

# THE SUNDAY TIMES magazine

10.5.2009

Interview: Valeriya

## The iron curtain-raiser

Meet Valeriya, a Russian chart-topper who's married to her very own Simon Cowell. Can the 41-year-old mother-of-three, who's survived a traumatic past, prove to Britain she's got talent? By Amy Turner. Portraits: Perou



**F**rom the sunny penthouse balcony of her Manhattan home, Valeriya's assurance and I watch a bit of the G20 protest march pass by on the street below. She is just late enough to make a statement entrance: "Here she comes!" announces her manager. Immaculately groomed and tall, with ice-blond hair and ice-blue eyes, she slides the doors wide open and steps out to greet everyone warmly, then leans over the railing. "What are they protesting for?" she asks, looking blank. There's an incredible pause — how can she not have heard about the G20? She's been staying in London for two weeks and touring the UK for the past two months. She's ambassador for a global human rights charity, and she grew up behind the iron curtain. Her own president is here, befriending Obama. "It's about, well, Iraq," offers her public-relations girl.

With a flick of her hair, Valeriya replies. "Oh yes, but some protest about the war, some here are for the global warming, and some are for the banks, isn't it? I just wonder which are these?" She laughs a lot, and smooches her head proudly, but make no mistake — Valeriya is no airhead. She's sweet in the true European tradition, but she can't hide a slickness that has probably both contributed to and underpinned her success, and which has carried her through some dark days — more on which later. ➤

### Interview

In her homeland, Russia, she is as famous as Madonna — her record sales exceed 100m and her tours are instant sellouts. She lives in Moscow with her husband, the record producer Joel Prigorenko, and they are recognized and jugged everywhere. Her three children attend private schools — one of them is Chelsea, where Valeriya and Joel have a second, lake-side house. She has her own, very successful, perfume and jewellery lines — the latter a collection with the large Russian diamond company Sverdlovsk Diamonds. Last year she ranked ninth in the Forbes list of Russian celebrity earners, and she's won scores of awards: Best Female Act from Russian MTV, Most Beautiful Russian Singer, and an Oscar for the Festival of Russia — Russia's equivalent of an OBE. And now, at 41, Valeriya has decided it's time to take on the world.

But, as yet, her reception has been tepid. She's been trying to crack the tough UK market since her first album in English, *Out of Control*, was due for release. There was some press coverage, and a few gigs, but a generally explosive performance at G-A-Y's London's Astoria was curtailed by the club's closure. Then the *Blonde* EP, which fell victim to the credit crunch and the album never saw the light of day. Valeriya and Joel returned to Moscow.

Joel found the record label she's signed to, New Music, which he created in 2000, four years before they were married. He also speaks very little English, is Russia's equivalent of Simon Cowell. Not many managers of other Russian artists, and he regularly appears as a judge on TV talent contests. Valeriya has accompanied him on the panel of the Russian version of *The X Factor*.

**V**aleriya has been touring with Simply Red since last March, an odd pairing, not least because it's unusual for the support act to have sold more albums than the headline. But it helped secure a new distributor, Absolute, and *Out of Control* is released this month. This time round, she's been on *The Paul O'Grady Show*, and done a bit of radio. But her songs are yet to receive airplay.

Valeriya is tightly and rather un-Russianly optimistic about taking on the UK. "Think I have the talent to pull it off," she adds over a beer. The only other recent Russian pop act to land success in the UK was Liza, an adolescent, school-sanctioned pair whose 2002 hit, *All the Things She Said*, was about their lesbian affair, and was released with a video that was practically sold pure. At 41 and with a career still all around, it's difficult to envisage Valeriya in the same arena as the likes of younger, older pop acts — Lady Gaga, Lily Allen or Girls Aloud.



Left: Valeriya with her husband, Joel Prigorenko, who runs the record label she is signed to. Right: Valeriya laughing the USSR flag

Neither is she likely to stand out from those more her own age with long-established international legacies, like Madonna or Kylie. But it might just work. Her voice is great, her songs are catchy, and she's working with some big writers and producers. She recently recorded a cover of Kanye West with the *Blue Genes* (Robin Gibb, though that shouldn't hold her back, and listen to my music, children very young, and their grandmothers and their parents).

