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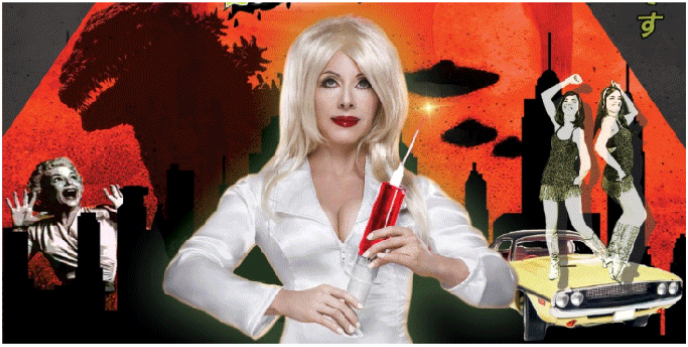
"Banned in Amsterdam", Bad B-Movies, John Waters, "Johnny are you Queer?"- Josie Cotton is Larger than Life

May 22, 2020 by Jeremy Hinks



Josie Cotton | Invasion of the B-Girls – artwork supplied by Cotton

Few artists have really left an impression on me before I even met them. I listened to Josie Cotton in high school and was excited to do this segment. This campy, highly talented musician, with a great sense of humor was a staple in my coming of age years. However, I had no idea I would feel the way did after having spoken to her. A flood of memories, mixed with the real person, and as eccentric as she is, she taught me that no matter how weird you are, celebrate your weirdness, and you will find you have more in common with people than any of you think. She is a pop-culture historical icon, who, like the exaggerated giant women in old school B-movies stomping on people, cars, and buildings, Josie Cotton is "Larger Than Life".

Cotton released singles in the '80s, debuted in the film "Valley Girl", had her single "Johnny Are You Queer?" used in failed conversion therapy, but also had it become a therapeutic anthem for young gay men, worked with John Waters, and had the honor of being "Banned In Amsterdam." She released an update of bad B-movie theme songs, now with the John Waters' song "Female Trouble", and she has carried on with wisdom, being just as interested in me and my life as I am hers. Live your life for you, enjoy it, and don't take it all too seriously, you'll miss out if you do

Jeremy Hinks: Hi Josie I appreciate you taking the time, I was warned ahead of time that you were really funny, and probably going to have me laughing a lot, so I am not expecting a professional interview.

Josie Cotton: Wow, people have some high expectations. This is a difficult time for everyone, and even putting out a record in all of this, and being funny is harder now.

JH: Oh yeah, the simple things, take the dog for a walk, a puppy does something cute and you get excited, that is the high point of the day. It's like life just came to a screeching halt.

JC: Might be a minute for that. I mean if we get cleared by them testing your temperature to let you into a concert, or like GATTACA, I mean, all of these science fiction movies are coming true these days. Like "28 Days Later", the empty streets.

JH: That is one of my all-time favorite movies, one of the top 3 in the Zombie genre, I am a "Zombie Anthropologist", my fave genre of all horror films.

JC: See, I liked Zombies when they weren't cool, you know before "The Walking Dead"

JH: Well, I was that punk kid in high school, you know, died black mullet, trench-coat, Joy Division T-Shirt. I wrote an article for some horror magazine where I cataloged the taxonomy of the species of 15 Zombies on the Linnaeus schedule, just crazy those days where.

JC: That's funny, I would love to see that.

JH: I wish I could find one of the last 2 copies I had, I can't even find them online now, the magazine was debunked in the mid-90s. BUT, your music was such an integral part of my misspent youth, so when I got the chance to talk to you, I had to jump on it. I know that "Johnny Are You Queer?" was the big iconic piece of yours, and for me, the reverse happened to me. I was involved with this girl, really hung up on her, we were both religious, but then one day she told me that her best friend I'll say, "Julie" was in competition with me, and I lost. That was 1991, and I was seventeen, hard to grasp that you know.

