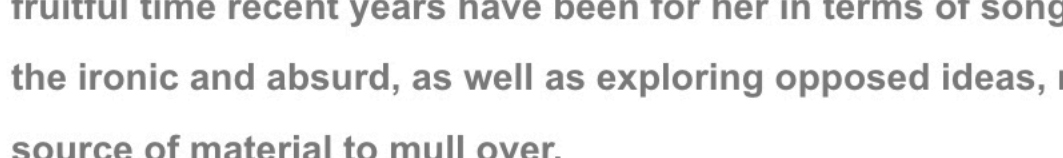


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Josie Cotton on Her Unapologetic and Witchy 'Day of the Gun' (INTERVIEW)

By Hannah Means-Shannon  No Comments



Josie Cotton recently released her new album five years in the making, *Day of the Gun*, via her own label **Kitten Robot Records**, co-produced by Paul Roessler. Singles and videos from the album have been making their way into the world for the past couple of years, teasing Cotton's trajectory and densely woven ideas, but the album took some time to arrive not least because of founding and launching Kitten Robot as well as gathering and rereleasing her previous albums via her own label. Even in the midst of wearing new more self-determined hats like video director, Cotton reveals what a fruitful time recent years have been for her in terms of songwriting. Given that she gravitates towards the ironic and absurd, as well as exploring opposed ideas, modern life has been a pretty ceaseless source of material to mull over.

The fact that Cotton can take all this seeming chaos of modernity and compress it into a context that's both musically and lyrically interesting and thought-provoking is out in full force on *Day of the Gun*. From songs that mix social and historical eras with sad love songs like "Ukrainian Cowboy" to songs that lay out her entire world view through the lens of a character's life story like "Day of the Gun", to her love letter to Ennio Morricone's work in horror like "Painting in Blood", Cotton delivers entertaining soundscapes and thought-provoking ideas. I spoke with Josie Cotton about launching Kitten Robot Records, to what extent she draws from the real world when songwriting, and the release that creative work brought her when completing *Day of the Gun*.

Hannah Means-Shannon: I've been following the releases from Kitten Robot Records and been very interested by them. It's great to talk to you as the mind behind the madness.

