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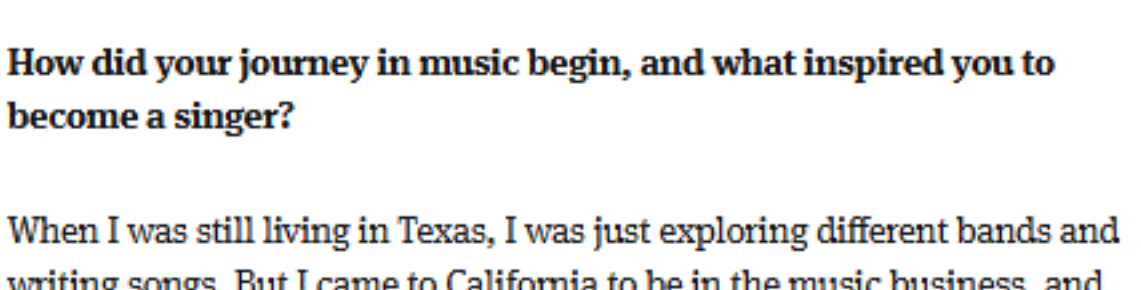
## Josie Cotton: The TVD Interview

BY MATTHEW BELTER | SEPTEMBER 27, 2023



PHOTO: RIO WARNER | In the vibrant and ever-evolving music scene of the 1980s, one name shone brightly amidst a sea of artists, Josie Cotton. With her audacious new wave sound and captivating stage presence, Cotton quickly became an icon of the era. From her popular hits like “Johnny Are You Queer?” and “He Could Be the One,” to her thoughtfully crafted albums that spanned genres, Josie Cotton left an indelible mark on the music industry.

But her influence extends far beyond her catchy tunes; it’s in her trademark style, her public persona, and the significant life events that have shaped her remarkable career. As we dive into the world of Josie Cotton, we uncover a musician who defies categorization, evokes nostalgia, and continues to captivate audiences with her timeless sound.



How did your journey in music begin, and what inspired you to become a singer?

When I was still living in Texas, I was just exploring different bands and writing songs. But I came to California to be in the music business, and once I finally arrived that happened fairly quickly. Even while moving from record label to record label, I ended up, ironically, getting signed because of a song I didn’t write—it was a demo that got me signed. So, that was just an odd way to begin a career.

When did you determine that you wanted to do this as a career?

Well, I really wasn’t planning on being a singer, per se. I was planning on being a songwriter, and so singing was something I did to let people hear the songs I wrote. That was when people seemed to notice my voice. The Paine brothers were one of the first to take notice shortly after I met them. They directed me away from the different styles of music I was experimenting with and asked me to focus on something which was familiar to me, girl groups. And coincidentally, they were working with the Go-Go’s at the time that I met them.

What are your earliest memories of performing on stage?

My stepfather was a ballet teacher, and he was grooming me to be a prima ballerina from the time I was three years old. He had been a famous dancer in Europe—dancing with Maria Tallchief and had run the Harkness Ballet in New York years later. So, my first memory on stage was when I was four years old. I was with a boy, and it was just us on stage with an orchestra. My stepfather would do these major productions with famous ballet dancers coming in from Europe, and so I ended up alone on the stage with a boy with this orchestra, and I just loved it. And the stage ended up being the only place I felt truly comfortable.