JC: It's funny, I have some friends out there in Salt Lake City, and they are by far the most eccentric people I have ever known, they stand out in their field.

JH: Hah, maybe I know them. So let's start with the first questions, the "Valley Girl" soundtrack, aside from Frank Zappa should have taken part in it, and cashed in on it. It was a great movie, and I have to say, I LOVE the soundtrack, You, the Plimsols, Modern English, Psychedelic Furs. Why did they pick the not so great songs, for each artist? Even your work on it was fine, but not as great as the rest of your catalog.

JC: They asked for another song I had written "systematic waves" from my first record. And I said, "No, its valley girls, it's about school and the mall" and so they didn't use that one, and that was one of the first of many times I sabotaged something good. I do think though, in defense of the soundtrack of

"Valley Girl" is that it did take so much of the alternative music and put it into the mainstream, and the mainstream needed it. It was an abysmal world on AM radio playing at the time. But "He Could Be The One" actually was a bigger hit for me than "Johnny", but "Johnny" was such a pop culture moment, that is the one that stands out more. Still, I perform it, and everyone loves it, even the "Hipsters" of today, they want to hear me sing "He Could Be The One", and it was never my favourite song.

JH: Well, you and every musician out there, like Radiohead, they hate their hits and the stuff that got on the radio. They think their fans are idiots for liking "Creep". And Modern English, they wrote "I Melt With You" while driving back from a gig, just on a catchy tune, it's marginal compared to the rest of their work, and it's one of the most popular songs of the 80s. So, I described you to my friends in high school, as "The Go Go's" meets Siouxsie and the Banshees, meets Pat Benetar.

JC: Oh, I like that.

JH: And if you saw the movie "SLC PUNK" I moved to Utah, at the tail end of that. I knew a lot of the people there in that film, and your sound was coming in at the end, very vibrant as that was winding down, and this underlying vibe of where music was going at the time, or at least what we were listening to. So, you were this foundation to a new … culture that developed in Salt Lake. In fact, Salt Lake was one of the 3 cities in the 80s that had a "New Wave" station in the country. Those guys played your stuff in the clubs or whatever, we did mixtapes until I left in 1993. It was kind of the "I'm Gay Anthem" for several of my friends, one friend Chuck, makes me look like a quiet recluse introvert, that was his theme for sure, proud of it at age 15 even. So, it stood out for a lot of the "New Wave" culture in Salt Lake. My friend Chet Tapp is a "New Wave" radio DJ (started on that station, so he is old) who was in the thick of that story as it really happened and knew every character, good times.

Johnny Are You Queer - Josie Cotton
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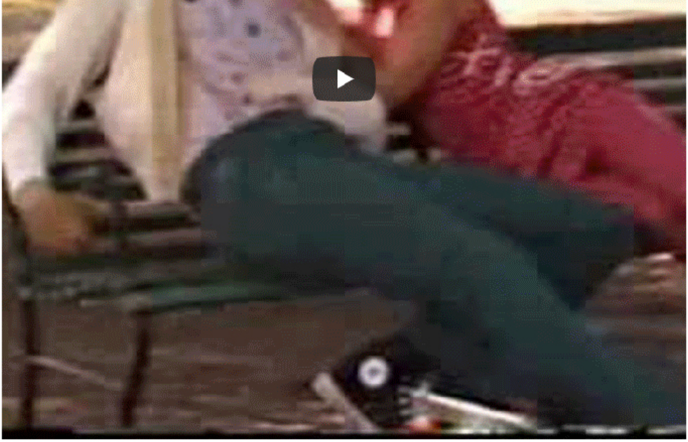

JC: Actually, I have a friend, a very talented musician who is gay, and he was from Salt Lake, and his parents sent him to one of those “Straight Camps” where they do that conversation therapy hoping to change you. And he swore this is true, and that the song that they played over and over that they wanted to scream, they would play “Johnny Are You Queer” so loud, it drove them to the edge of madness.