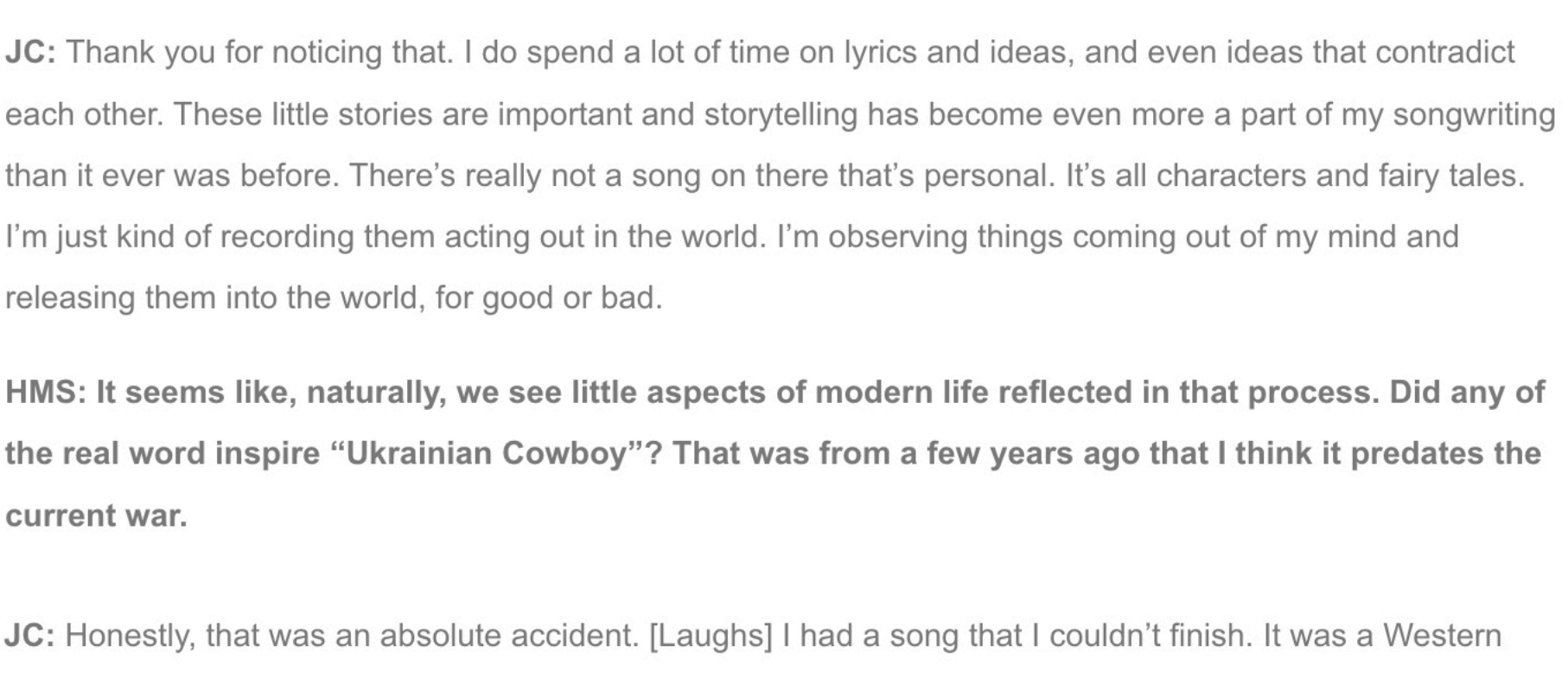
Josie Cotton: Well, I used to make records, and I'd just put them out. And no one would hear them! I didn't know what I was doing in terms of how to release things. I thought the fairies would fly them up to a big DJ in the sky or something. So doing Kitten Robot Records felt great because my music finally got a send-off, the best it's ever had. During all that time, I was recording, and putting out singles along the way, working with different artists. That's part of why it took five years for this album.

HMS: When I look at the past few years, it's a substantial amount of work that you've managed to put out into the world, including your own rereleases. It's a lot of hats to wear, I'm sure.

JC: It's so many hats! Now that I'm making videos, too, I'm so involved in everything. It's maddening to try to be the artist, writing the treatments, the styling of them. I'm like the bad guest who won't go away. I feel like if I take my eye off the ball, things go off track, so I'm so careful now about the details. I've becoming very

HMS: You may have your high standards, but you also have a great track record of actually getting your work out into the world. That letting go is important.

JC: Yes, that's the differential with someone who can see reality, I guess. I do try to see reality. But sometimes reality can be bent, and I'm often trying to bend it in my way.



HMS: Listening to the songs on *Day of the Gun*, none of them seem like a simple road taken. All of them have more than necessary to them that adds to their richness. There are all kinds of layers of ideas. I'm glad being so busy didn't cause you to be less expansive.

JC: Thank you for noticing that. I do spend a lot of time on lyrics and ideas, and even ideas that contradict each other. These little stories are important and storytelling has become even more a part of my songwriting than it ever was before. There's really not a song on there that's personal. It's all characters and fairy tales. I'm just kind of recording them acting out in the world. I'm observing things coming out of my mind and releasing them into the world, for good or bad.

HMS: It seems like, naturally, we see little aspects of modern life reflected in that process. Did any of the real word inspire "Ukrainian Cowboy"? That was from a few years ago that I think it predates the current war.

