

Josie Cotton

GREGORY NICOLL on June 16, 2020 at 5:41 pm

QUEEN “B” JOSIE COTTON GOES TO THE DRIVE-IN

“My whole life I’ve been fixated on science-fiction,” announces singer Josie Cotton, speaking by phone from her home in Silver Lake, California.

It’s an unexpected admission from a pop singer best known for reviving the sweet sound of ’60s girl groups on her 1982 Elektra LP *Convertible Music*, and for her participation in the 1983 rock-romance movie *Valley Girl*, and also for her oddly controversial hit “Johnny Are You Queer?” which was banned in Amsterdam. But Cotton’s latest major project is *Invasion of the B-Girls*, an album of movie songs paying homage to Godzilla and Mothra, and which also bows knowingly to much more edgy late-night film fare. Cult directors John Waters and Russ Meyer both threatened legal action to block its release, which causes her to observe, “I don’t know what’s going to be written on my tombstone, but ‘Banned in Amsterdam’ and ‘Almost Sued by John Waters and Russ Meyer’ is a life well-lived, don’t you think?”

Cotton recalls that *Invasion of the B-Girls* “came about from me having the idea of doing a whole record of theme songs from all the movies I’ve loved – science fiction, monsters, flying saucers, and hellcat motorcycle girls.” As it happens, many of the most interesting examples of such movies did not have songs in them, and assembling enough tracks for a full album entailed a lengthy quest.

“The research of watching so many movies was the funnest project in the world, so many days and nights spent watching truly horrible movies. Some of them were, in the perfect way, what we call quote-unquote ‘bad,’ which I truly love. I became friends with this fellow at the video store,” she recalls, “because I had the highest late charges of anyone ever, and I was also the only one who ever came back after, like, two years, when they just give up and stop sending bills. I came back with all the movies, and I paid my late fees. He said, ‘You’ve given me hope for humanity!’”

Among the material Cotton eventually recorded were songs lifted from *Ghidrah the Three-Headed Monster* (1964), *The Green Slime* (1968), and *The Return of Godzilla* (1984). The *Ghidrah* song presented a special challenge as it required her to sing in Japanese.

“I didn’t know if I had done a very good job,” she admits, “but just last week a friend of mine who’s a DJ in Tokyo – he’s half American and half Japanese – he told me my Japanese accent was excellent. He’s married to a Japanese woman and said I must have taken lessons. But no, I had the song translated into English, although I did not know the meaning of any particular words, just the general meaning of each line. I wrote it out phonetically – just what the sound was. I knew the emotion of the song, so I just read from my own very strange hieroglyphics of Imitation Japanese. He said I must have sung it a hundred times to get that exact pronunciation, but I told him no, and nobody had been coaching me. It was so wonderful to hear that I hadn’t shamed myself before the nation of Japan.”

Cotton also cut “Get Off the Road” from *She-Devils on Wheels* (1968), a movie about female bikers which had marked an unusual departure for splatter/horror filmmaker Herschel Gordon Lewis. The song was famously covered by The Cramps, although Cotton was unaware of their recording until after her own was completed. “Theirs is very atmospheric and cool,” she notes, “but mine is total trashy surf.”

When asked which song was the most fun to record, Cotton delivers another surprise. She points to the title track from the 1966 racial melodrama *Black Klansman*, a song written from the perspective of an African-American man whose daughter has been murdered by the KKK. “I had to become a whole other human being,” she explains. “I mean I could already relate to biker chicks who kill men, I get that, and to a Japanese Princess singing to Mothra, I can understand that, but this person who sang ‘Black Klansman,’ it was a new trip on a long journey to somewhere else.

“If it had been at all racist, I’d have run away from that song, but I knew it was actually a true story and that the director was a civil rights guy, and it was all above board. But it was a horrible movie. Definitely on the B-movie side. It’s hilarious that no one notices the guy was black when he showed up at the KKK rally. My criteria for this record was that it had to be kind of a disturbing or odd movie on some level. It couldn’t be just a surf movie. But the song had to be catchy. I loved singing that song! It was very ’60s, with a little organ, and whatever place it was that the song goes to, I loved going there. You felt like you were someone very loyal and true to their ideals who was singing that.”