JH: And he is your friend despite all that, you must be a real charmer. (lol) Well, I’m in Utah, and an outspoken ally, I’m such a supportive ally to the queer community, that I even annoy gay people. I am big in the fringe Mormon community fighting that stuff. We finally got the state by way of the church to ban conversion therapy. But, that girl I mentioned that I was dating, her parents sent her to “Straight Camp” twice. As far as I know, it wasn’t as bad as the electroshock therapy that Lou Reed wrote about, but it was bad, she was there till she turned eighteen, then left.

JC: Wow, that’s terrible, how bad was it for her in the end? Didn’t convert her of course.

JH: Well, she is pretty messed up even these days, she is married, and zippy the Christian “Wonder Woman”. She is the weird flip flop personality overly Christian, warrior of the lord then crashes the other way for a while. That, and my dad was gay, he had been hiding it and put us through all kinds of hell trying to deal with it.

JC: Wow, yeah, my dad was gay too, I found out when I was nine, but then I didn’t know what sex was either, so I learned about them both at the same time.

JH: Yeah, Utah isn’t far behind that, we have this whacked-out sexual oppression culture, that frankly is terrifying. The dark underbelly that it has created could be a horror film. So, aside from the classics, “B-Girls” album, you mentioned some time back in another interview of more work that was sitting in a vault, do we have it all now?

JC. Yes, the “Invasion of the B-Girls” has just been re-released and updated, but there was one album “Everything Is Oh YEAH” that was in the vault for 30 years, and it just came out last year, 2019. But yeah, that is everything that I have, now its been released. I pretty much made them all on my own, in varying degrees of exposure to the light, no more hidden gems. But, except “Female Troubles” we put on the re-release of “B-Girls”. But we are working on and remastering for each re-release, we put a new song on each one.

JH: Actually yes, no I know that I LOVED the collection, I had even seen most of the movies and knew the songs. You are getting ahead of me, answering before I even ask the question.

JC: Well, then UN-ask me, and I'll answer in reverse.

“They say I'm insane…but I don't care”
Female Trouble
Josie Cotton

Photo credit: Piper Ferguson

JH: Ok, so, I had seen “Teddy Bear”, “Female Troubles” and a few minutes of “Black Klansman” but I still have to say, of all the film theme songs you picked, “Green Slime” is still one of my favorite horror films of all time. It was the first one I ever saw, I was about 5 or 6, and man, that scared the hell out of me. I remembered the floating octopus' screeching, and everyone getting electrocuted, man, for its day, it did the job. The only one that really missed

out cause they didn't do a theme song for it, I'm sure you would have for this album, but "Attack of The Mushroom People".

JC: THEY DIDN'T, that was one of the movies I wished they had a theme song for. There were so many films, and I had to pick the demented film with a great song, so many to chose from but yeah "Green Slime" was a winner.

JH: Well, I love old, campy, trashy, horror, sci-fi films. When I was in college, my roommates and I would go to this underground video-tech in Boston, and I said to the guy "I want the worst B-Movie you have" he said "Do you want, Cheerleader, Slasher, or Sci-Fi" and I said "YES". That was where I got "Teddy Bear" from and "Female Troubles". There are a few on this list that sound awful, I want to see them.

JC: Oh they are great, all of them. I had that too, there was a video store in town, he would direct me to these movies, and I watched them for an entire year, and I didn't return them. So I had the most late fees of anyone in his shop, and then I brought all the videos back and paid it in full. And he came out and hugged me and said: "You gave me hope in mankind again, cause no one ever comes back after this long".

JH: Ok, important question, what is your favorite bad B-movie of all time, with or without a soundtrack?

JC: As far as titles go, one of them was "The Mummy versus the Aztec Wrestling Women". Then there was actually one called "Invasion of the Bee Girls" and it was so great, it was too bad they didn't have a theme song for it. It was about these sexy female scientists, who were actually bees, and they had sex with men for their blood.

JH: I'm not gonna lie, that sounds awesome.

