

TELEVISION REVIEW

A Reality Show With Doubts About Its Own Reality

By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

This is meant to be an American dream story, so let's be grateful for Gabrielle, the doubter.

Sullen, vain, gorgeous Gabrielle of Columbus, Ohio: she's the one would-be band member on "Blowin' Up!: Fatty Koo," a reality show that starts tonight on BET, who has grave doubts about the whole concept of star-making.

As she says, world-weary: "Everybody in Columbus, all these inner-city kids, all they want to do is music. And I'm just one of them. So hearing that these people in New York want to help me get discovered, it's not very credible. You know?"

We know. And this low-energy chronicle of one band's struggle to make it — to blow up — seems to know it too. "Blowin' Up" exhibits none of the ebullience or even optimism of "American Idol." Even as some of Gabrielle's bandmates, especially the supremely talented Valure, posture and showboat, the show's disposition toward show business is "I'll believe it when I see it" skepticism.

This restraint makes the show a pleasure to watch, a quiet meditation on dreams and pop music. Fatty Koo, a five-member band from Columbus, first came together on something called the John Lennon Educational Tour Bus, a mobile recording studio that lets kids make music, and they're a straight-arrow quintet: two singers from school choir (Gabrielle and Valure), two clean-cut showmen (Ron and Eddie B.) and even a quiet Venezuelan cellist (Marya).

The band makes easy, tuneful music that in principle combines R&B, hip-hop, Latin, jazz and pop. Tonight the members are shown getting their heads turned, or not, by the bright lights of Englewood, N.J., where they



From left, Gabrielle, Marya and Valure, of the five-member Fatty Koo, hope to make it in pop music.

go for their first studio session after signing with Sony Urban, DAS and Columbia Records.

It's no wonder that the kingmaker who first calls them east is David Sonnenberg, the owner of DAS management, and the power behind the Fugees, the Black Eyed Peas and other huge-selling rootsy, neo-hippie pop acts. He likes good, low-key kids with nice messages. As creator and executive producer of "Blowin' Up," he makes stardom look hard, but rewarding and not soul-destroying and also not impossible. He clearly wants

to be a good guy.

Ron, Valure, Eddie B. and Marya are fairly undistinguished reality characters, though Valure is intriguing insofar as she hates Gabrielle. In a recording session in Columbus, the two girls are so at each other's throats that their producer encourages them to sing about it.

"You want to talk about hypocrites in this world," one sings to the other. "Why don't you just practice what you preach?"

Among young women, the showy charge of "hypocrite" seems to have

Blowin' Up!: Fatty Koo

BET, tonight at 9:30; Eastern and Pacific times; 8:30, Central time.

Stephen Hill, executive producer and BET executive vice president, entertainment and music programming; David Sonnenberg, S. A. Barton and Gary Fisher, executive producers.

replaced the old charges of "pretentious" and "conceited" as the one with cachet in a catfight. Who knows what will happen to Fatty Koo? But the song, what little we hear here, sounds like a hit.