Arguably the best-known number on *Invasion of the B-Girls* is the title tune from Russ Meyer’s much-revered 1966 girl-gang movie *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* Cotton is quick to point out that the film is included in the Museum of Modern Art’s collection (“To me, that’s a B-movie that’s a work of art!”) but re-creating the film’s song – as well as the gentle, lilting title track from Meyer’s *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) – was doubly difficult. The material itself was unexpectedly complicated to record, and Meyer himself raised a roadblock.

“Musically, they sound like straight-ahead pop songs,” says Cotton, “One’s a ballad and one’s more high-tempo, but when I brought in musicians to record these, they would look at me like I was kidding because there were so many chords. It was so musical, with such a high level of musicality in the arrangements and chord progressions. Some of my really amazing musician friends were going, ‘Please wait and let me have a second, this is the hardest thing I’ve ever done,’ on both of those songs!”

Cotton encountered more troublesome pushback from director Meyer. Notoriously protective of his own material, the filmmaker had also been releasing his soundtracks through his own private record label, and he bristled at the idea of Cotton covering not one – but two – of “his” songs.

“I had called Russ Meyer and told him about the album, and I asked for his blessing,” Cotton recalls, “but he said, ‘You’re gonna be sued until the end of time if you do that.’ I said, ‘But I’m just a singer and love your movies, blah blah blah,’ and he said, ‘Don’t do it!’ He was kind of laughing. He said, ‘You don’t want to be tied up in court, and you’ll never release it.’ He was pretty nice about it, but I said, ‘I’m still doing it.’”

Equally cordial but ultimately much more persuasive resistance to *Invasion of the B-Girls* came from filmmaker John Waters, who extensively delayed Cotton’s album because she had intended to grace it with her version of the title track from his 1974 opus *Female Trouble*. Waters had placed Cotton’s signature hit “Johnny Are You Queer?” on his own 2007 compilation record *A Date with John Waters* but he was planning a follow-up album of songs sung by Divine (the flamboyant drag queen who frequently starred in his films), and he did not want Cotton’s version of “Female Trouble” released.

“John Waters told me that a lot of drag queens had tried to record his songs, and he’d sued them and was totally within his rights to,” remembers Cotton. “Finally, I wrote me this lovely letter that said, ‘I know you’re not going to like me anymore, but I just can’t allow this to happen.’ I wrote him back and told him, ‘I could never *not* love you, John Waters, and you’re such an inspiration to me, and thank you for writing that song ‘Female Trouble’ because it’s empowered me as a female when I perform it, it’s changed how I even think about being female, and I’m okay with this then.’ He wrote me back and said that was the sweetest thing he’d ever heard, and he asked me to allow him to write the liner notes. It was because I had been gracious with him, and he appreciated that. But he did threaten to sue me.”

Invasion of the B-Girls was eventually given an “obscenely limited quantity” release in 2007 on Scruffy Records – without “Female Trouble.” Casting about for a replacement song to round out the record, Cotton had come across the bizarre 1966 movie *Who Killed Teddy Bear?*, about a female DJ stalked by a sex-crazed fan. “What’s funny is, it’s a really high budget movie,” Cotton observes, “but no one really saw it. Sal Mineo was in it – he was nominated for an Oscar for *Rebel Without a Cause* – and Juliet Prowse, she was amazing – an A-list cast and a pretty funny premise.”

The film’s haunting title track proved ideal for *B-Girls*. “That was definitely the best-recorded song we did for the record,” she declares. “Paul Roessler did those insane Nino Rota keyboard things. I almost did an equally insane video for it.”

The initial release of *B-Girls* was so under-the-radar that, as Cotton observes, “it didn’t get heard much,” but the year 2020 finds her in a fortunate position to rectify that. “I have a really great crew around me now and my own record company, Kitten Robot. It’s the first time I think I ever had a group of people who had my best interests at heart and were actually sane and also *competent* – a strange combo I’d never heard of before.”

So the time came to revisit *B-Girls*. “It’s all from classic movies, and the songs are classics, so I have no shame about re-releasing it. We also re-did all the artwork and remastered it, and I added on ‘Female Trouble!’ That’s what we’re gonna do on every album we re-release, try to put on one extra song to make it a little different and special.”

The much-delayed “Female Trouble,” which features the Tower of Power Horns and showcases a searing guitar break by legendary punk rock producer Geza X, is a revelation. It stands in dramatic counterpoint to the original version Divine sang for the movie. “I thought it belonged to the drag queens until I sang it,” Cotton announces. “And then I went no, no, no, it doesn’t just belong to them, it’s for women, it’s for girls. Especially girls who are fat and fucked up.