JC: I had this idea of going back and writing theme songs for some of these movies, and that didn't have one. So my tribute to that movie was an album "B-girls", and in movies like in "Mummy versus the Aztec Women" there were all these real bad ass females in them, and it was all vintage from the '60s. And it wasn't like in the '30s and '40s, where you had all these strong women like Joan Crawford, and Betty Davis, in the '60s and '70s all the strong women were in B-movies.

JH: Well, yeah, the only real big name in that type of film in the 60s like that, was Jane Fonda in Barbarella right? Other back stories about the songs?

JC: Well, with "Black Klansman", no one had ever done this, and I was in a race against time with the idea and was turned down by Rhino Records because it was too quirky, but that was when Rhino is thriving off "quirky", but I thought someone was going to get the idea of a compilation of B-movie theme songs. And finally, we put it out, and all the labels were surprised at the idea. So we had to go and track down the authors of the songs some of who were no longer with us, and Black Klansman was the hardest because no one would ever admit to having written it.

JH: Well, "Female Trouble" stood out just enough to be probably the most enjoyable songs on

there. And I spent most of the 90s living in Germany, The Netherlands, and France. My time was in Rotterdam, but I know Amsterdam well, and for being banned in Amsterdam, that's quite a task.

JC: That's a story, I hope you write a book about that. But YES, I want "Banned in Amsterdam" on my headstone.

Photo credit: Piper Ferguson

JH: Oh yeah, I'm writing one, a million stories, and I did them all sober too. BUT, "Pussycat

Babylon", In Hannover Germany I heard this band called "Fury In The Slaughterhouse", do you know them?

JC: No, but I like the name.

JH: Well, they did a song I guess it was a rights issue, but they did a song with just a few verses from the theme song, "Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!". The referenced the film and sang a few lines from the song, but hearing that one, made me go see the movie. And here you are doing "Faster Pussycat", closer to the movie, so its coming full circle, wow, you have contributed so much to my misspent youth I tell ya.

JC: Well, that song, wow, it had so many chords, it was such a difficult song, I was lucky to have some great musicians recording that with me because it was a very complex piece. And it was the same for "Beyond The Valley of The Dolls", they were saying "Who are these people who wrote this stuff" cause it was the same songwriters for both films.

He Could Be The One Josie Cotton
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JH: That's another one actually, I saw "Valley of the Dolls" because of the old Generation X, you

remember them, Billy Idol's band in the '70s, their song "Into The Valley of the Dolls". So, I'm getting a lot of titles for these movies from my research into these bands' songs. So talking to you like this is pretty cathartic. You did great with this, I love the record, I hope the re-release goes well for you. You are not just a novelty act, and you are a real musician. So, do you know T.S.O.L. that punk act?

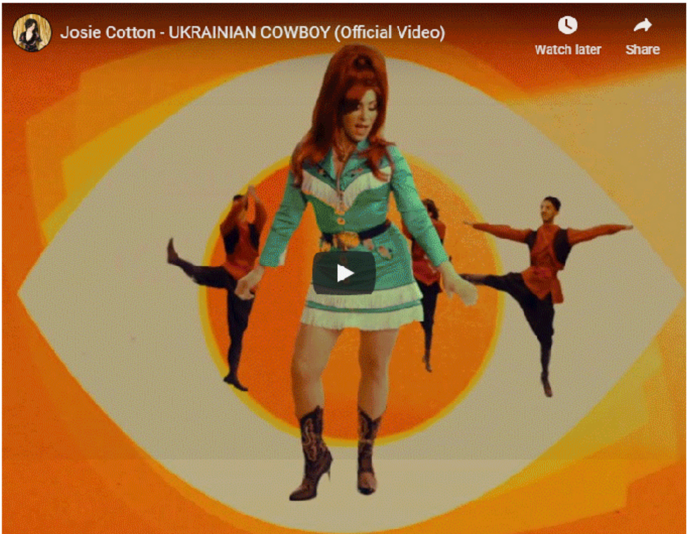
JC: Actually, I do know them, I own a studio with my partner and those guys record in our studio.

