they existed anymore, but luckily they did. I liked that show. I was really with the show, but I didn't think it was going to fit because that's such a techno version of the eighties. I was a little rockabillish. I didn't think I fit for the show, but it did cause me to go on that search and find those old tapes and whatnot.

Have you ever encountered any of the stranger things the show talks about?

I can't say I've delved into that world very much. They must have cut me off at the bar or something because I'm free. They don't really speak to me, those other worlds.

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You were a B-Girl in the 1986 movie Nomads.

For that one shining moment of film history we'd like to forget, yes. That was a fun experience. I would like to have done more acting, but they wouldn't let us speak because we were dead Eskimos. We couldn't communicate. But there were some great actors around me. Adam Ant was hilarious. Mary Woronov was amazing. That was fun.

Mary Woronov comes from Roger Corman and Andy Warhol movies. Where do you think Warhol fits in the scheme of B movies?

Well, he is a B movie. I don't think that B movies are high art. I think he just stands alone and I just love that he existed. It's not that I loved his art so much, but I loved him. He was a work of art. He was dazzling in his oddness. I was very beguiled by him and being in the world.

Which of the B-girl actors had the best acting chops?

I don't know if there's one real actor in any of them. I mean when I think of acting, I think someone who is good at their craft. I don't think there's one real actor in any of the movies that I did the theme song for, honestly.

Who had the best scream then?

Well, the extras on any *Godzilla* movie. I think they all have the best screams. I don't know who they are. They're legions of people. I don't know their names.

The Carrie Nations, the all-girl band at the center of *Beyond the Valley of The Dolls*, had to learn how to play instruments so they could fake it better than anyone else in film. Are they the best?

They weren't trying to be musicians but they definitely were coached to be fantastic. They look like they're really playing. So they are acting their way through it, but those girls were amazing. That whole movie it's just the peak of movie-making. I wish more people knew about that movie. It's kind of outrageous. Then there was nudity at the time that is not allowed anymore. Things have gotten a lot stricter it seems in what they allow to be shown. At that time it wasn't like that. I think it was better.

Can you get chlamydia from riding a motorcycle?

I would think you can. With the proper set up, I think that could be transmitted. I do, I have not attempted it, but I think one could if one pursued it. Yes.

You went through a Mother-Russia-is-watching phase with "Cold War Spy."

That I took pretty seriously. That wasn't fun and games. I've always been fascinated by all aspects of spies, the spy craft and even the glamor of James Bond and all of these documentaries I had seen. But when I realized the name of the song was going to be "Cold War Spy," I was amazed. The Stasi had always intrigued me because they were such master spies. They ran circles around Russia and England. I mean, they were it. It was the most watched society in human history.

I went down a horrible rabbit hole of watching these things on YouTube where they had these actual training tapes of the Stasis when they were trying to literally do what they call "the removal of the human soul." They had a name for it. This very calm German voice was telling them the process of doing that, number one, and I became so horrified. It is a dystopian world that really was happening in that society in East Germany at that time. The amazing thing, we talk about science fiction and all irrelevant or just an escape, but there's some highly political elements to it. The most dangerous book to the Stasi was anything by George Orwell. [If you read Orwell] you were tortured and in horrible ways. That's quite amazing because he was saying something in the science fiction world, a lot which has come true, that you couldn't say out loud in the real world. That's what's so intriguing to me about all this.

But I went into that hard core. It was the hardest song I ever wrote because the heroism was so incredible and the people who were fighting the Stasi. But I wanted it to be a "swinging London 60s" kind of sixties, because that was the era. I wanted it to be kind of romantic with a James Bond thing, but I didn't want to say too much scary stuff because I wanted to be fun. I was almost tortured. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and go, "I can't say that, start all over," it was insane. But I was happy with the way it turned out.

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While we're talking about Stazi mind control, did a Christian station try to use your song to brainwash people by playing it during extended periods of sleep deprivation?

That is actually two different pieces of information. One is in Salt Lake City. There were some conversion camps where they were trying to take gay boys and make them straight by playing certain songs while they're pretty much in prison. My friend actually went through it. For like 18 hours a day they'd play "Johnny Are You Queer" insanely loud until they relented and gave up being gay. I never understood why they picked that song, but that was used in conversion.

But then there was a TV station and televangelists. I'm also obsessed with religious cults and what not, so I occasionally skim through and watch some of these people. I was going through the stations and I saw the "Johnny Are You Queer" 12-inch pressed up against the TV camera. [The televangelist's son] was screaming that there was no Josie Cotton, that this is actually a man trying to promote homosexuality. Then he went over to a turntable. They played "Johnny Are You Queer" at half speed and I swear I sounded just like Brian Wilson. I swear this is true. I saw this. I've been trying to find the tapes.

