

THINGS TO DO

'Valley Girl' gets musical reunion

Josie Cotton, Plimsouls tune up for Middle East show



Josie Cotton plays the Middle East on a bill with The Plimsouls Wednesday. (Photo Piper Ferguson)

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In the cult-classic 80s movie “Valley Girl,” Nicolas Cage gets to beat up a rival while singer Josie Cotton is onstage, then kiss his beloved as the Plimsouls play a Hollywood punk club. We should all be so lucky.

Cage probably won't be there but the movie's two musical stars, Josie Cotton and the Plimsouls, will share a bill at the Middle East Wednesday. It will be an amusing occasion for both artists, who haven't looked back too often at their big Hollywood moment.

Cotton was two albums into her career when director Martha Coolidge tapped her for the film. “It amazes me how people still sentimentalize about it,” she said last week. “What I remember is that it was people doing a movie guerrilla style, because they believed in the project. We were filming in this old abandoned schoolhouse. There were leaks, it was freezing. It was a one-take situation, nobody got paid, and I don't remember being fed. But I think the message of the movie was good, for sensitive guys trying to make it in a world of jocks. I've only started doing these 'Valley Girl' reunions and I feel like I've left the '80s for so long, they've become new to me again.”

Her featured song in the movie, “Johnny Are You Queer?” is a story in itself. Essentially a takeoff on sexual attitudes and '60s pop (and intended to be gay-friendly), the song was played live by LA contemporaries the Go-Go's before it got to her. Cotton's version was an underground hit which got her signed to the Elektra label — and then dropped when there was a backlash. (This also put a stop to her touring, so the Middle East show will be her first local one ever).

“I had a background in comedy so to me the song was comedy gold. It was hilarious for so many reasons— the idea of an innocent person saying this controversial word, and her having no gaydar at all. To my mind even singing the song was an acting job, it was a part I played with a character. The song made a lot of people laugh until they cried — gay people, straight people, everyone.” Though they loved it in California, some gay publications in New York took offense.

“That's when Elektra dropped me, I was a shooting star and they shot me right down. That had already happened when Martha used the song for the movie, so I thought that was incredibly brave of her.”

Cotton went on to become something of a Renaissance woman. She currently directs videos of her own new songs in campy horror-movie style, with Tarantino and John Waters as role models; she may even direct a movie in the future. She also opened up a recording studio where Elliot Smith and Meredith Brooks made hits. “That was fun because I liked being around people who loved making music and hadn't had their dreams shattered yet. I wanted to bask in that glow.”

Even if it wasn't in the movie, the Plimsouls' “A Million Miles Away” would be remembered as one of the great power-pop songs of its time. Though the band was dormant for decades, lead guitarist Eddie Munoz has lately formed a new lineup. “It was all because I wanted to play this music and people wanted to hear it. There was pretty much radio silence on the other end (meaning original frontman Peter Case), so I took it upon myself to get this band together.”

There's even couple of familiar local faces in the lineup: singer/guitarist Anthony Kaczynski, the Magnetic Fields member and Fireking leader who's one of the most gifted popsters in Boston; and Garret Vandermolen, bassist of the fine indie band Speedfossil.

The Plimsouls scene in “Valley Girl” was filmed at Sunset Strip club the Central, soon to become the famous Viper Room. “It was the punk club in the movie — as if a punk club could survive in West Hollywood,” Munoz laughs. “We had some great shows in that club, but that day it was us onstage with earbuds, trying to mime to a recording. They probably picked us because Martha was a fan, she loved our songs. We were pretty crazy at that point, always jumping around onstage, and we were pretty photogenic. We were a bunch of good-looking young studs, not the old cranks we are now.”

And his take on the movie: “I thought it was just what it was supposed to be — the three thousandth take on ‘Romeo & Juliet’ with young kids set in the modern era.”