JH: WOW, so you know "Uncle Jack" (Grisham) then? T.S.O.L. and "The Damned" were those punk acts doing great horror film records. So, I went through high school your music, The Damned, and T.S.O.L. * (Jack Grisham was on his way to becoming a stand-up comedian and got sidelined into singing in the best west coast punk band).

JC: Absolutely. I am on a project with them, can't say much about it right now, but it's going to be a great one. But, I call Uncle Jack "The Marlon Brando" of Punk Rock.

JH: Well, at the same time in high school, I got into "Leningrad Cowboys", they are a crazy Finnish Punk act, that plays The Rolling Stones, and The Turtles "Happy Together" with a Red Army Chorus. And yet another reference to your music, your song "Ukrainian Cowboy", I went into a shop looking for them, and they gave me your single of that. I knew your music but hadn't heard that one until they handed it to me. I loved it.

JC: I have to check them out, that song was one of those that I thought I had gone crazy and couldn't show it to anyone, then we did it. It was so hard not to laugh in that video. But I do have to look at those guys.



JH: Ok, can I ask, because of you being respected in the community, and you got to work with John Waters, I know he wrote that piece for your linear notes, but just tell me about him if you could.

JC: I have all the love and respect in the world for John Waters and his work. So when I originally sent him Invasion Of The B-Girls before its release, he told me he was waiting on a record of Divine songs he had been working on. Since the song had never been covered before I was happy to wait and respect his wishes. Years passed and that record never came to fruition and in the meantime, the Melvins also covered the song so I figured it was time to unleash my version of it onto the world as a bonus track on the re-release of my Invasion record. It's an ode to the King of Filth himself… a little bit campy and a little bit dangerous. He can do no wrong in my book. I thanked him for writing the song, it was inspiring, I felt empowered when I was performing it live.

Photo credit: Piper Ferguson (notice all the Grace Jones faces)

JH: So how much support have you gotten from the LGBTQ from the community in all this time?

JC: Oh, I have had a lot of great support from the community, people identify with so many of my songs, but so many gay men have told me personally that song told them it was okay to be gay, many were able to accept that. What I have been told by so many people that it was instrumental in them coming to understand that about themselves. It was the religious right that got it wrong, all the televangelists were all up in arms. BUT, there was one awesome story to it all, there was this televangelist couple, and he turned out to be gay in the end it was a crazy scandal. And their son was super anti-gay. And one time someone was holding the 12″ single on the screen saying "There is NO JOSIE COTTON, this is a man trying to convert men to being gay", and they actually played it half speed, so I sounded like Brian Wilson. It was becoming for me to know that I didn't exist. That and the failed conversion camps, it has been great for the community. I have played pride in several cities over the years.

JH: So for the young people in the young people in the community, do you still have a lot going with them, do you connect to them still?

JC: Actually, I will be gone for years, then I come back, play a show, and I have twenty-somethings young gay hipsters all knowing me, and my music, I love them, even now they have been great to me.

JH: So what would you say to the young gay kid, who is afraid, unable to come out, who is in that vulnerable state, maybe even suicidal?

JC: What I would say to a young gay person contemplating suicide. I think I would tell them to not let the bad people win…Not ever!!

JH: Well, thank you, Josie, this is the most unprofessional interview I have ever done, and one of the most enjoyable.

Josie's Homepage – https://josiecottonmusic.com

YouTube – https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-E3vD-ZKY8Zu8ExMXpZ9Fw

Instagram – https://www.instagram.com/josiecottonofficial/

Facebook – https://www.facebook.com/josie.cotton.10

* In the time between the interview and publishing, it was announced that Josie and a collection of Punk Acts got together on a project called "Flatten the Curve". 31 musicians, raising awareness for Covid-19, and social distancing.