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Nouvelle Vague's Lubich Launches Solo Career

By Sergey Chernov

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Lubich sings in English, Russian and French on “C’est la vie.” She and her group play in Moscow on Thursday.

ST. PETERSBURG — Jenia Lubich, a St. Petersburg indie pop singer-songwriter, who made a name for herself with her collaboration with Nouvelle Vague, a French band that performs unlikely bossa nova covers of 1970s and '80s new wave and punk hits, will play Dom Muzyki on Thursday as she promotes her debut album, "C'est la vie."

The CD, recorded with French musicians in Paris, contains 11 songs that she wrote in Russian, French and English and includes her hit, "Russian Girl," whose lyrics — the girl has "vodka in her blood" and "dances with brown bears" — ironically play with national stereotypes.

Lubich's singing breakthrough came at a Nouvelle Vague concert in 2008.

"I was really impressed, and after the show, rightly or wrongly I snuck into the dressing room

and handed a disc over to producer Marc Collin. The disc was badly recorded, but it had my songs on it," she says.

"A week later, I got a message from him saying the recording was horrible, everything was horrible, impossible to understand — but there was something about it and could you come to Paris for a recording session."

Lubich had played with a local group but says she mostly sang her own songs in the kitchen for friends. "I was not sure that anybody else would be interested," she says.

Her debut with Nouvelle Vague in her hometown of St. Petersburg came in 2009, when she was asked to perform as a guest singer but ended up singing virtually the entire show after both the band's vocalists were unable to come at short notice.

"I realized that it could be a complete disaster because people were expecting French singers," she says. "It was not an established fact for the Russian public that there was a Russian singer working with them."

To save the situation, Lubich came up with the idea of speaking in French when addressing the musicians or introducing songs during the show.

"Then, after the ninth or 10th song, which happened to be 'Too Drunk to

F---' [by the Dead Kennedys], I was lying on stage in semi-ecstasy and heard myself saying 'Zharko u vas' ['It's hot here' in Russian].

"Everybody was stunned, and I heard somebody whispering 'Wow, she speaks with no accent.' So I went on through the rest of the show speaking mostly in Russian. But I'd won the audience over by that time and managed to avoid the negative reaction that I was afraid of."

Lubich, who has an MA from the city's Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, a collaboration project between St. Petersburg State University and Bard College in the United States, says studying in the United States helped to form her as a singer.

She started to write songs in English while spending nearly a year at Bard College, a liberal arts college located in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, when she was 16.

Lubich does not remember when she wrote the English-language song "Russian Girl," but suggests that it was probably conceived on a flight between Russia and France.

"It's both a myth and reality," she says.

"Perhaps there are no such Russians that I sing about and there are no such bears. But at the same time, all this exists. It's a collection of typical things that are usually associated with Russia. But such spiritual impulses do exist. By and large, it's a song about the Russian soul, which is a mystery."

Local crowds react to Lubich's songs written in French and English with the same enthusiasm as to her Russian songs.

"If I start writing a song from a melody, sometimes I feel that it should be in English, rather than in any other language. It stems from musical phrases and melodic patterns. I feel that English lyrics will be the most organic for it. Or French lyrics. Or Russian lyrics. Every language has its own notes and rhythms."

Seen as very much a St. Petersburg artist despite her international connections, Lubich describes her song "Chyornoye" (Black) as some sketches of St. Petersburg images and impressions.

"When we perform outside St. Petersburg, people often approach me after the concert and ask 'Aren't you from Peter?'" she says.

"I think that this is the song that people can work that out from. I wrote it in St. Petersburg, I was walking over Palace Bridge in the rain, cars were speeding by, and it was cold and dark. It's true, 'in this black city only the night is white,' that's what I felt."

Lubich sings Thursday at the Moscow International House of Music, 52 Kosmodamianskaya Naberezhnaya, Bldg. 8. Metro Paveletskaya. Phone: 730-4350. www.mmdm.ru

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