

MUSIC

# Lesbo Lolitas

Hailed by pop fans and censored on Leno. Who is this t.A.T.u?

BY ELS DEBBAUT

It all began three years ago in the strikingly entrepreneurial (if perverted) mind of Russian advertiser and psychologist (!) Ivan Shapovalov, never seen in the music business before. He dreamed of starting a provocative "project" starring two teen-age girls willing to act out his vision of selling music through sex.

To find his two Lolitas, he arranged a singing contest. Out of 500 competitors Volkova Yulia Olegovna (Julia) and Katina Elena Sergeevna (Lena) were independently selected to form the band t.A.T.u.

Lena's dad is a distinguished Russian musician, and Julia attended state music school. Both entered the contest separately but had formerly participated together in a children's music group. Rumor has it Julia was expelled from the band for "unworthy behavior and depravity of collective." (Did she talk back to her elders? Put stink bombs in toilets? Kiss other girls? No one is talking.)

The slick Shapovalov promised the duo instant fame provided they sign a stifling contract—tight schoolgirl outfits and obligatory onstage kissing and fumbling. The teens would have no hand in the creative process or in the manipulation of their public image.

Redhead Lena (then 16) was immediately instructed to lose 20 pounds, and Julia (then 15) was to have short, jet-black hair (you know, to butch her up a little).

The group t.A.T.u. was born, and scandalous music clips with the teens lip-locked and groping each other in white cotton underwear have rocked the Russian music industry since. The acronym stands for "ta lyubit tu" or "that girl loves that girl."

Their catchy pop debut, *200 Km/H in the Wrong Lane*, released with a concurrent barrage of tabloid advertising, took Russia by storm. The CD and clips were banned in several eastern European venues, but in most of the continent they spread like wildfire.

The pair do especially well in the European disco scene; Kylie Minogue fans and electro-pop lovers are in for a treat. The attractive, high-energy tunes and catchy melodies are fairly irresistible and entrancing on the dance floor.

The single "All the Things She Said" reached No. 1 in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Italy, Spain and Austria; has climbed to No. 13 in Canada; and has reached No. 20 in the United States. (The album peaked at No. 13).

The album's English version came out in the United States last December on Interscope Records, and it's no coincidence that Shapovalov chose producer Trevor Horn—known for his success with wicked pop acts Pet Shop Boys, Grace Jones and Frankie Goes to Hollywood (the outrageous gay band of 20 years ago, with its notorious S/M clips).

Since the addition of the English version, more than 1 million copies of *200 Km/H* have sold worldwide, and the girls are effortlessly filling giant stadiums and vast amphitheaters with their explicitly lesbian stage performances.

Deliberate absence of press communication and vague explanations about their relationship ("Maybe and maybe not; you know, we are not going to give you a straight answer") are meant to fuel the interest of genuine music fans and middle-aged drooling men alike. But the tired conventional motions of the girls are a pretty see-through straight male fantasy, and their real love interests are starting to show.



PHOTO BY KAROL HATALA

Kiddie porn or artistic expression? Above: Lena (left) and Julia in one of many, many indie promo shots. Below: Helping each other out of their clothes on stage.

Journalist Svetlana Makunina writes: "They've been hiding two boys from their fans. Their boyfriends are both students.... Nobody in Russia believes they are lesbians."

Song lyrics are unquestionably lesbian, but none of them are written by Julia or Lena. "All the Things She Said" was a collaboration of co-producer and journalist Elena Kiper and theater student Valery Polienko.

The overall message of the debut disc is simple and simply ironic: Don't pretend, be who you are, and express what you feel. ("When they stop and stare/don't worry me 'cause I'm feeling for her what she's feeling for me/I can try to pretend, I can try to forget/But it's driving me mad, going out of my head.")

And, heck, that's not a bad message when you're a queer teen-ager. The video for the song depicts the couple falling for each other with occasional lip-locks. Of course, they're garbed in schoolgirl uniforms, but it's still undeniably groundbreaking for same-sex attraction on MTV.

There's no question t.A.T.u. is exploiting images of scantily clad young women, but you can't argue with the outrage around their censorship. Their videos have been banned by the British Broadcasting Corp., and during their Feb. 25 performance on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, the camera quickly panned away when they performed their signature kiss. Both girls are now over 18; would Leno's camera have shied away from an 18-year-old boy and girl kissing during a love song? Let's guess not.

On the official Internet site [www.tatugirls.com](http://www.tatugirls.com), Lena says, "People love us or hate us but nobody thinks nothing about us." Touché. **J**

ELS DEBBAUT is a Portland free-lancer writer.

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