Your album Everything Was Oh Yeah! was never released. Was that because of the fallout of "Johnny are You Queer?"

Because of the backlash and they just really didn't know what to do with me. So I had already started making this record on my own and I would have turned it over to them had they not removed me from their roster, so to speak. And that would have been their record. But I just ended up shelving it and this just reminded me of the music business and my brief experiences breeding in captivity I thought I was better, free range. I'm on my own and it's turned out to be the best thing.

***Valley Girl* made alternative music mainstream, but I think that the song "Johnny Are You Queer?" may have been more important than the film itself.**

Well, people ask me about what it feels like to have had such a huge hit and they call me a one hit wonder at times, which makes my skin crawl because it was more like an atom bomb that song. I think it had a huge effect on the world even though it never hit mainstream radio. I made no money from it. But it did have some kind of a cultural title wave, with a huge backlash effect. That song was already on its way down when it got into that movie. Because my record company was so afraid of the song and they actually pulled it from the radio. It was about to go into AM radio with a beep on it: [sings] Johnny Are You Beep, would have been on AM radio.

I think the corporate backlash was too much for them. As for the publicity, they chickened out and they pulled it. I think that song, it kind of was important at that moment. I don't think someone could introduce that word into culture now. Everything is so politically correct and people are highly sensitive and it came in, it's the only moment I think it could have come in into our vernacular.

And it was owning the words. Now, people call themselves queer and I feel proud that I had a small part in that, but yeah, I think I took a bullet for that word, I do in a sense. But, I mean the best thing that ever happened to me was being dropped by my label. So I could explore all these crazy worlds, like in this record and that's been fun.

Frank Zappa tried to get a movie made out of *Valley Girl*, but the studios did it on their own and then left him out. So as a musician, how would you feel if "Johnny Are You Queer" was turned into an afterschool special and you weren't given a cameo?

I'm a little uncertain how I would answer that. I don't know if who coined the term Valley Girl actually. There were a lot of different accents in the valley. A comedian went through all these very different versions of what a Valley Girl was. I really wasn't aware of that. It's not ever good when a studio steals your idea, that's horrible. But I do think the music that turned out in that movie was pretty on point and a lot of alternative music got to a lot more people because of that movie and that was a good thing.But they've not asked me to do a cameo in the musical [remake of ***Valley Girl***]. I don't know how you do that without it being a total nostalgia movie. Because to modernize it, it would have to have a lot of elements that would make it kind of like a snuff film, teen suicides and school shootings and opioids, now a pandemic. How do you make something current? You'd have to make a parody of it really I think.

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You kill a lot of people in your "Man-eater" music video.

I killed a lot of men. If you're familiar with ***She-Devils on Wheels***, I radically changed the fashion statement from that movie and it was glamorized somewhat a lot. Somehow I have this odd English accent as I'm singing that song as well. I knew I was doing it at the time but I don't know where that came from. The script I had was much more like the movie. It was a lot of kicking people in the ground, like in the movie. We just brought it to a director and came up with this really funny, it was like a little B-movie that was a great experience.

We were going to do a second video from that record and then this whole coronavirus thing happened and we had to cancel the shoot. But, because these movies are classic and I think the songs are classic,I think that video holds its own even though it's been some time since I made it. But I love that video. I think it's hilarious. We all had different tools of destruction, the electric knife unplugged, it was really a wonderful thing. Those girls, they were all friends of mine, the gang.

When you were on your movies-that-are-so-bad-they're-good bender, were there any that were just too bad?

The thing is, I could forgive any depth of badness if there was a song that appealed to me. But there were quite a few movies that I loved that didn't have a theme song. That was the thing I ran into more. I don't think I had any moral compass about the movie being too bad. If the song was good enough and the movie was demented enough. That's the thing. It can't be just a surf movie with a giant lobster. It had to be a certain type of movie, usually, on the dark side with dark humor and then have a song that I could enjoy singing.

But ***Black Klansman*** comes to mind. That was a pretty awful movie. And it's not science fiction in any way. They're very sincere about this, and it's actually a true story, but the song was so great and the movie was so bad. I think that might be, in the scope of things, probably the worst movie on the record. It wasn't quite bad enough like ***Girl the Go-Go Boots*** was, it's the worst go-go dancing in human history, it was beyond.

And ***She Devils On Wheels***, that lives forever. It's just really classic. ***Faster Pussycat***, I mean, I love all these movies so much. I'm looking for more theme songs. If any of your audience can send them to me. I'm reaching out to everyone. There are so many movies that you watch the whole thing and there's no song. I'll spend the rest of my life watching so many movies. At my funeral I would be watching the last movie before I pass on. Because you don't even know if there's a song on there or not, so I need some guidance or somebody throw me a movie.

What kind of character would you go for in a B-movie?