*As we break for lunch I ask Valeriya if she's cold. She's been draped, virtually naked, in a communist flag for most of the morning, facing a wind machine. She can't complain*

rubber rattle dancing. When we meet, Valeriya herself is dressed — as usual, she says — in head-to-toe Paul Casimir, and her perfume smells expensive. The long glass dining table in her suite is decadently laid with fresh-arrived scallops, strong coffee, mountains of biscuits, sugared nuts, honey dates and champagne, which she doesn't touch. She's got a page class later, so she's keeping a light. Behind her on a ruffier table are piles of *Out of Control* and a kind of glory Valeriya because bearing some very attractive glamour shoes, to be handed out to large Valeriya glossy paper bags with open handles. In fact, the picture on the bag looks strikingly like Girls Aloud's Sarah Harding, and not very like the attractive woman I am to try my music on a different audience.

front of me. Does she worry that age could hinder her breakthrough, I wonder? "Not really. At home I have my audience, I've kept my audience with my age — we go together. And here? I know my target audience — that is really important." So who is her audience? "I'm, I think grown-up people. In Russia I am a family singer — all ages come to my concerts, and listen to my music, children very young, and their grandmothers and their parents."

I think she will continue her in Russia and is, rightly, proud of her success in Russia and

is it different this time than last year? "Oh, I think we are taking only the first steps of the journey," she says, confidently. Making music came easily to Valeriya. "Enter found me" she says, laughing and shrugging coquettishly, bating her lashes. An only child, she was born and raised in Arkhark, a small village 400 miles southeast of Moscow. Her mother and father, both classical musicians who taught at a local music school, say they first heard Valeriya sing aged eight months. She started learning the piano at five — her parents wanted her to be a pianist — but gave up nine years later to pursue singing. "No one was disappointed — they encouraged me always." Aged 17 she made her way to Moscow in search of fame.

"I was very brave, you could say, because I didn't have any support. I didn't know anybody in Moscow. But I went to enter Gnesin academy (Russia's most prestigious music school). There was great competition just to enter, but I entered with no problem. Only at that age can you act like this, with so much self-confidence. Maybe too much of course, youth gives this, I would never do it now."

She says she is confident enough to test out the UK market now because of her home success, and dislikes comparisons with other international artists. "I cannot compare myself to anyone else. I am not Madonna. I am myself."

She graduated from Gnesin in 1990. The youthful confidence wasn't to last, however, despite her growing success as a live performer. Within a few years Valeriya's home life was in

tatters. Her then husband, Alexander Shvagin, who was also her producer, was a violent man. She'd met him during her last term at Gnesin, and they went on to have three children together: Anna, Arseny and Arseny. "At first he was nice, bringing flowers and saying nice things. We worked together for two years before we got married. He didn't reveal his bad temper until we started living together. He was a tyrant. I was his shadow. But I was really in love with him, I couldn't stop it. I am not a butterfly going from one flower to another, and I tried to help him, but it got worse. My children, they were traumatised. The worst thing? He tried to shoot me, and I was in my ninth month of pregnancy with my second child. He [shot] a big hole in the wall next to where I was standing and he said, 'The next one will be yours, in your head.'"

For someone to have such public success while their private life was so traumatic must take tremendous inner strength. "I am a very serious woman," she says. "I always believed that marriage" — she swears every word — "is for... etc."

Valeriya knew she would try everything to make it work. "I tried to adapt my own behaviour to [my husband's], I approached a psychiatrist, a psychologist." She sighs. "I thought him in church because I thought real faith would help him. But at the end he used even my faith as a thing he could control me with. He wouldn't let me go to our priest, he said that this was my cross and I had to bear it."

"But I don't regret staying with him, or leaving him, because now I can tell to God, to everybody, I did everything that was in my power. I couldn't do more." The telling of this episode in her life is published, as befitted, in a supposed at how ➤



# Britain's most infamous hotel finally re-opens its doors.

Join the nation's favourite comedy channel for a G.O.L.D. world exclusive, as the cast of the nation's favourite comedy show finally share the secrets of what went on behind the scenes.

check in 9pm tonight

G.O.L.D. go on the gold

Virgin Media 125

Sky 210

gotoghdaily.co.uk

## Interview

From left, Valeria, Mel C, Natasha Hamilton, Mark King, Lulu and Robin Gibb at a charity concert in London, January 2009

quickly and easily the subject comes up, and that she raises it herself, and in such detail. Evidently this history is integral to her professional and self image. Does she find it difficult to talk about in any way? "No," she says. "Everything is behind me a long time ago. I can look at it, over there, with irony, and it's hard to imagine that it happened to me."

By 2001, with seven bestselling Russian albums and a host of awards, Valeria left her husband, named her back on music, and returned to Arkarsk with her children. "It was very good for them when I broke up the relationship. I realised that if I stayed even a little bit longer I would ruin my life and my children's lives, and I couldn't. Neither she nor the children have any contact with Shulgins now, though she believes he lives a happy, wealthy life somewhere in Moscow. She says he forced her at gunpoint to sign papers and hand over a vast portion of her fortune before she left him.