“I’ve been doing it live. It changes how you perceive the song, as a female doing it live. It’s the most empowering thing to sing that song. As somebody who was an outcast and not very popular, and just kind of a weird Wednesday-from-The-Addams-Family little girl, to sing that song, it’s a very powerful song: I’m insane, I’m a murderer, I’m crazy, I’m gonna go to jail, I’m in a straitjacket, but I’m a female, here I am, take it or leave it.”

The reborn *B-Girls* album also sequences the songs in a different order, “Which strangely made a huge difference,” Cotton notes. The record now concludes with “Goodbye Godzilla,” which the singer proudly points out includes the real Godzilla roar sound effect, officially licensed from Toho Productions. “It’s always nice to end with a ‘Goodbye,’” she laughs, “particularly to a large reptile that you’re in love with, and who’s stomping over Tokyo as he leaves.”

In addition to reworking the entire *B-Girls* album, Cotton recently found herself engrossed in the history of spies in Europe. The result was a delightful single, the playful “Ukrainian Cowboy” b/w the considerably darker “Cold War Spy.”

“I love spies!” she declares. “I was really trying to do that era in the 1960s on the B-side, what it was like to be in Berlin and to be a double agent. It was hard to write. I had such huge respect for the heroism. It was Orwellian and horrifying, and yet it was probably pretty romantic. I was going for a James Bond-meets-Stalin feel. I’d always been interested in the Stasi – the East German secret police – but I didn’t really understand just how insane it was over there. I was listening to these instructional tapes of the Stasi telling the people under them to remove the human soul. That recording is on the song, at the very beginning of the track. It’s chilling. They have a hundred miles of records underground, from where they spied on their own people.”

Cotton is no stranger to the spy music sub-genre, having famously sung “Secret Agent Man” while backed by the classic lineup of The Ventures, an ’80s-era performance which now lives forever on YouTube. “I didn’t even get to rehearse that!” She laughs. “And all of a sudden they’re filming it live and I wish I could go back and change a couple of moments in my singing, but I thought it came off pretty cute. I still do that song live, and I sing it much better now. I’ve been thinking of putting it on my next record. I can control how I sound on a record.”

Another of Cotton’s recent projects was resurrecting her “lost” third album, *Everything is Oh Yeah*, which had originally been intended as the follow-up to *Convertible Music* (1982) and *From the Hip* (1984) on Elektra Records. “I was already dropped by Elektra when I recorded it,” Cotton recalls. “My favorite new phrase I’ve come up with is ‘to be removed from their roster.’ Which is another way of saying you got dropped from the label. That would have been the third record, but I just started recording it anyway, and then everyone started swirling around, my old manager came back, and it all made me nervous because I’d had such an uncomfortable experience in the music business, after doing such a controversial song. So the record got put aside for a variety of reasons.”

One of the “reasons” which eroded Cotton’s confidence in the third LP was getting caught in the middle of an argument between music business impresario Malcolm McLaren and Stray Cats guitarist Brian Setzer. “My producer was friends with both of them, separately, and they would come into the studio when we were recording *Everything is Oh Yeah*. They weren’t friends, Malcolm and Brian, but one day they did happen to come in at the same time. It was a clash of musical philosophies, and it all was centered around my record being obsolete, as Malcolm was indicating, since beat music and anything with rhythm was taking over. He told me to erase it and start over. Him and Brian got into kind of a heated exchange over it because Brian believed – and was also correct – that rock and roll is not gonna die, and the two styles were gonna have an unholy alliance going forward. One would not eliminate the other. Both dinosaurs would live on.

“But it froze me in my tracks. I sensed that they were both right. That was just an odd moment in my career. It stopped my brain, actually. That was one of the reasons I just said okay, it might be obsolete and it might not – so many feelings – and I just put it away.”

But where, exactly, was “away”?

“It got lost. The tapes – these giant 2-inch tapes – had been stored in California, of course, and there had been several things that might have happened. They were around during a landslide, an earthquake, a flood, a fire in Malibu, and I didn’t know where they were.