Something comedic. Something I can completely overact in. I would have loved to have been in a ***Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*** film. I just think that this is the end all, I mean, that's one big movie that you really have to call a work of art, right? It just broke all kinds of barriers of impolite society. I don't know. I forgive him for all the B movies, because of those two movies.

Zappa did "Cheepnis," Fabulous Poodles did "B Movies," the Kinks did "Celluloid Heroes." Do you have a favorite song about movies?

Well I'm in the middle of writing a song about these Italian horror movies. I don't have a song title quite yet, but it's going to be fun. I'm actually working on that today. My other idea, I was thinking about writing theme songs from the movies. I found they didn't have one. That's one of my projects that might or might not happen, but it's a fun idea.

Which movie do you think you should have written for?

Well, the one that stands out is ***Alice in Acidland***. It's a B movie and it's just amazing visuals and the things that happen. That one really should have had a theme song. But I named the whole record because ***Invasion of the Bee Girls*** was one of the ones that didn't have a theme song. That was an actual movie. I could have wept after it was over because there was no theme song. My homage to that movie was naming it, but a little double entendre. There are just some movies that need a theme song but didn't get one.

The John Waters quote "Josie Cotton makes the unlistenable unforgettable" sounds like the kind of praise *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* would get.

Yeah, that was just such an amazing moment when I read that. That might be going on my gravestone along with "Banned in Amsterdam." I don't know which I love more. But the fact that he said it, of course, it's been given a crown by the King, of all of that world. He was such an inspiration to me and I'm just really happy I was able to find the release. He co-wrote the song "Female Trouble." It's really great, one of those movies. It just stands above so many of them.

Is there something special about being a cult artist as opposed to a mainstream artist? Is there something more fun about cult status?

Yeah, I find it a much better place for me. I couldn't be the company person and I just didn't fit in around there, so, the freedom to be able to do what you want and then to follow these crazy leads. It's like being a character actor, I think. You can see all these different personas. Although, there are people from the eighties who just want to hear 80s songs and I love giving that to them. Some of these 80s shows I've done, I've told people it's like performing before thousands of puppies. I feel so happy and I love puppies, but they don't know about any other records I did. They really want to hear "He Could be the One."

They don't really know me in a way that I feel like I'm making the most contribution. It's important to them and I do honor that. But it feels like a cage, honestly, when I have to do just a song and I can't do the stuff that really made me happy and laugh and as I was doing it, and was such a great adventure going into. But that's the irony. Once you have a brand for a certain audience, they don't want it to change. But some people have gone with me and they're the ones that keep me going. Because they remember the quirky part of me, that keeps me live.

Your press agent said to ask about the fight between Malcolm McLaren and Brian Stetzer about the future of rock and roll. So I looked it up and I agree with McLaren about beat music. So where is rock and roll now and will there be a nostalgia for it, now that it's all past?

I think they were both right. That is a true thing. I just got caught in between them and I froze in time. It was the question that I couldn't answer. But I think there always is going to be in place for Rock and Roll. It goes through phases and I think it's on an upswing right now. I think that in Los Angeles, which is very musically driven, there's a huge amount of rock artists, especially girl bands in punk rock bands that are performing and people are craving it and loving it.

It seems to be re-circling back around but with a new twist on it. I don't think it's going to go. I think the world will end before Rock and Roll ends. There's always going to be a place for it.

I wanted to ask about the rumor. Do you come from Texas oil money?

Well my granddad was an oil guy, that was on my mom's side but, that was my granddad. My father was a ballet dancer and what not. I can't say I was really influenced by that part of my culture, except I'm still a Texan. I guess I'm kind of a Texan, but at the same time I was needing to leave Dallas in particular.

You don't believe in love, but do you believe in shame?

I just love that line. I thought it was so defiant and it was just so outrageous. I just love saying that in a song. She's this protagonist, as I call her. She's defiant about love and I think that's a very freeing thing for a female. And to say you believe in shame was so outrageous. I mean, who believes in shame? So really fun to say because no one else probably loves shame, shame is the shameful thing. So it was just the irony. And to be able to say "the purge of Stalin" in a pop song was so wonderful to me. I took great pleasure in that.

Frightened By Nightingale's is completely different from everything else you did.

Yes, That was completely different. I wanted to do something so vastly different than anything that I'd been known for. I was not even using my name as spelt, I spelled my name right differently on that one in the odd chance it would make a difference, but of course it didn't. It was a chance for me to be a real singer and with a whole different style of music. And the first review I got out of that record made me so happy. They said it reminded them of "being in the desert at dusk when you find a missing head in a trailer park." That is so what I want to be. That is the real essence of where I want to be artistically in the world.

Josie Cotton's ***Invasion of the B-Girls*** is available through Kitten Robot Records.

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Music

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