Two years after leaving Shulgins she met Louf, who signed her to Nox and helped to re-start her career. Valeria's comeback single went straight to No 1 in Russia and stayed there for 15 weeks. In 2006 she published her autobiography, *Life, Tears and Love*, which sold over 230,000 copies. Women from all over the world write to her, thanking her for inspiring them to leave abusive relationships. "I am happy to have given a ray of light to those who felt alone," says Valeria. "I know how it is to have felt alone." She believes domestic violence is a form of "modern slavery", and supports a number of charities, including the International Organisation of Migration, which fights human trafficking, and to which the proceeds from her new single will be donated.

The next evening I watch her in concert at the O2, supporting Simply Red. She looks fantastic on stage - slightly Debbie Harry in a sparkly minidress and her swaggy bleached hair. She performs to a half-full stadium with people still filing in ready for the main act. But the show goes down well. By four or five songs in, people are clapping along and she's getting proper cheers and whistles. For the slower songs, like *Someday*, and even her new single, *Back to Love*, there's a slight lack of interest, but by the end she's won them over.

The hand links hands and steps forward to take an old-fashioned bow. "Thank you for your hospitality," she says with a smile and a wave, and people are genuinely applauding as she goes off stage. A man behind me says he'll definitely buy her album. The woman next to him sniffs and said, "She looked older than her picture,



didn't she?" A couple of ladies in the row in front say they loved the fast, clap-along songs. "But not the slow ones, we weren't so focused on those, were we, Sue? She was much better at the party party stuff" - proving my hunch that we like our Euro-pop to be Euro-ish, upbeat, and not too serious or worthy.

Behind the scenes, Valeria looks slightly put out. She's tired from touring all week, the backing singers say they couldn't hear the applause, and it looked as though people were bored. It must be wearing playing to a bunch of seated middle-aged women who're

are a size too small and causing her terrible pain, though a door is open and a non-guitar-spring breeze must be chilling her hair between, she doesn't complain. In fact, she never stops smiling as she balances on the spike heels. She laughs as she points an instructor finger for a pose: "Radio 2? This is for you. Play my records!" Louf, perpetually on his mobile, is ever-present. He stands behind the photographer and captures the shoot on his camera phone. He shows me her website yet again, and asks someone how to say "I am so proud" in English. Later, as we break for lunch, I ask Valeria if she's

*"He didn't reveal his bad temper until we started living together. He was a tyrant. I was his shadow. But I was madly in love with him - and I couldn't stop it"*

used to wearing tights and crocses. "London is snobbish," her Latvian make-up artist tells her. "Don't worry about it. Everyone is like, people don't show appreciation." I agree, and congratulate Valeria on a great show. She smiles graciously but briefly.

The singer Beverly Knight pops by to congratulate her, then Robin Gibb arrives for hugs. What a chance they couldn't have performed *Staying Alive* together, he says. Later he tells me: "I really admire Valeria. I think she's a great artist with great prospects in the UK."

It's Louf's 40th birthday. Exhausted but still looking a million dollars, Valeria hosts a very late after-club dinner party for him back at her hotel. She brings the entire team - her band, hair and make-up crew, security, me, and seven other Russian friends there. There are lots of toasts. To everyone she is friendly, smiling and charming. "Not at all like Madonna when I worked with her," says the make-up girl. "Some people are rude, and some people are professional. Valeria is lovely, and very professional."

It's time. For the photo shoot for this feature the following week she arrives precisely on time. Though the PVC thigh boots she's by his thigh

could. She's been draped, virtually naked, in a crimson flag for most of the morning, facing a wind machine. "No, I'm fine," she says, shaking her head and smiling brightly. But, moments later, she's swaddled in dressing gowns and Louf's jacket, and a make-up artist has trained his hand dryer on her shivering legs.

It's not that she won't put her foot down, it's that she won't complain. Earlier, she says she unwrapped a beautiful grey-and-white dress and held it up for her to inspect. Louf strode over and demanded for the label. "Alexander." "The real."

"A, McQueen. It's fine." "It's useless, so be approved. But Valeria didn't like it, so she opted for her own, silky black Guiltier, which she brought along herself. She's surely aware of how she wants to be seen, aware of what suits her best, and quietly, classily professional. And this, rather than youth, could be her propellant. We've seen countless popstars, younger and older, posing and posturing, dropping names, throwing weight around as though it's talent, but here is a hard-working, determinedly professional stand-out singer. And frankly, she deserves to find it. And the gay scene will love her, which is half the battle. ■