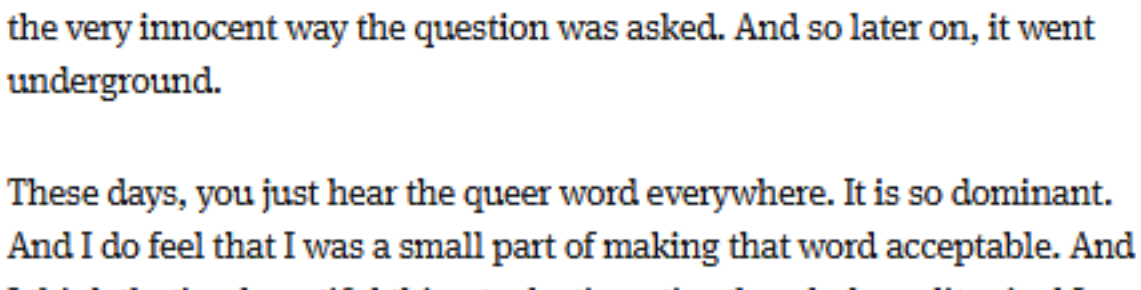
Your music has a distinctive blend of pop and rock. How did you develop your unique sound?

My initial sound was a little bit of rockabilly mixed in with real classic songwriting, courtesy of the Paine Brothers. I credit them with that because Bobby Paine was this complete virtuoso rockabilly guitar player, and they had the classic kind of songwriting that made it really interesting—both melodic and structurally clever. And the only thing they didn’t teach me about was how to write about one’s feelings, because they just didn’t believe in that. To them, you wrote outside yourself objectively. And so I later on, learned to expose everything in my writing. But yes, the Paine Brothers taught me so much. They were my mentors.

What is your creative process like when it comes to writing new songs, and how do you keep your ideas fresh?

Well, I don’t know. Maybe it helped that I disappeared for long stretches of time. I would quit the music business—I would completely quit music. And maybe it just built up to the point where it had to explode or something. But I don’t know. I’ve always had a curious mind, I think it’s part of it, just being curious, and to explore ideas, feelings and relationships. And I love words, play on words, and melody is where I live, so the ideas come to you. I don’t plan for things to come to me. And sometimes it’s just something someone will say, a line someone will say, not knowing I was going to steal it. And then sometimes it’s just trying to channel a feeling and not even knowing what the feeling is. And then sometimes a melody will come to you. The process is always different, never the same.

That’s a huge question. You can find music a lot easier now, which is a good thing. You can hear a lot of new music that’s amazing. However, it’s not as good for the songwriters or producers. Production is becoming a lost art. They don’t pay producers and they don’t pay songwriters unless you’re talking about mega hits. So that’s the dark side of it all, and streaming, it’s very much like the SAG boycott right now. It’s just having the streaming with no evidence that you were ever there in the room. They just take your music with the acting, with music, they just take your music, and then good luck with getting anything.



Your hit “Johnny Are You Queer?” became an anthem for the LGBTQ+ community. Can you share the story behind this song and its impact?

Well, this song has gone through many different phases. At the time, it was so shocking and enraged people on all sides of the political divide. For others, it was an anthem. However, there was so much corporate backlash on me, and that was tricky. And I was very confused about how people weren’t just getting the song, the humor of it, the sincerity of it, the very innocent way the question was asked. And so later on, it went underground.

These days, you just hear the queer word everywhere. It is so dominant. And I do feel that I was a small part of making that word acceptable. And I think that’s a beautiful thing to destigmatize the whole reality. And I still have gay men come up to me and thank me for recording that song and thanking me for helping them realize they were gay. Many shared while crying how they told their parents while playing the song.

And so that’s pretty wonderful. Not that I want to be enshrined, but just to know that people understood my meaning at the time. For me, that’s what keeps me still wanting to do the song, because it was such an empowering thing for so many gay men at the time. This word just slipped into the vernacular, is what I like to say, just through this humorous pop song, international dance hit, and it just slipped in. And now it’s almost the only word you can say. And so, I’m good with that. I am proud of that.

You recently released *Day of the Gun* back in May. What are you most proud about with this release?

I think what I’m most proud of about the album is that I didn’t put any limitations on what I could say. I just let it happen on its own and I was just a stenographer. And that was a great feeling to not be so calculated, but knowing what I was doing. In the past, I’ve kind of did, and on this one, I had no idea and it felt like great freedom in not having any idea what was happening. It was just like, okay, I’m going to say that, am I? Okay, Josie, good luck.

