

# GRAB JOSIE

## Much more than Johnny's girl: An interview with Josie Cotton

By Gregg Shapiro

In terms of music and movies, 1982 was an unexpectedly significant year in queer culture. The movies *Making Love*, *Personal Best*, and *Victor/Victoria* were released in theaters. The UK band *Culture Club*, led by the original gender-bender *Boy George*, burst onto the scene and topped the charts, even winning a Best New Artist Grammy Award in the process. That same year, a singer named Josie Cotton released her debut album *Convertible Music*, containing the campy new wave single "Johnny, Are You Queer?" (written by Bobby and Larson Paine). Depending on where you lived, it was either a hit or just bubbling under. One thing's for certain, it helped to put Cotton on the radar of a lot of LGBTQ+ folks, especially those with a good sense of humor. Of course, the fiber of Cotton's talent is greater than that. Over the course of her career, she released six more albums, had songs featured on movie soundtracks, and founded her own record label. As a record mogul, she's been able to reissue previous albums, including *Pussycat Babylon* on vinyl, as well as see to the long-awaited CD debut of *Convertible Music*. Cotton, who is embarking on an autumn 2021 concert tour was gracious enough to make time for an interview before hitting the road.

**Gregg Shapiro:** Josie, 2022 marks the 40th anniversary of the release of your debut album *Convertible Music*, which has been rereleased in an expanded edition on colored vinyl as well as on CD by Bomp! and your own Kitten Robot Records. Do you have anything special in the works to mark the occasion?

**Josie Cotton:** I didn't even realize that was the case. [Laughs] I didn't know there was an anniversary coming, so thank you! I don't have plans at this moment, but it sounds like I should start making them right now [laughs].

**GS:** Did you have gay friends at the

time that "Johnny, Are You Queer?" the hit single from *Convertible Music*, was released and, if so, were you concerned about how they would react to the song?

**JC:** I grew up with a whole gay parade of friends of my mom's. She was very progressive, at the time, in Dallas, Texas. She had gay weddings in her house. Her best friends were gay. I grew up in a ballet studio [laughs] with a lot of male dancers who swung that way. And my father turned out to be gay. I'm immersed in it.

**GS:** Do you recall the way your friends and family reacted to the song?

**JC:** My friends loved it. Everyone in California was pretty elated over the fact that they had a song that they thought of as their own, which was lovely. The only people who were confused and angry [laughs], as they usually are, was the religious right, who were protesting at KROQ where I think "Johnny..." was number two (in airplay popularity). They thought I was a gay man trying to convert people to homosexuality [laughs].

Because I have an odd sense of humor, I would watch some of these crazy shows. They were playing "Johnny, Are You Queer?" at half-speed. (Televangelists) Jan and Paul Crouch, who had a whole worldwide TV network,



said I wasn't real. I remember thinking, "God, I sound just like Brian Wilson," when they played it at half speed. (Sings "Johnny, are you queer, boy" very slowly.) [Laughs] they were crying and screaming on TV. I was thinking, "No, no, we didn't mean that! You're missing the whole idea of this." It was just strange. As you probably know, there was some reaction on the East Coast that was not as friendly as it was on the West Coast for some reason. It's always been kind of a mystery to me how I was banned in Amsterdam, which I thought was kind of a wonderful moment in my life [laughs]. That's something I can be proud of, I suppose, if I choose to be. A lot of younger friends didn't know there was an issue with that word. They took it in the spirit that it was written, which I think was very innocent. It was more like a phenomenon that was happening. In the androgynous new wave days, girls were falling for boys, and you didn't know quite what was going on. Also, I considered it an acting job on my part,