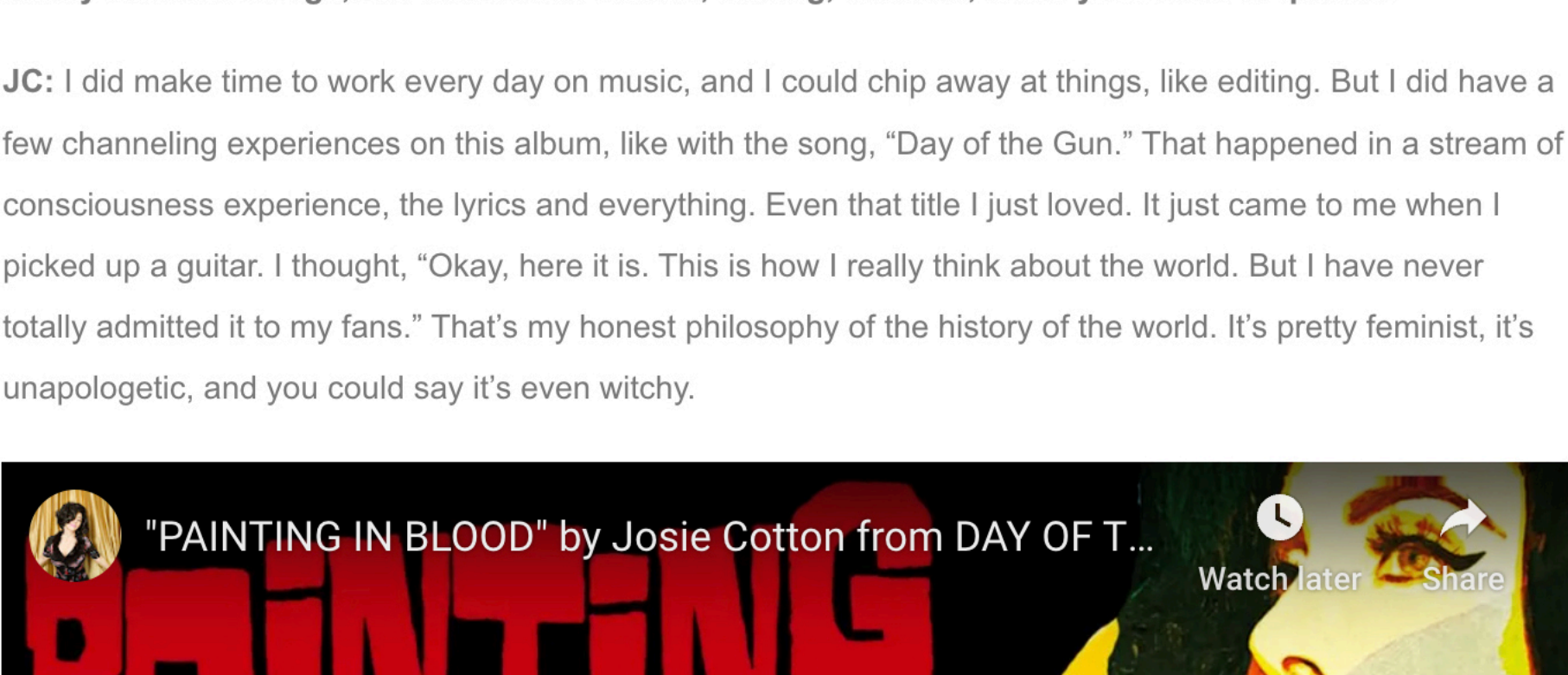
JC: Honestly, that was an absolute accident. [Laughs] I had a song that I couldn't finish. It was a Western song and it was sad. I had a chorus and parts of verses. It was called "There's a Hole in My Soul as Big as Texas." Since I'm from Texas. Over years, I couldn't finish it. But one night, when we had started recording the album, I had the news on, which was my constant companion during the pandemic. They were talking about Russia. I was writing, "There's a hole in my soul the size of...", and the news said "Russia" right where I would've said "Texas." Russia's much bigger than Texas, so I thought it was a whole other angle.

I'd also been watching all these documentaries about World War I and Stalin. I was just obsessed with that whole period of time. In these new documentaries, you can see a lot of footage and interviews. It's more cinematic than it used to be. I knew when that title came up that I had a lot of material about Russia. Part of my brain was full of all those images. It was still a sad song, but now I could bring all these images in. I went to Paul [Roessler] and said, "I have had this song for decades. I have a new line for it." He immediately started putting all these Russian instruments into it. I didn't want it to be a joke song, since it's a sad song. But I loved that music. One of my step fathers was from Eastern Europe and used to play music from that part of the world. It all reminded me of my childhood. But I still didn't have a song title. My gun-fight stuff was still there from the Texas part of it.