So, I think I was pretty brave on this record. Not about my personal things—that was the record before. But electronically, so you don’t really hear it unless you’re listening to the words, which people rarely do. Instead, there were really no songs about me—just stories. And I felt like I became more of a storyteller in this, and with characters, all outside of myself. And I really, really liked that because I had no need to express anything in particular. And they would just come through me. And then it was just like, oh my God, that’s coming through now. Okay, well, let’s just see where that goes. And just following the breadcrumbs through the forest. And I think that’s a very liberating feeling for any artist to just be following the sound of the wind.

Who are some of your biggest musical influences, and how have they shaped your sound?

Well, I would say that Wanda Jackson became a big influence after I moved to Los Angeles. But growing up it was the Ronettes, it was the Shangri-Las, the bad girls. And later on, Tammy Wynette. Once I came to LA, I got into more of the classic country and even Elvis. However, James Brown was one of my biggest influences. He completely changed my life when I was eight years old. I lived in a house that was chaotic, with many different music styles. But that was something I found on my own. I have no idea how I found it, but I would just worship James Brown as an idol throughout my life. Different periods he would drop in into my life, but I don’t know. The first type of music I sang in Dallas was soul music, and no one even knew that.

So, I guess he musically did influence me, but I haven’t kept up with that part recently. But recently, I just partook in this great tribute album to Maryanne Faithful with a whole bunch of great musicians. I’m forgetting all of them right now, but it’s a double-sided album with all female artists. And when I started, I was trying to find a song to sing, and I realized that she’d had a big influence on me when I was a little girl. Just a sadness in her voice along with hope, and I think she also influenced me. And I didn’t realize it until I was invited to do this record. And I think she’s not talked about a lot, but there was something in her voice that moved me, and that’s where I started.