“Then when I signed with a new publishing company, they were trying to get my music into the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, which is set in the ’80s. I knew my music pretty much wouldn’t fit because *Stranger Things* is more all about the synthesizer sound of ’80s music and the kinda spooky songs, and I was more of a girl-group-rockabilly-surf artist. But the publisher said I had to find the tapes. They were in my producer’s dusty old garage, up in the rafters, and amazingly they were immaculate. There was no damage! We had to bake them for two days, which is standard procedure for old tapes. They were 30 years old but were immaculate.”

The recordings proved to be a gem worth excavating. *Oh Yeah*’s album-opening title track, followed by the exultant Jackie DeShannon-ish “The Way You Rock” will spread a smile on the mug of anyone who loved 1982’s “He Could Be the One.” An exceptionally catchy guitar riff propels “Sometimes Girls,” Cotton conjures a Dolly Parton-ish swagger on “Love’s Working,” and there’s also a very pleasant romp through The Beatles’ classic “The Night Before.” It all wraps up with a jaunty love-song of The Tremeloes’ 1967 hit “Here Comes My Baby,” the only track Cotton subjected to any tweaking. “We changed the ’80s synthesizer, replaced it with real mariachi band horns. I insisted we get real horns on there!

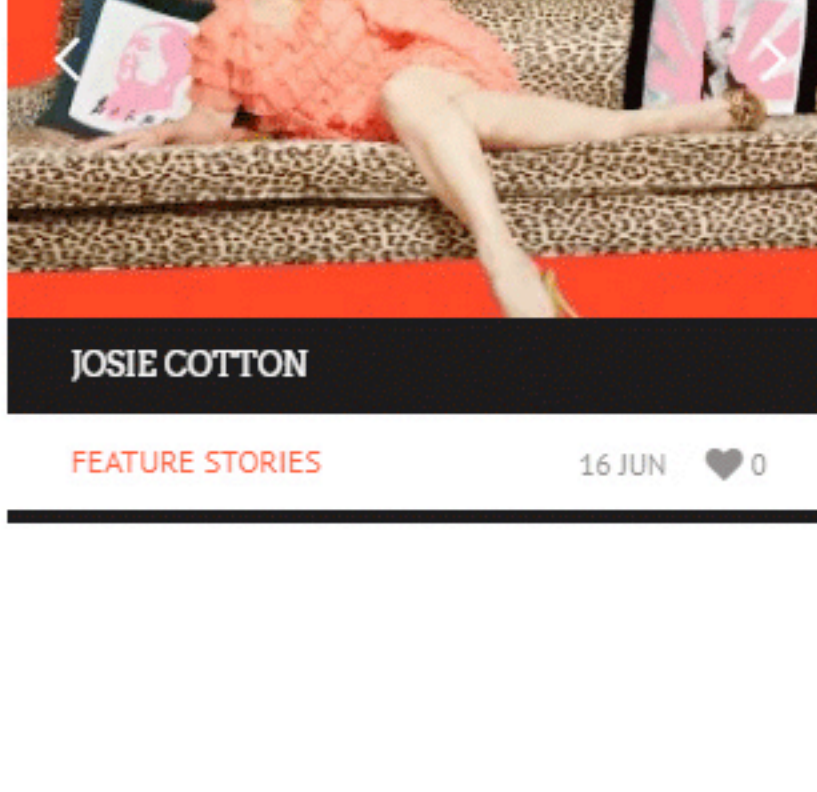
“I still wasn’t sure if I wanted to put *Oh Yeah* out because it came from a really weird time in my life, but then I heard a few of the songs and was like, I *have* to put this out. This is the album my fans would have liked to have heard at the time. It’s been wonderful to have something finished after putting so much love and work into it. The only thing that hadn’t been done was the songs weren’t mixed. So we mixed it, and were so tempted to modernize it. Should we make the drums sound current and not so ’80s? Should we take a little more of the echo off?

“We decided just to let it be,” she concludes, “let it ride, from that era, something from a time warp. People have thanked me for letting them go back in time with it, but to experience something brand new.”

Photo by Piper Ferguson.

POPULAR		
TODAY	WEEK	MONTH ALL
	JOSIE COTTON	1
	LADY ANTEBELLUM KNEELS IN SUBMISSION, GETS SHAT UPON	2
	ERSTWHILE ATLANTA DRUMMER MASON BRAZELLE GONE AT 53	3
	SAMANTHA FISH	4
	ATLANTA RESTAURATEURS BEHIND UPCOMING POLITICAL DRAMA	5

LATEST ARTICLES



JOSIE COTTON

FEATURE STORIES 16 JUN ♥ 0