Paul was saying that I needed to call it something, so off the top of my head, I made the joke, "Ukrainian Cowboy." I thought it was hilarious. Ukraine was in the news because of Trump. I came to realize that there are really Ukrainian cowboys with their own music. I thought I should change the title at that point, but everyone said, "You can't change it now!" So that stuck. I didn't want to sound opportunistic.

HMS: I didn't think of it that way. Both the song and the video dramatize a relationship conflict in a really intricate way. It's not like it has a political message.

JC: Thank you. I love the video. People have commented on its campiness, but they aren't listening to the song, which is really sad. The verses are heart-breaking but the music sounds upbeat because it's a Russian Polka song, in a way. I love juxtaposition and saying something that means something to me and having some humor come through. I avoid corniness at all costs. I will house things in humor and plays on words. And sometimes I include things that I know no one in the world will notice, but they make me smile. And that song is full of them.



HMS: I feel like your songs and videos for this album present things for the audience to experience or think about in a surprising way.

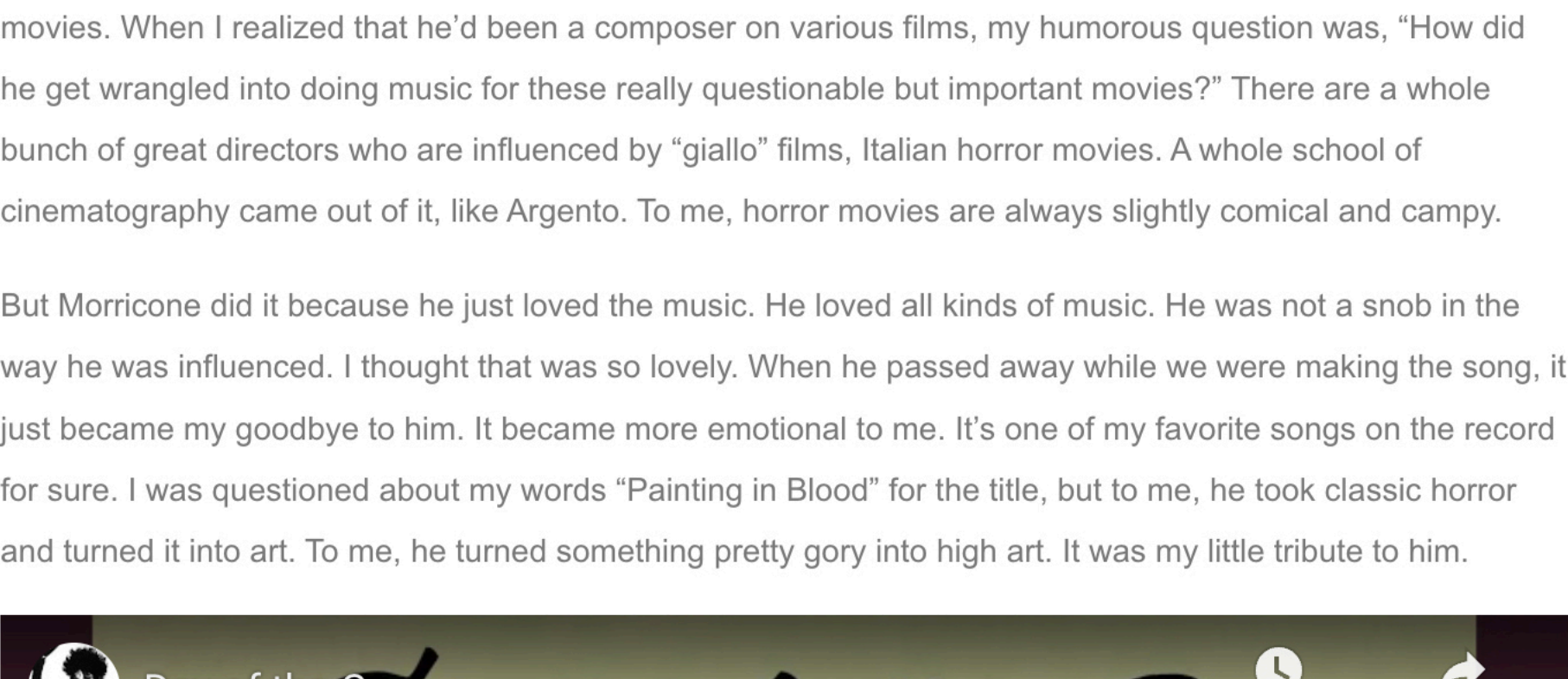
JC: If you have a good sense of irony, you can endure a lot. And a good sense of the absurd. I try to use that as my guiding star a lot of the time, appreciating things that are absurd and loving it.