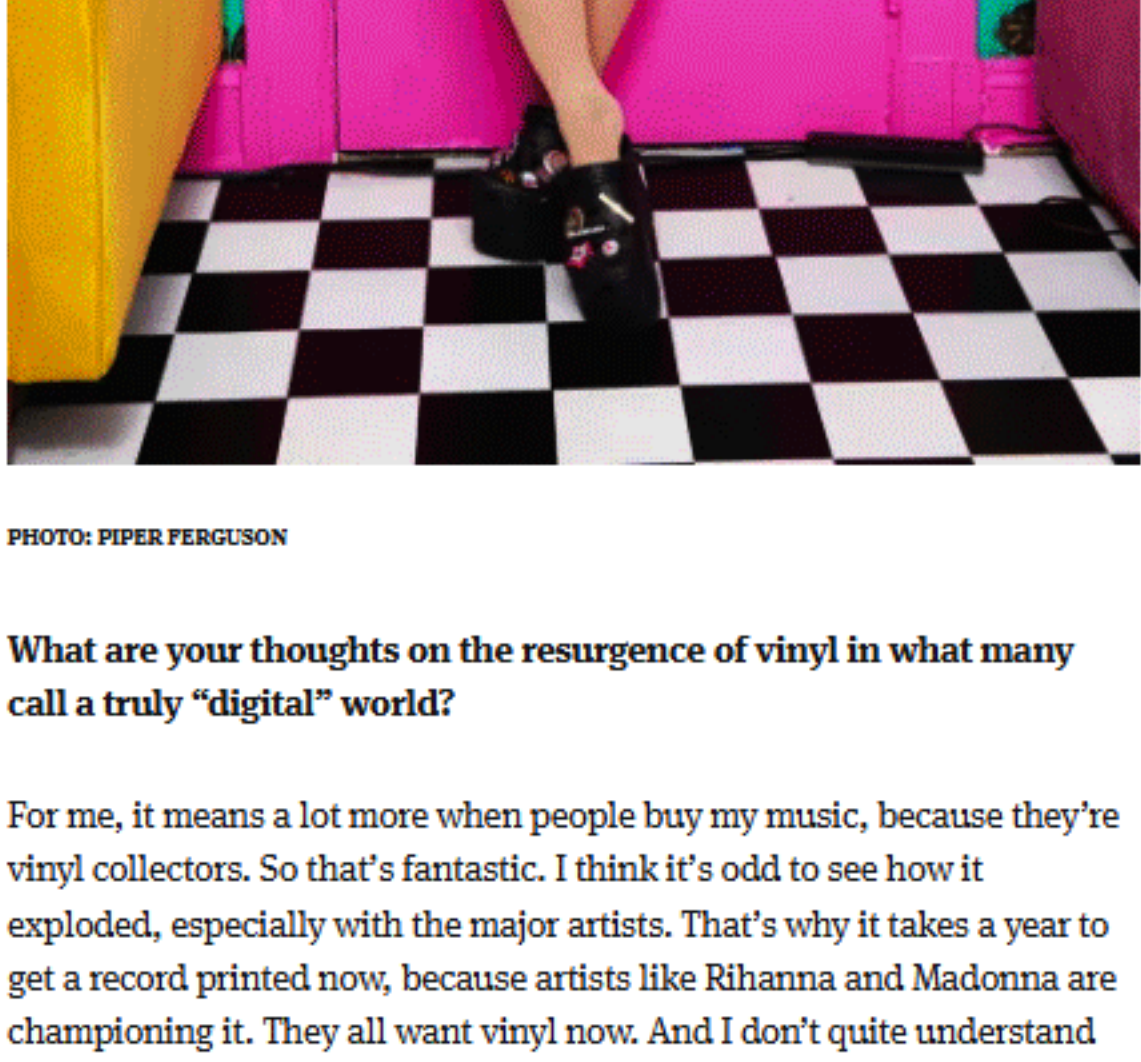


PHOTO: PIPER FERGUSON

What are your thoughts on the resurgence of vinyl in what many call a truly “digital” world?

For me, it means a lot more when people buy my music, because they’re vinyl collectors. So that’s fantastic. I think it’s odd to see how it exploded, especially with the major artists. That’s why it takes a year to get a record printed now, because artists like Rihanna and Madonna are championing it. They all want vinyl now. And I don’t quite understand how that happened because I don’t think a lot of people have record players. I think people miss holding something visceral in their hand, and seeing the artwork, and being able to read the liner notes. And it’s much more intimate, you get to hold it. It’s not just like a blip on your computer. It’s something you can hold and touch. And I think that was missing. I think that’s a lovely thing to offer people.

What sets vinyl apart from other digital formats?

Well, I think it’s a true statement that vinyl sounds better. And I think people were sold a bill of goods when they say, “Oh, well CDs are the ultimate sound.” And it turns out they’re not the best sound. And so now, everyone got rid of their cassette players, and then their record players, and then their CD players, and now no one can play any music outside of streaming. And so, I think it’s a manipulation of people to keep buying new gear, which I think is messed up. That’s not right.

What’s next for Josie Cotton? Can we look forward to any upcoming projects or performances?

Right now, I’m trying to finish up a new video. And so that’s probably going to occupy me for a while. And then I have a few live shows coming up in Southern California and New York. Recently, I also just signed up with the new booking agent and I’m really excited about it. After that, next year, 2024, who knows. I’m just happy to continue doing what I love.

Finally, what legacy do you hope to leave in the world of music?

I don’t know. I just want people to hear my music. That’s what a musician wants, to be heard. And assuming that they’ve heard it, I think as someone who took chances, someone who at least attempted to bring humor into some pretty heavy topics, who could balance between those worlds, and come up with something that was fun to listen to, even if you weren’t listening to the words, and musically enthralling at times. What I try to do comes from my songwriting. That would be the legacy, if someone gets my kitschiness, my edginess, and my love for the world.



Josie Cotton’s *Day of the Gun* is in stores now, on vinyl.  
Josie Cotton Official | Facebook | Instagram



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