HMS: You're reminding me of the video for "Disco Ball" that is so incredibly detailed with all these quick cuts between totally different stories, scenes, and costumes. That has its absurd aspects, but at the same time, I feel like there's some psychological truth in there.

JC: Yes, and people notice different things about that song and video. Some of them I had never even thought of! I've learned not to try to explain my songs to people because it can ruin it for them. Sometimes the not fun thing. I love anything that can shut off my reactive mind. I think that's where profound things can come through, when the brain has to stop. When the constant chatter stops, I love that feeling. I think that's when art can happen more easily, when you can get your mind to shut up! [Laughs]

HMS: It seems like a widespread truth that creative breakthroughs often happen when you're doing totally different things, like household chores, driving, etcetera, when your mind is quieter.

JC: I did make time to work every day on music, and I could chip away at things, like editing. But I did have a few channeling experiences on this album, like with the song, "Day of the Gun." That happened in a stream of consciousness experience, the lyrics and everything. Even that title I just loved. It just came to me when I picked up a guitar. I thought, "Okay, here it is. This is how I really think about the world. But I have never totally admitted it to my fans." That's my honest philosophy of the history of the world. It's pretty feminist, it's unapologetic, and you could say it's even witchy.



HMS: I really love that song. I listened to it over and over. I love how everything comes together. Did you feel better, in a way, having written it? Did it crystalize your feelings for you?

JC: I did! I have always known those things and have a belief system that incorporates all of that, but it was a huge relief when I started off, saying "Bad luck with men, more than a few..." I had just never been so honest. It really felt great to own it. The whole religion aspect felt unbelievably uplifting for me, just to say it in a song. I could distract people enough with the song that they might not hear those lyrics. But I think meanings seep through, even if they aren't consciously aware of it. I've just been on a different path for so long that I don't often talk about my radical feminist ideas.

Me being a political person is out of my wheelhouse, but I can write songs like that where some people are going to hear it and get it. Some will just say, "What a fun rock song!" Some who get it in the wrong way might get upset. I'm not saying which religion got it all wrong. I'm just saying all of them! They all jump off from their original intent and ends up messing around with what they were all about to begin with. I was a little nervous about that song, honestly. Someone asked me for a one sentence description of that song and the one that I thought might break through to a general understanding was "It's Rocky, set in the Old West, with a female anti-hero." There's a battle going on and you could relate it to a Spaghetti Western. I didn't want to call her a heroine because she's a broken character and I totally identify with that, too. She's so honest that she'd probably be burned at the stake in some other time.

HMS: Unfortunately, there's a little bit of tragedy in there with "Painting in Blood", with the passing of Ennio Morricone, but that makes it fit in with the other songs on the album even more. The song really evokes his worlds. That's a tribute to something you really love, right?

JC: Yes, I've always loved science fiction, and horror, and B-movies. I was in awe of Morricone from various movies. When I realized that he'd been a composer on various films, my humorous question was, "How did he get wrangled into doing music for these really questionable but important movies?" There are a whole bunch of great directors who are influenced by "giallo" films, Italian horror movies. A whole school of cinematography came out of it, like Argento. To me, horror movies are always slightly comical and campy.

But Morricone did it because he just loved the music. He loved all kinds of music. He was not a snob in the way he was influenced. I thought that was so lovely. When he passed away while we were making the song, it just became my goodbye to him. It became more emotional to me. It's one of my favorite songs on the record for sure. I was questioned about my words "Painting in Blood" for the title, but to me, he took classic horror and turned it into art. To me, he turned something pretty gory into high art. It was my little tribute to him.

